



COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ

DEPARTMENT OF PARKS, OPEN SPACE & CULTURAL SERVICES
979 17TH AVENUE, SANTA CRUZ, CA, 95062
PHONE: (831) 454-7901 - FAX: (831) 454-7940
SCPARKS.COM

NEWS RELEASE

Date: March 25, 2025

Contact: Kathy DeWild

Kathy.DeWild@santacruzcountyca.gov

JANET JOHNS IS 2025 ARTIST OF THE YEAR

Janet Rachel Johns, dancer and choreographer, has been named 2025 Santa Cruz County Artist of the Year by the Santa Cruz County Arts Commission.

As an Assyrian woman, mother, educator, dance instructor, choreographer and a performing artist in Santa Cruz County for over 45 years, Johns has experienced firsthand the power of the arts for healing a community and bringing people together. Since she started learning folklorico dance at age 18 as a university student at San Jose State University, she learned from her mentor, Ramon Morones Ortiz, of Guadalajara, Mexico, the importance of learning authentic steps, style and choreography from master instructors and keepers of the traditions of Mexico. When she moved to Watsonville to begin her career as a bilingual educator in 1978, she co-founded Esperanza del Valle and wrote her first Arts Council grant, establishing her folklorico dance class as a performing company in 1980. Esperanza del Valle was the only adult folklorico dance company in the Watsonville community in those early days. Hundreds of dancers have trained, learned, and performed with her company over 44-plus years.

The Artist of the Year award is presented to local artists for outstanding achievement in the discipline of performing, visual, or literary arts who have also made a substantial contribution to the cultural enrichment of Santa Cruz County. A free Profile Performance will be held at the Crocker Theater at Cabrillo College on May 9, from 7-9 p.m. Admission is FREE to the public. Seating is limited and available on a first-come, first-served basis the night of the event; advance tickets are not available. To learn more about the award and previous recipients, visit www.scparks.com.

Johns has served on many sub-committees of Arts Council Santa Cruz County (e.g. the Grants Committee, Steering Committee) and currently serves on the commission supporting the Arts in Watsonville. Esperanza del Valle is a partner with the Watsonville Center for the Arts; she has volunteered for 40+ years to find a home for

the arts in Watsonville. She volunteered as a founding member of the Watsonville Film Festival for many years and has served as a local artist/dancer instructor for many charitable community organizations.

Janet has produced annual gala theater performances in the Greater Santa Cruz Tri-County area with Esperanza del Valle, bringing the best of Mexican dance and music to our community for 4+ decades. She is thankful to have worked with amazing fellow artists in the community and Mexico and to have had the opportunity to teach at Cabrillo College, UCSC, CSUMB and PVUSD, share these wonderful resources with students and families in our community. She has offered free lectures, demonstrations and dance classes with visiting master instructors, who visited schools throughout the county and offered classes for our local youth folklorico groups. Collaborating and performing with El Teatro Campesino, Santa Cruz Symphony, Tandy Beal and Company and many more have brought a richness to her life as an artist.

She has received numerous awards and accolades, including a proclamation from the mayor and City of Watsonville in 2020 recognizing her 40 years of leadership with Esperanza del Valle; The Watsonville City Council Mayor's Award in 2014 in recognition of her leadership in the City of Watsonville; a Gail Rich Award in 2002 for her community service in the arts; and a Calabash Award in 2001 for Excellence in the Ethnic Arts.

Her dance company has performed in Santa Cruz County for over 44 years, donating their time to many local charities and events 15-20 times a year. When the Loma Prieta Earthquake struck in 1989, they collaborated with local artists and produced a performance at the SC County Fairgrounds, as a fundraiser for the Watsonville community. Esperanza del Valle has continued to support the community of Pajaro through the floods of 1995, 1997 and recently in 2023.

She is very proud of her son, Gabriel Johns Robledo, who teaches folklorico and drama at Pajaro Valley High School, inspiring new generations of adolescents to see themselves as artists and agents of change.

Over the last 41 years, the Santa Cruz County Arts Commission has selected outstanding artists nominated by the public and has honored them through the Artist of the Year Award. Nominees must be a resident of Santa Cruz County, must have a national or international reputation, must have contributed to the cultural enrichment of the local community, and must have created or presented work in Santa Cruz County. For more information, including how to nominate an artist for the award, please visit www.scparks.com.