

New Jersey State Council on the Arts 2026 Annual Meeting

About the Artists: Spotlight on two 2026 New Jersey Heritage Fellows

Every other year, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts awards New Jersey Heritage Fellowships to exemplary folk and traditional artists in recognition of their lifetime achievement, artistic excellence, and contributions to our state's living traditional arts heritage.

Deborah Mitchell, 2026 New Jersey Heritage Fellow

Deborah Mitchell, born in St. Louis, MO, is an American tap dancer, choreographer, teacher, presenter, and Founder of New Jersey Tap Ensemble. Founded in 1994, New Jersey Tap Ensemble was the first touring rhythm tap dance company in NJ. Ms. Mitchell has a rich, extensive background and career with the art form of tap dancing. As protégé of Leslie "Bubba" Gaines of the Copasetics, this award-winning tap professional's credits include *The Cotton Club* Motion Picture, Tony Award-winning Broadway Production *Black and Blue*, PBS Great Performances, and international tours with the legendary Cab Calloway performing with Germaine Goodson as The Rhythm Queens.

She is a recipient of some of tap dancing's most prestigious awards including Flo-Bert Award 2007 from The New York Committee to Celebrate National Tap Dance Day, The Hooper Award 2007 from the American Tap Dance Foundation, The Living Treasure Award 2007 from Oklahoma City University, and Savion Glover Award 2006 in recognition of National Tap Dance Day. She has been featured in various publications including *Tap Dancing America* by Constance Valis Hill, *Dance Magazine*, *Dance Teacher Magazine*, and the documentary *Gotta Move, Women in Tap* by Lynn Daly. With a Master's Degree in Social Work from Indiana University, Ms. Mitchell is a strong advocate for arts education. She is the author, director, and choreographer of the children's work *The Doll Shop*, and *Generation Tap*, which she presented for many years to children in New Jersey public schools. Ms. Mitchell's personal journey and her contribution to the legacy and history of tap dance has been documented in an oral history by the Jerome Robbins's Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Omar Edwards, 2026 New Jersey Heritage Fellow

Omar Edwards is an internationally acclaimed tap dancer, foot musician, choreographer, playwright, educator, and cultural ambassador whose work has redefined tap dance as both a musical and storytelling art form. A Brooklyn native, Omar trained under legendary masters Henry LeTang, Jimmy Slyde, Marie Brooks, and Olu Dara before gaining national recognition in 1994 when he and Daniel B. Wooten Jr. won the grand championship on *Star Search* after 13 consecutive victories. In 1998, he released *Tap Dancin' Is Music*, becoming the first artist of his generation to record an album with the tap dancer serving as both bandleader and principal instrument, laying the foundation for his signature artistic style, *Afro Feet: Music and Beyond*.

Omar has performed in more than 20 countries, appeared on Broadway and in the international tour of *Black and Blue*, and continues to expand the art form through innovative works including his interactive wellness program, *Dance Medicine*, and his original play, *The Gypsy Code*, which premiered to a sold-out audience at the 2026 Genesis Festival of New Voices and New Plays at Crossroads Theatre Company. In 2024, he was proclaimed a Chief by the Joint Council of African Chiefs for his arts education work with children in Liberia, his mother's birthplace. His honors include an NAACP Image Award, nominations for a Bessie Award and a Broadway World Los Angeles Award, and the 2026 New Jersey Heritage Fellowship Award. Whether performing on stage or teaching in communities around the world, Omar Edwards continues to use rhythm as a universal language that connects, inspires, and heals.