

Cultural Daily

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Fostering Up, Not Just Out

Ann Haskins · Wednesday, August 12th, 2020

A doctor, a judge and a choreographer walk into a room... Not the opening for a shaggy dog story, but components of the Dr. Kerry English Creative Fellowship. The newly announced fellowship provides five years of funding for *Foster Up*, a program from **Heidi Duckler Dance** using the arts to help youth transitioning out of foster care.

The long-time head of Martin Luther King Medical Center's pediatric department, Dr. Kerry English died of ALS in April. His widow Olga Garay-English established the new fellowship in his name, committing to provide \$15,000 annually for five years to *Foster Up*.

Garay-English described the fellowship as reflecting her late husband's two greatest passions—children and the arts, especially theater. She is no stranger to the arts in her own right, having headed the LA City Cultural Affairs Department and served as the Ford Theaters' interim head where she crossed paths with choreographer Heidi Duckler years before Duckler and her company began their current artists residency at the MLK Medical Center.

The judge involved is the Hon. Martha Matthews, a judge at the court supervising children in foster care who provided valuable perspective and advice in the development of the fellowship program. Two students will be funded by the six month Fellowship. The committee also will select two artists to teach and mentor.



L.toR. Heidi Duckler, Olga Garay-English, and Dr. Kerry English, Olga Garay-English. Photo courtesy of Heidi Duckler Dance.

In a recent interview, Duckler described how the new fellowship provides important support that will help further the mission of *Foster Up*.

“Foster children are some of the most vulnerable in our society. While they are in foster care there is court and county oversight, until the day they turn 18 and suddenly they are out of foster care, often without much transition or preparation for becoming an adult,” Duckler explained. “The fellowship reflects the doctor and his wife's deep roots in L.A., their devotion to L.A. arts, and their deep commitment to the vulnerable youth in foster care,” she added.

Duckler sees the fellowship as supporting needed innovation in the youth foster care sphere and critical to the long-term growth of the youth.

“I believe exposure to the arts is a key to assuring young people in foster care that they can make a strong, successful transition to adulthood, and hopefully equip them to break free from the intergenerational cycle of foster care, poverty, and hopelessness.” Duckler said. “With the additional isolating factor of the pandemic, the need for support has never been as critical as now,” she added.



Heidi Duckler Dance Community Program at Martin Luther King Medical Center. Photo courtesy of Heidi Duckler Dance.

While the HDD artists residency is centered at the MLK medical campus, Duckler and her company also have been involved with the surrounding Watts-Willowbrook community. Well-attended outdoor performances on the MLK campus have introduced HDD’s site specific artistry to the community and other HDD programs have involved school children with elements of performance. Even before the fellowship, Duckler’s company had partnered with two community-based groups To Raise a Child and The Right Way Foundation in the *Foster Up* program.

The initial fellowship artist recipients will be selected in September with the RFQ (Request for Qualifications) available starting September 10. The two debut fellowships are open to artists with a focus on dance, theater, or poetry as well as an interdisciplinary combination. The student fellowships are open to those from foster care, age 18 to 24. The selection panel includes a diverse group of artists and medical professionals drawn from and involved with the MLK Medical Center and its surrounding community.



Heidi Duckler Dance at MLK Medical Center. Photo courtesy of Heidi Duckler Dance.

The student fellowship will provide some living expenses for six months. Duckler stressed that while financial support is limited to the two fellowship students, the *Foster Up* program is open to all youths transitioning out of foster care. Duckler and her collaborators view the fellowship as just the start of efforts to expand the program and to secure additional funding to underwrite participating artists and assist other youth exiting foster care. For Duckler and her collaborators the fellowship and the five year commitment are a strong assist in demonstrating the value of *Foster UP* and the best way to attract additional financial support for future *Foster Up* participants.

With the current pandemic, the operation plan for the program is fluid. “As part of the artist’s residency at MLK, we have use of two rooms as studios or classrooms which we planned as the site for *Foster Up* program activities. However, if Covid-19 concerns extend into the fall, we have contingency plans to begin online,” Duckler explained. With their background in site specific performance, improvisational response to unexpected encounters is something Heidi Duckler Dance definitely knows how to handle.

Questions about the fellowship can be directed to debra@heididuckler.org. Application [available here](#).

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