

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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**PLEASE TOUCH MUSEUM ANNOUNCES WINNERS OF THE  
12TH ANNUAL 'GREAT FRIEND TO KIDS AWARDS'**

**Philadelphia, Pa.** – Please Touch Museum, the Children’s Museum of Philadelphia, is pleased to announce the winners of its 12th Annual Great Friend to Kids Awards, honoring individuals and organizations making outstanding contributions to enriching the lives of children. The awards will be presented at a ceremony at The Union League of Philadelphia on Thursday, November 15, beginning at 11:30 a.m. The 12th Annual Great Friend to Kids Awards is presented by Comcast and all proceeds will support Please Touch Museum’s exhibits and programs for young children and their families.

“The six individuals and organizations recognized this year are truly Great Friends to Kids,” says Nancy Kolb, President and CEO of Please Touch Museum. “They have inspired, served, educated, entertained and enriched the lives of children, and by recognizing their efforts we hope to inspire others to make similar efforts in the community.”

**This year’s winners are:**

**Susan Shea (Philanthropy)**

**Elliot L. Shelkrot, President and Director, The Free Library of Philadelphia (Education)**

**Rocco Fiorentino (Young Achiever)**

**Philadelphia Mural Arts Program (Arts)**

**Germaine Ingram, Esq. (Community Service)**

**Carter and Pat Merbreier, aka “Captain and Mrs. Noah” (Lifetime Achievement)**

The lunchtime ceremony will include a short video featuring each recipient and their contribution to the community. Each of the winners will be presented with a special award designed by Philadelphia artist Leo Sewell, creator of Please Touch Museum’s own “Artie the Elephant” and the Statue of Liberty Arm & Torch now being constructed for the new Please Touch Museum at Memorial Hall.

The Great Friend to Kids Award was initiated in 1991 by the Association of Children’s Museums to honor individuals who have made outstanding contributions toward strengthening education for children. National Great Friend to Kids Award winners include Fred Rogers and Marian Wright Edelman. Please Touch began presenting its own award in 1996 to coincide with the museum’s 20th birthday. Past winners include the Philadelphia Eagles Youth Partnership; Sheryl Leach, creator of Barney, the cuddly six-foot purple dinosaur; Carolyn Johnson, Founder and Executive Director of the National Adoption Center; and Alex Scott, Founder of Alex’s Lemonade Stand.

**More about the winners.....**

**Susan Shea**

Susan Shea serves on the boards of directors of Please Touch Museum, St. Edmond’s Home for Children, and Philadelphia’s Gesu School, an independent, all-faiths school in the middle of one of the city’s most hard-pressed neighborhoods. A former Special Education teacher, Mrs. Shea comes to Gesu one day a week to work with students in the Debbie Martinelli Resource Room, named in honor of Sue’s sister, who passed away in 1999 from the effects of Juvenile Diabetes. Mrs. Shea introduced Ballroom

Dancing to the fifth and sixth grade students at Gesu and sponsored the program by supplying a dance instructor and collected formal clothing for the students to wear to an annual ball. A resident of Berwyn, Ms. Shea is a volunteer and supporter of the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, the Breast Cancer Golf Tournament of Philadelphia, and serves on the advisory board of FLITE – Foundation for Learning in Tredyffrin/Easttown.

### **Elliot L. Shelkrot**

Elliot L. Shelkrot is the President and Director of the Free Library of Philadelphia, a city-wide system of 54 branches, including three regional libraries, the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, and the Central Library. Since coming to the Free Library in 1987, Shelkrot has initiated a wide range of innovative programs to increase library services, with a commitment and belief that children, teens and families are a priority audience for the institution. This commitment is evident through the development of the LEAP after-school program, offering homework assistance, computer literacy, library skills, and multicultural enrichment activities on weekdays from September through June at all Free Library locations. Additionally, Mr. Shelkrot instituted Books Aloud!, an award-winning program that introduces parents and caregivers to books that prepare their young children for school; developed initiatives encouraging young people to pursue careers as children or teen librarians; and launched a comprehensive initiative that renovated all branches of the system in order to create a focus on children, teens and families.

### **Rocco Fiorentino**

Ten-year-old Rocco Fiorentino is an honor student at Signal Hill Elementary School in Voorhees, NJ. An aspiring singer and musician, he has performed at the famed Birdland music club in New York and at venues throughout the Philadelphia region. That is just the beginning of the story of this remarkable young man, who was born four months premature, weighing only one and a half pounds. He spent the first six months of his life at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and, after 12 surgeries he was released with no sight. Being blind is "just normal, just who I am," says Rocco, who has become an advocate for other children who are visually impaired or blind. The Little Rock Foundation, a non-profit organization formed by Rocco's parents, offers support services for children with visual impairments. In addition to visiting schools and sharing his story with other kids, Rocco has made an impact on government. When he was only five years old, he addressed legislators at a local budget hearing for the New Jersey Department of Human Services to increase awareness about Braille Literacy for the New Jersey Commission for the Blind & Visually Impaired. Rocco was credited with saving the budget for the Commission that year. The following year, Rocco spoke at a budget hearing for the Department of Education. After this speech, the Department of Human Services received \$900,000 to increase Braille services to blind and visually impaired children across the state.

### **Philadelphia Mural Arts Program**

The Philadelphia Mural Arts Program (MAP) evolved from the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network (PAGN), a city-wide initiative to eradicate destructive graffiti and reduce blight. The Mural Arts Program was established as a distinct endeavor in 1996. Simultaneously, MAP launched a non-profit dedicated to youth development and neighborhood revitalization through the arts – The Philadelphia Mural Arts Advocates. Due to the success of MAP, Philadelphia has become the mural arts center of the world. More than 5,000 tourists come to Philadelphia each year to tour the City and its culture through venues focused on the City's vibrant murals – and tours, events and literature based on these murals. The Mural Arts Program has produced almost 3,000 murals throughout Philadelphia – more than any city in the world. The organization's greatest contribution has been its impact on children and youth throughout Philadelphia. MAP is deeply involved in mural-making and art education. The art education programs target underserved youth at neighborhood sites both after-school and in the summer. Art education classes use mural-making to teach art, promote self-confidence and develop life and job skills. More than 3,000 youth participate each year, working with professional artists who serve as teachers and role models. These programs are free – making them accessible to all youth. MAP provides career/internship opportunities for emerging artists – employing over 300 artists each year. These artists work with more than 100 communities/community groups working to celebrate culture, ethnicity and the value of embracing diversity.

**Germaine Ingram, Esq.**

Germaine Ingram has dedicated her life to serving children – particularly those in the Philadelphia area. For many years, Ms. Ingram served as General Counsel and then Deputy Superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia – working to ensure a high quality education for all children. She focused on achieving scale – so that model programs could be expanded to serve those beyond the experimental group. She also fought to retain funding for arts, music and other enrichment programs – understanding that these were essential aspects of high quality education. Ms. Ingram later served as Vice President for the Black Community Crusade for Children of the Children’s Defense Fund, a national initiative to support African American children throughout the United States. Ms. Ingram is also a mainstay of the Picasso Project, operating under the auspices of PCCY. She also plays a major role as a Board Member and long time president of The Philadelphia Folklore Project, which has worked to bring arts and culture to the Philadelphia community, particularly children.

**Carter and Pat Merbreier**

For 27 years, the children’s program “Captain Noah and His Magical Ark” aired on WPVI-TV, Channel 6, reaching millions of children in the Delaware Valley. The live program, consisting of 3,600 episodes, provided a daily dose of high moral and educational value, unmatched by any other local children’s show in the country. The Merbreiers were not only the hosts of this wonderful children’s show but also the producers. The show’s close associations with Philadelphia area institutions opened the doors of exploration with the Philadelphia Zoo, Franklin Institute, and Philadelphia Museum of Art, and promoted the Fire Department’s first smoke alarm give-away program. The “Magical Ark” was a magic carpet for children’s imaginations and dreams. The Ark Art Gallery was an inspiration for many of today’s artists, and American Folklore was way ahead of its time in showcasing the inspiring stories and legends of both women and minorities in American History. Mr. and Mrs. Merbreier were honored by the Pennsylvania Association of Broadcasters with their induction into the Pennsylvania Broadcasting Hall of Fame and were also inducted into The Broadcast Pioneers’ Hall of Fame and were their Persons of the Year. Captain and Mrs. Noah’s legacy continues to this day with their inspiring live Elementary School presentation of “Lessons in a Box of Crayons,” provided free as a continuing commitment to children.

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The presenting sponsor of Please Touch Museum’s 12th Annual Great Friend to Kids Awards is Comcast. Media sponsors are The Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia Daily News, and philly.com. Magazine sponsor is Philadelphia Magazine.

Tickets to the 12th Annual Great Friend to Kids Awards are still available. To purchase tickets, please contact Stephanie Lim Capello at 215-963-0667, ext. 3159 or e-mail at [HYPERLINK "mailto:scapello@pleasetouchmuseum.org" scapello@pleasetouchmuseum.org](mailto:scapello@pleasetouchmuseum.org).

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Please Touch Museum® is dedicated to enriching the lives of children by providing learning opportunities through play. Recognized locally and nationally as one of the best children’s museums, Please Touch is open seven days a week from 9 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. Admission is \$9.95 for adults and children age one and over. Children under one are free. For more information, please call 215-963-0667, visit our web site at [www.pleasetouchmuseum.org](http://www.pleasetouchmuseum.org).