VRA Nancy DeLaurier Award 2022

Andrew Wang, Nominator

It's my honor to present one of the 2022 Nancy DeLaurier Awards to two of the most talented and hard-working individuals I know in the Visual Resources Association: Lael Ensor-Bennett and Kendra Werst.

Lael and Kendra have worked on so many committees within VRA, but their commitment to creating and co-leading the Equitable Action Committee, or EAC, in the past couple years has become invaluable for our organization. Lael and Kendra have addressed some of the most pressing issues within our profession through thoughtful, inclusive, and innovative programs. Anybody who has been able to attend one of EAC's many virtual Community Hours, for instance, can speak to the group's impact. In addition to low-pressure meetings to check in on one another throughout the pandemic, EAC programming has also covered everything from critical cataloging to accessibility and equity in online instruction; from unionizing to mutual aid; from salary transparency to institutional responses to Black Lives Matter.

Their achievements are too numerous to list, but I want to express my thanks for the community they've managed to establish in the past few years. They've truly breathed new life into VRA by providing leadership opportunities, representing some of the most marginalized members of our community both within and beyond VRA, and modeling ethical practices within our profession. On top of all that, they're truly wonderful to work with. They've inspired me, personally, time and time again.

At this time I'd like to share some passages from the writers of support:

Julia Murphy

"Together, Kendra and Lael provide a meaningful and much needed resource for the VRA community. Thanks to their commitment to listening, understanding and action, they've made VRA a better organization. Not only are they inspirational leaders, but I'm also proud to call them my friends."

Devon Murphy

"[Kendra and Lael] have cultivated a welcoming, active space, balancing needs for rest for individuals (especially important for POC members) and opportunities to make significant change. I frequently compare the EAC to other diversity groups I have joined, at my workplaces or in other organizations, and they cannot compare to the leadership and focused activity that the EAC provides under these two."

Summer Shetenhelm

"I can confidently say that the most meaningful conversations I've had within VRA have occurred within the context of the EAC. I cannot emphasize this enough--the EAC has provided

me with so many opportunities to be an active VRA member and find joy and community within VRA."

Cindy Frank

Whether it is a committee meeting or Community Hour, Lael and Kendra welcome everyone, and support each individual who comes to the space. I have to say that the EAC meetings are ones I look forward to, because I want to be in community with my fellow committee members. Lael and Kendra have built that welcoming space together, by being respectful to themselves, each other, and all of us who join them.

Thanks to the Awards Committee. Thanks so much to Julia, Devon, Summer, Cindy, and all the members of EAC, past and present. Kendra and Lael, you both mean so much to me. Congratulations and thank you for everything you've done.

Lael Ensor-Bennett, Recipient

Thank you so much, Andrew. When Kendra and I were informed about receiving this award, we both were teary (-eyed) and speechless. Everyone in VRA who knows me also knows how rare the latter is. It may seem that the world was on pause during the last two years, but so much has happened to so many of us. It is hard to believe that EAC only began in late 2019 and that we had not had any sort of in-person presence until this week.

However, as only half of our co-chairing team on an especially good day, I can't help but feel at a loss that Kendra is not standing up here with me. In fact, they expressed to me immense sadness that they could not be here today. While I continue to wish them well on their current endeavors, their presence in VRA is truly missed everyday.

At our first EAC meeting I couldn't even finish the sentence, "if you are interested in being cochair, please email me," before Kendra burst forth to volunteer. This type of work is never done, and it is always collaborative. I can't imagine having formed EAC without Kendra. Aside from all of the work that went into developing the committee, meeting with Kendra was an essential component of my mental health during the pandemic. How many times did they pull me back from the proverbial precipice? How many times did we laugh until nearly crying over a Google doc? How many times did they remind me why we keep doing what we do, even when the world outside seems so bleak and incomprehensible?

Both Kendra and I knew there were more voices to be heard from the community, in addition to a need for greater awareness about accessibility. We hoped our endeavors would bring the VRA community closer, especially during unprecedented times, and lead to greater member engagement. We supported each other's ideas and took care of each other as friends. It's rare to meet someone else who cares as much as you do--we are grateful to have worked together for the past two years.

I cannot say in a few words here how much I have learned and how humbling it has been to cochair EAC. I could talk about other DEIA groups I have been in or am a part of and why I wanted to join them, but in this moment, I'd rather talk about VRA. I'd rather talk about how in 2014 I was immediately welcomed into a caring and friendly community who so wanted to help me succeed. I'd rather talk about how easy it was to volunteer for committees and task forces that interested me and how encouraging the 2017 call that asked me to run for the Board was. I'd rather say all of these things because I was initiated into VRA by my supervisor who had also done *all* the VRA things. It was easy for me to simply fall into everything. I don't recall the moment when it really became clear to me that, for many reasons, this experience was not one every new or prospective member shares.

EAC is important to us for many reasons, but maybe most of all because we want everyone in VRA or even considering joining VRA to feel and know that it is the most kind and inspiring community we have ever had the good fortune to be a part of. We want our doors to swing open and for us to invite everyone, and we want existing members to feel that if something's not right, that it can be.

A lot of the time, we find it demoralizing to have to accept that remaining aware and being vigilant about recognizing where we are not educated is doing the best we can on a given afternoon. We will always fall short, but if we all feel empowered we can move forward together with everyone's voices being heard and respected. No person is an island, when we achieve, we usually do so because others have helped.

At the end of the day, this work has been facilitation, organization, and administration, all while standing on the shoulders of others. So, we must ask you to bear with us as we say our thank yous to everyone who actively and continually makes VRA a more inclusive organization.

First and foremost, we must thank all of the current and past members of EAC: Dot Donovan, Jackie Fleming, Katherina Fostano, Cindy Frank, Alvina Lai, Devon Murphy, Bonnie Rosenberg, Summer Shetenhelm, Shelby Silvernell, Chelsea Stone, Andrew Wang, and new co-chair Lesley Chapman. To all of the inaugural members, we thank you for helping get the committee going. The committee would not be the vibrant group it is today without all of the members' guidance, thoughtfulness, and intentionality.

We must also thank the 2018-2020 VRA Executive Boards, the VRA Identity Task Force, and the VRA Strategic Plan Task Force who all supported the formation of a DEIA group. As we all know, having supportive supervisors and co-workers is key to getting work done, so we thank Amy McKenna and the Art Department at Williams College, as well as Ann Woodward and the Department of the History of Art at Johns Hopkins University. I also thank JHU's Assistant Dean for Diversity and Inclusion Darlene Saporu for all of her essential advice in the committee's formation. Of course, we also owe our gratitude to all of our VRA member mentors and colleagues that are far too numerous to name. But, we must make special note of Jasmine Burns, Marcia Focht, Allan Kohl, Amy Lazet, Meghan Rubenstein, and Kate Thornhill who lent us courage, confidence, varying perspectives, and their time for *all* the brainstorming sessions.

We thank the person who in an open EAC meeting first suggested the Community Hour series (we would love to formally recognize you). We thank the many members who have come to our Community Hours and made them the vibrant space they continue to be. Thank you to the current Board, the Awards Committee, and to Andrew, of course. We thank our partners and dear friends who support us with all things VRA.

We accept this award humbly and in awe of all of our fellow VRA members--we dedicate this award to you! We are proud to have served you--if we were able to give back just a bit to the community that has given us so much, we are eminently grateful.