

A photograph of the Rothko Chapel building, a modern brick structure with a dark entrance, set against a blue sky with white clouds. In the foreground, a large, dark, abstract sculpture with a conical base is visible, partially obscured by green foliage. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking up at the building and the sky.

Rothko Chapel

2023 Annual Report



Contents

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 6 | Program Highlights |
| 7 | 8th Annual Frances Tarlton “Sissy” Farenthold Endowed Lecture |
| 8 | 2023 Rothko Chapel Óscar Romero Award Ceremony |
| 10 | Annual MLK Observance |
| 11 | Transformative Power of the Arts |
| 12 | International Days of Observance |
| 14 | Henry Luce Cohort on Spirituality and Social Justice |
| 16 | Inspirit: Rothko Chapel’s Evening of Inspiration |
| 18 | Opening Spaces: A Campaign for the Rothko Chapel |
| 19 | Our Supporters |
| 20 | People Behind the Rothko Chapel |

Dear Friends of the Rothko Chapel,

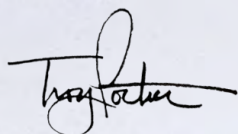
In planning for the next phase of the Chapel's future, this year we launched the Rothko Chapel: Beyond 50—one of the most comprehensive strategic plans in the Chapel's history. This “behind the scenes” effort addresses growing interest in Chapel visitation and program attendance, and preparations for the expanded campus and mission as the result of the Opening Spaces site development project.

The planning process is also driven by our commitment to enhance engagement with critical issues that demonstrate the inherent worth and dignity of all people. To date, we have garnered new insights and suggestions from numerous stakeholders about the Chapel's potential areas of increased impact. We look forward to rolling out the plan next year which will be the result of a truly collaborative enterprise in the spirit of the Chapel's commitment to intersectional engagement. We are especially grateful for the grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in support of this planning initiative.


This spirit of collaboration and cross-sectional dialogue was also emphasized throughout the program season through lectures, meditations, music, poetry and facilitated conversations on the ongoing work on civil rights at risk in this country. While there were many highlights, we were particularly moved by the honorees of the 2023 Óscar Romero Award who work so diligently to ensure “justice for all.” We were also reminded of the importance of music to bring attention to critical issues such as violence against women, as well as to support social change movements as we experienced first-hand through the Summer Sounds concert on the Chapel plaza featuring the music and witness of Zimbabwean Thomas Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited. The 2022-23 program season made clear the importance of the synergist relationship between art, spirituality and social justice.

Looking toward the next year, we anticipate hosting an increasing number of Chapel visitors and getting the construction on the north campus started again as part of the Opening Spaces project. Simply put, envisioning and accomplishing the mission of the Rothko Chapel would not be possible without your support. We look forward to an expansive and transformative future and thank you for all you do in support of the Rothko Chapel.

Sincerely,



Troy Porter,
Board of Directors Chair



David Leslie,
Executive Director



The Rothko Chapel invites people from all walks of life to contemplate complex and intersectional issues and to join in action together to create a more equitable, livable world. In addition to offering a quiet place for reflection, meditation, and prayer, the Chapel curated a selection of public programs for the 2022-2023 season, concluding a multi-year initiative on civil rights in the US with the 2023 Óscar Romero Awards Ceremony. These season programs were designed to sustain the mind and spirit during challenging times, provide education on critical social justice issues, explore the transcendent power of the arts, and provide connection internally and externally with our communities locally and globally.



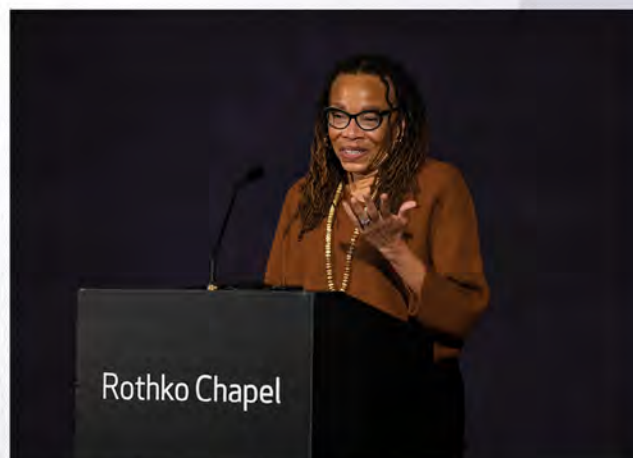
8th Annual Frances Tarlton “Sissy” Farenthold Endowed Lecture in Peace, Social Justice and Human Rights with Dorothy Roberts

Co-presented by the Rothko Chapel & The Bernard and Audre Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice at University of Texas at Austin School of Law, the eighth annual Farenthold Lecture engaged acclaimed scholar and activist, University of Pennsylvania law and sociology professor Dorothy Roberts. Roberts’ lecture “The Long Struggle to Abolish Reproductive Slavery” traced Black women’s struggle for reproductive rights from a 1662 Virginia law determining that children born to enslaved mothers held the racial and legal status of their mothers, to the family separation by state “child welfare” systems today. During her talk inside the Chapel, Roberts noted how she felt liberated to speak from her faith on this topic, something that is discouraged in more academic settings.

She argued that the Supreme Court’s 2022 *Dobbs* decision was part of this racialized history of legally coerced childbirth and economically coerced family separation. Quoting Malcolm X’s proclamation that “I have no mercy or compassion in me for a society that will crush people, and then penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight,” Roberts called for the abolition of contemporary reproductive slavery. She insisted on the urgency of building a “society that meets human needs without policing pregnancy and families.”

After the lecture, Roberts engaged in lively conversation with Eleanor Klibanoff, women’s health reporter at the *Texas Tribune*, including discussion of the implications of Roberts’ work for Texas. The evening concluded with a book signing of Roberts’ *Torn Apart: How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families—and How Abolition Can Build a Safer World* (2022).

Named in honor of Sissy Farenthold (1926-2021), who dedicated her life to exposing and responding to injustices as a lawyer, legislator, and global leader in human rights, this lecture series aims to inspire audiences to think and act creatively in response to the greatest human rights challenges of the 21st century.



2023 Rothko Chapel Óscar Romero Award Ceremony



The Rothko Chapel's Óscar Romero Award has been given biennially since 1986 to recognize courageous, grassroots human rights advocates. This award is named in honor of Saint Óscar Romero of San Salvador, who was assassinated in March 1980 while conducting Catholic Mass in a local hospital chapel. He is recognized internationally for his vocal opposition against oppression and has inspired countless others to advocate for justice even in the face of great economic and political pressure.

At a time when many urgent, intersecting civil liberties and human rights are under attack and actively losing protections in the US, the Rothko Chapel continued a multi-year effort to further community engagement on the topic of civil rights, following our 2021-22 Symposium "Beyond the Rhetoric: Civil Rights & Our Shared Responsibility."

"In the relentless pursuit of Reproductive Justice, the future is too important to be held hostage by fear".

- Rev. Erika Ferguson

The 2023 Rothko Chapel Óscar Romero Award recognized individuals and collectives exercising courageous, grassroots, human rights advocacy to further civil rights in the United States, with the nomination committee seeking awardees working on urgent issues of reproductive justice, LGBTQ+ issues, and racial and economic justice.

2023 Awardees included **Rev. Erika Ferguson**, Principal, Envision Justice & Reproductive Justice Post Roe (Dallas, TX); **Secunda Joseph**, Co-Founder & Director of Smart Media & Organizing with ImagiNoir/BLMTX (Houston, TX); and **The People's Paper Co-Op** (Philadelphia, PA).

Rev. Erika Ferguson is the principal of Envision Justice, the reproductive justice strategy firm of the future, and Reproductive Justice Post Roe, a vibrant online community and movement. Fighting for reproductive justice became her mission after seeking life-saving healthcare for herself, leading her to answer the call to become an interfaith minister and a national public speaker on matters of reproductive justice.

Secunda Joseph, aka “For The People Bae,” is a devoted and conscientious activist-organizer based in Houston, who promotes organic, community-based approaches to solidarity work and activism. As Co-Founder and Director of Smart Media & Organizing with ImagiNoir/BLMHTX, she uses Black abolitionist principles and mutual aid concepts to create, build, and work alongside vulnerable communities toward more liberating life options for future generations born to inequity.

Founded in 2014, The People’s Paper Co-op (PPC) is a women-led, women-focused, women-powered art and advocacy project at the Village of Arts and Humanities in North Philadelphia. The PPC looks to women in reentry as the leading criminal justice experts our society needs to hear from and uses a variety of art forms to amplify their stories, dreams, and visions for a more just and free world. Their posters, prints, and t-shirt sales have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in bail funds to free Black mothers and caregivers annually.

The celebratory program inside the Chapel on March 26, 2023, included a moving awards ceremony followed by an insightful moderated conversation facilitated by Omar El-Halwagi, The Anti-Discrimination Attorney PLLC, Co-Founder of Grassroots Islam, and Rothko Chapel Board Member & Program Committee Chair. Each awardee discussed the collaborative nature of their work, as well as how imagination, creativity, and spiritual connection sustain their work and drive their actions for a more just world. The program was followed by a reception on the plaza during which attendees interacted with the awardees, including students and faculty from La Promesa High School, who studied Saint Romero’s life and work, witnessing connections to his ongoing legacy in Houston and beyond.

“Houston is one of the most diverse cities in the nation & one of the most inequitable. We are number two in evictions in the nation, in inaccessibility to affordable housing and our jail is one of the largest mental health facilities in the state. Our work directly impacts folks whose real lives are impacted by these statistics. This award highlight’s the work we do but also brings more attention to the very significant issues Black, Brown, and disenfranchised folks face.”

- Secunda Joseph

“We have spent years working with women coming home from prison to create public art that reaches large audiences and literally frees women, and our annual art fundraiser has raised over \$200,000 to bail out Black mothers and caregivers. This award will help us flood Philadelphia with public art advocating for a world where all women are safe, free, and thriving.”

- Courtney Bowles, The People’s Paper Co-op



Annual Martin Luther King Birthday Observance

“Images & Words: Media’s Influence on the Struggle for Civil Rights”

In partnership with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) and The Gordon Parks Foundation, the 2023 Annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday Observance explored the role of the media in civil rights movements past and present. Inspired by the MFAH’s concurrent exhibition *Gordon Parks: Stokely Carmichael and Black Power*, panelists shared their work and perspectives on how photographers and journalists shape narratives around social justice movements and leaders.

Noting Dr. King’s mastery of communication strategies alongside the growth of television and photojournalism in the 60s, moderator Tony Diaz, Houston-based writer, activist, and media personality, facilitated a timely conversation about the important role artists play in liberating language and imagery. Panelists Lisa Volpe, Curator of Photography at the MFAH, and Michal Raz-Russo, Program Director at the Gordon Parks Foundation, discussed impact of the exhibition at the MFAH featuring Gordon Parks’ *LIFE* Magazine feature of Stokely Carmichael, SNCC Chairman and Black Power activist in 1967. Parks used the camera as a weapon against poverty, intolerance, and racism to humanize the resistance and elevate the inherent beauty of Black life in the US.

“Artists inspire other activists - we are the truth-tellers and the light-bringers.”

-Devon Allen, Baltimore-based photographer

Parks’ work set the precedent and inspiration for photographers and journalists working today, demonstrating the power of uniting images and words. Panelist and Baltimore-based photographer Devin Allen spoke about his process of photographing the emerging Black Lives Matter Movement from its beginnings in Ferguson in 2014 to the Baltimore Uprising in 2015, landing him a *Time* Magazine cover with his grassroots views of these important civil rights actions. Allen shared how his photography became activism by counteracting institutionalized media’s stereotypical portrayal of Baltimore and Black youth, and how he used social media to tell more direct, authentic, and verified stories.



Panelists closed the rich discussion encouraging audience members to have a critical lens on the interpretation of the media they consume and to support local photographers and journalists who are from the communities they are reporting on. They also shared the important message that one doesn’t have to be on the frontlines of action to be a changemaker, just like artists find their own ways to communicate and inspire, so can each person tap into their unique skills and passions to make a difference.



The Transformative Power of Music

Music is essential to expressing the transformative powers of spiritual experience and the pursuit of justice, as concerts are central to the rich programmatic life of the Chapel.

In July, the “Songs of Justice” series closed with a concert by Thomas Mapfumo & the Blacks Unlimited, who performed deep mbira anthems, rollicking township dance grooves, and refracted glimmers of reggae, R&B, and African jazz outside on the Chapel Plaza. Affectionately known to the world as the “Lion of Zimbabwe,” Mapfumo has used his revolutionary, spiritually charged music to decry injustice and highlight the historical and cultural issues that underlie Zimbabwe’s economic and political crises. Throughout the performance, the band shared the origins of the songs, illustrating the many forms and approaches that scholars, musicians, composers, and performers are employing to address social justice issues through music and storytelling, both historically and today.

The following spring, the Chapel debuted several world premiere performances, including during the “Will and Soul” concert featuring Loop38 in May. Inspired by the Chapel’s mission to illuminate our shared humanity, Houston-based, new music group Loop38 performed contemplative works by George Lewis and Chen Yi that consider humanity’s inherent creativity and life force, as well as Carolyn Chen’s extroverted work exploring our relationship with the environment. The performance concluded with the world premiere of *Dream Shadows/Shadow Dreams* (2023), a new work by composer Martha Horst featuring poetry by Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton about hope, aspiration, and the power of creation.



An additional world premiere of chamber works occurred a few weeks later in May with Houston Grand Opera’s culmination of the six-year multi-disciplinary initiative *Seeking the Human Spirit*, highlighting universal spiritual themes raised in opera. Hosted in collaboration with the Menil Collection, each site presented three new compositions during two simultaneous performances based on the identified themes. The Rothko Chapel hosted the premieres of *A Stillness that Moves*, composed by Shih-Hui Chen, based on text inspired by the Rothko Chapel on the theme of faith; *Drives*, composed by Mark Buller, with a libretto Euan Tait on the theme of character; and *hela*, composed by J.E. Hernández, set to Nahuatl poems on the theme of transformation. The evening finished with a gathering at Menil Park for a labyrinth walk through an installation by Reginald Adams, performance by 2022 Houston Poet Laureate Outspoken Bean, and collecting meditation beads crafted by Eepi Chad.

Throughout the year, the Rothko Chapel hosted a series of observances, each a powerful reminder of our mission:

International Day of Peace:

In a world too often marred by conflict, we came together to celebrate peace and the possibility of a harmonious future. Community members gathered for reflection, music, and silence to cultivate world peace and sustain our spirits at a time of interconnected crisis and conflict.



World AIDS Day:

We commemorated those affected by HIV/AIDS, offering support, education, and a space for reflection on the ongoing fight against this global pandemic. Attendees gathered in solidarity and were invited to bring a small memento or item to place on a community altar in remembrance of those who have passed on, and in celebration of those living with HIV.



International Women's Day:

The Rothko Chapel's International Women's Day event focused on reflecting on women's social, economic, cultural, and political achievements. It featured a call to collective action for accelerating gender equity in alignment with the United Nations' global theme for last year, "Embrace Equity." Participants engaged in challenging gender stereotypes, addressing discrimination and bias, and fostering inclusive environments and systems. The event provided a platform for women leaders from the Houston community to share their intersectional insights into the past year's state of gender equity.

The event's distinguished presenters included Kimberly Baker, Assistant Dean at UTHealth Houston School of Public Health; Kelly Johnson, Director of Public Programs at Rothko Chapel; Rachna Khare, Executive Director of Daya; James McAloon Jr., trumpeter & DACAMERA Young Artist; Rev. Diane McGehee, Senior Pastor at Bering Memorial; Leslie Contreras Schwartz, poet; Kesley Sham, harpist & DACAMERA Young Artist; Eden Rose Torres, Founder of Pride Portraits & transgender activist; and Donya Ziraksari, Iranian women's rights activist, author, and producer. Each presenter brought a unique perspective and expertise, contributing to the diverse and insightful discussions on gender equity and the achievements of women. Their collective voices enriched the event, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in advancing gender equality.





World Environment Day:

Our commitment to sustainability and environmental stewardship was reaffirmed as we explored ways to protect our planet for future generations. To celebrate World Environment Day, we explored the interplay between our own nature and the nature around us through a facilitated walking meditation led by Aroteem Choudhury.



Summer Solstice:

In observance of the longest day of the year, the morning contemplative music experience featured American jazz drummer and percussionist Hamid Drake. Widely regarded as one of the best percussionists in jazz and improvised music, Hamid Drake performed a unique mix of Afro-Cuban, Indian, and African percussion instruments and influence.

Kaminari Taiko of Houston, a Japanese drumming ensemble, marked the end of the day of the year with an evening performance.



Henry Luce Cohort: on Spirituality and Social Justice

In 2020, as part of the Rothko Chapel's 50th Anniversary observed in 2021, we launched a multi-year cross-sector dialogue project focused on how the Chapel can best engage an expanding environment of spiritual, political, religious, and social expectations. As envisioned, the primary goal of the project was exploring how spirituality—in both religious and non-religious contexts—is understood and operative in contemporary social change movements, and how these learnings could impact the Chapel's future public programming, educational offerings, and training initiatives. Central to the Chapel's ethos is the affirmation that spiritual grounding and the unwavering commitment to social justice are important, if not necessary, aspects of the long-haul struggle for civil and human rights. In this context, spirituality is understood to be, in part, a person's relationship to and engagement with the transcendent questions and issues that confront one as a human being.

Through the generous support of The Henry Luce Foundation Theology and Religion Program, we were able to organize a cohort of activists, artists, religious leaders and academics—all well-versed in different approaches and understandings about how spirituality and social change intersect. Members of the cohort were Elia Arce, Costa Rican conceptual/performance artist; Suzanne Benally, Executive Director of the Swift Foundation; Sean Fitzpatrick, Ph.D., Executive Director of The Jung Center-Houston; Ash-Lee Woodard-Henderson, Co-Executive Director of the Highlander Research & Education Center; Matthew Russell, Ph.D. Co-Managing Director of projectCurate, and Executive Pastor at Chapelwood United Methodist Church; Najeeba Syeed, J.D., Associate Professor of Muslim and Interreligious Studies at Chicago Theological Seminary and Director of the Center for Global Peacebuilding; and John H. Vaughn, Executive Pastor, Ebenezer Baptist; Caron Tabb, Mixed Media Artist; and Anthony B. Pinn, Ph.D. Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religious Studies at Rice University.

Through our various dialogue sessions, some important questions surfaced including Is it possible to create the space where people who identify as religious, spiritual not religious, and non-religious or spiritual can deliberate and work together on critical social justice issues? Is spirituality an important aspect of current social movements such as Black Lives Matter, LGBTQI+, climate equity and criminal justice reform efforts, and if so, how is it manifested? How does one discover and foster the spiritual, interpersonal, existential and inter-community resources needed to sustain effective social change efforts? How can religiosity and secularity within the context of social justice organizing be held in creative and productive tension?

Finally convening in person in June 2023, key findings emerged from our dialogues and community outreach efforts. First, there was consensus that real differences exist related to the breadth of understandings as to the meanings of “justice” and “spirituality.” As such, it is important to create the environment to better understand the nature of such differences and avoid the rush to reduce everything to the “lowest common denominator” and “uncritical common ground.” Second, there is a real need for opportunities and places whereby people representing different academic disciplines, parts of the community and regions of the country, religious and secular viewpoints, social justice movements and sectors can come together to learn from one another and that “mediating institutions” like the Chapel have an important roles to play to this end. Third, art in its diverse mediums is an important way that people express ultimate meaning and sustain their spirit while also being a critical aspect of communicating key messages and information within social movements themselves. Fourth, organizations committed to the “art of social change” need to engage in ongoing organizational analysis including organization infrastructure, leadership approaches and community partnerships to assess and enhance inclusion and community engagement—keys to effectiveness. Fifth, the personal narrative matters and it is important to listen to one another’s experiences and foster understanding especially at time of so much divisive rhetoric. The Chapel aims to continue gatherings like these in the future.





Inspirit: Rothko Chapel's Evening of Inspiration with Carrie Mae Weems in conversation with Ellen Susman

On a beautiful Wednesday evening on March 29, we welcomed over 200 guests to The Astorian for an inspirational evening with celebrated artist and activist Carrie Mae Weems in conversation with American cultural ambassador and award-winning journalist Ellen Susman about the important relationship between art and activism in addressing today's critical social justice and equity issues. The event raised \$250,000 and made numerous new friends for the Chapel!



The evening started with cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, providing an opportunity for guests to mingle before the main event. In continuation of the Rothko Chapel's focus on the future of civil rights in the United States, Carrie Mae Weems and Ellen Susman shared their insightful perspectives on the nature of justice and democracy. Weems and Susman's conversation inspired us all to reflect on our beliefs and values, consider what ways we can make a positive impact on society, and take action to create a more just and equitable future. These sentiments continued to reverberate throughout the room in the engaging conversations shared by guests over dinner.

The evening was a huge success, and we could not have done this without you! Thank you for investing in the Rothko Chapel to further the critical work we do. Your donations directly supported our operations and service to the community - services that are vital to continue our mission. We give special thanks to our evening's chairs Teresa and Chao-Chiung "C.C." Lee & Judy and Scott Nyquist.



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Opening Spaces: A Campaign for the Rothko Chapel

As a cherished and iconic institution in Houston, the Rothko Chapel holds a crucial place in our city's cultural, spiritual, and human rights landscape. Committed to addressing the ever-changing needs of the nation's most diverse city, the Chapel is dedicated to fostering its growth. This commitment is evident in the realization of the Opening Spaces masterplan, reflecting our vision for the Chapel's expansion.

The visionary masterplan, with a budget of \$40 million, marks the most ambitious and transformative capital endeavor for the Rothko Chapel since its construction 50 years ago.

Phase I, completed in 2021, involved the restoration and lighting transformation of the Rothko Chapel sanctuary, the construction of the Suzanne Deal Booth Welcome House, comprehensive drainage and infrastructure enhancements, and new plantings, including the Charleen Mullenweg Birch Grove, overseen by Landscape Architects at Nelson Byrd Woltz.

We are currently preparing for Phase 2 of the project, which encompasses:

The construction of two new buildings on the North Campus: The Program Center and Administration and Archives Building.

Development of a new meditation garden.

Rehabilitation of a bungalow on-site to provide dedicated housing for Chapel speakers, research fellows, and other visitors.

With the ongoing expansion and implementation of the Opening Spaces masterplan, the Rothko Chapel is poised to reach a broader audience. The addition of new facilities, educational spaces, and community engagement hubs ensures that the Chapel becomes a more accessible and enriching destination for all, fostering a sense of unity and shared experience. As we grow, our commitment to providing a sanctuary for reflection, dialogue, and exploration of the intersection of art, spirituality, and human rights remains steadfast, promising an even more profound impact on the lives of those we serve.



Our Supporters

July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023

The Rothko Chapel would like to thank those who have contributed to the Annual Fund. For more information about making a gift, please contact the Advancement Office at 713.660.1409.

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