

THE *Current*

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[Shelly Leachman](#)

A&L director awarded for leadership in the arts

Recognized for her decades-long contributions to arts and culture across the region, Celesta Billeci, Miller McCune Executive Director of UC Santa Barbara Arts & Lectures, has received the 2024 County of Santa Barbara Leadership in Arts Individual Award from the Santa Barbara County Arts Commission.

The award was established by the commission in 2006 to honor “individuals or organizations that have made a significant impact on the arts and culture of our region through innovative thinking and exemplary commitment to promoting, sustaining and advancing our quality of life through the arts.”

Billeci is celebrating her 25th year leading UCSB Arts & Lectures (A&L), [which just launched its 65th anniversary season](#). She joined the organization as executive director in 2000, from UCLA Live.

“Since taking the helm of A&L in 2000, Celesta has transformed what was once a mostly campus-facing program into one of the largest and most respected public arts presenting programs in the nation,” the commission said in a statement about the award. “Her determination and passion is to present the best in the performing arts, public lectures, educational outreach programs and special events to audiences throughout Santa Barbara County ... Celesta’s drive to create meaningful opportunities for community engagement with the arts is unparalleled and inspiring.”

Acknowledging the award, Billeci said she accepted the honor “on behalf of all the great people who have supported me and contributed to Arts & Lectures in the 25 years I have served as the organization's executive director: my hard-working and loyal staff, both present and past; the faculty, staff, administration and students of UCSB; and the many members of the Santa Barbara community who have attended events, made contributions and devoted time and energy to serving on the A&L Council – thank you all from my heart.”

In the 2023-2024 season A&L presented 75 public events — many of them free of charge — and over 100 educational outreach programs. These include ¡Viva el Arte de Santa Barbara!, created in 2006, sharing the rich cultural heritage of Latin America with thousands of students and community members in Guadalupe, Isla Vista and Santa Barbara. A&L’s Access for All initiative provides dynamic learning experiences for K-12 students and lifelong learners, serving more than 30,000 students and community members annually, including matinee field trips for students county-wide to performances with A&L-sponsored performers at The Granada Theatre.

Working with dedicated staff, community partners and generous donors, A&L under Billeci’s leadership launched the Thematic Learning Initiative to engage lifelong learners and local non-profit organizations with visiting speakers and thought leaders; A&L’s Family Fun program; the popular Speaking with Pico author series; and the Justice for All series, which addresses societal challenges and explores potential solutions.

“Arts & Lectures shows how fundamental the experience of gathering for a live event is to a healthy community,” Billeci said. “Whether it’s the hum of animated voices as people file out of Campbell Hall after a great lecture, the shouts of approval and waves of applause that sweep through the room after an exciting dance number or a beautiful song, or the absorption of a roomful of students leaning in to hear a talented artist speak about their life's work, there's no substitute for the joy of all being in one place to witness something as a group.

“This award comes as we embark on the 65th anniversary season of UCSB Arts & Lectures, and it is my greatest hope that, 65 years from now, a new generation will be celebrating the continuing success of Arts & Lectures in educating, entertaining and inspiring Santa Barbara.”

Billeci is the previous recipient of the Jerry Willis Leadership in Arts Award (2015) from the Western Arts Alliance. She was recognized by The Santa Barbara Independent in 2003 as a Local Hero and again in 2023, with the A&L team, for Leadership in Performing Arts and Public Affairs.

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