

Pasatiempo

SANTA FE + NEW MEXICAN

"Artists, educator, the Lencic among recipients of Santa Fe Mayor's Awards for Excellence in the Arts"

By Brian Sandford

September 25, 2026



Rose B. Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo) sculpts in 2020 in her studio in Española.
New Mexican file photo

In her formative years, mixed-media artist Rose B. Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo) faced a challenge all too familiar to the progeny of famous creators: following a path other than the well-worn one leading right to her feet.

"It used to [bother me], when I was younger, because I wanted to figure out who I was outside of my cultural and familial contexts," she says. "But when I went away to graduate school in Rhode

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Island, where I could be anonymous, I realized that this foundation is actually integral to my identity. It is vital, and I had to get away from it to really appreciate it."

Simpson, the daughter of sculptor Roxanne Swentzell and granddaughter of late potter, author, and architect Rina Swentzell (both Santa Clara Pueblo), has had work featured around the United States and was selected for a series of fellowships and residencies beginning in 2013. Her separate identity has received another layer of glaze via the Santa Fe Mayor's Awards for Excellence in the Arts; she's one of eight recipients to be honored in a ceremony Tuesday, September 29.

Simpson is recognized in the arts category. The other recipients and categories are Mary H. Olson, arts educator, who retired in 2020; Axle Contemporary, arts innovator; Vital Spaces Executive Director Raashan Ahmad, Culture Connects; interdisciplinary artist Erica Lord, heritage arts; Catherine Oppenheimer, philanthropy/supporter; Valentina Perea, youth artist; and the Lensic Performing Arts Center and Lensic 360, Community Different Award.

Nominations for the awards were collected from October 2025 through May, and arts commissioners created a list of finalists. Mayor Michael J. Garcia selected the recipients. Previous awardees include filmmaker Godfrey Reggio, SITE Santa Fe curator Brandee Caoba, art writer Lucy Lippard, and theater company Exodus Ensemble. Simpson will be part of the talk *It Seems Everywhere There Are Eyes* from 6-8 p.m. October 7, hosted by ICA Santa Fe. To learn more, visit icasantafe.org. She, Olson, and Ahmad fielded questions from *Pasatiempo*; their replies have been edited for length and clarity.

You have degrees in ceramics and creative nonfiction, and you've performed in punk and hip-hop bands. Have you encountered many others with such wide-ranging interests?

Simpson: The more I look back on my life, I don't think a lot of people have taken the same trajectory as I have. Sometimes I feel really lonely, and I try and figure out why. Then I'm like, "Oh, it's because not a lot of people have done or are experiencing the same things, and so sometimes it's hard to connect to people."

I grew up in Santa Clara Pueblo with my mom and would spend every other weekend with my dad in Santa Fe. My realities were very dichotomous. I was living sustainably off the land on the pueblo, then going to Santa Fe with my dad, who's also an artist, and seeing a different life and different culture. My dad's non-Native, and I had a lot of questions: Why is this this way? Why are these different? Why does this feel bad? How does this whole thing work? When you're going back and forth between (worlds), you have perspective that, if you're fully immersed in something, you don't necessarily get. I think that's where my deep questioning comes from; it's a constant investigation.

Your daughter is 9; do you incorporate any lessons from your childhood when managing her artistic growth?

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Simpson: When I was a kid, it was really important to my mom that I made art that I liked — that I wasn't seeking validation from teachers, from other people, or even financial validation. She didn't let me sell anything. She really wanted me to build a relationship with my work. With my daughter, I'm careful because I don't want to push in any way. I've noticed she is an absolutely incredible drawer. I recently found a book of my drawings from when I was her age, and she's way better than me.



Raashan Ahmad, the executive director of Vital Spaces, plays with the bubble table during adult night in 2022 at the Santa Fe Children's Museum.

Luis Sánchez Saturno/The New Mexican

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How did it feel to learn you'd received this award?

Ahmad: It felt really good to see that email and read the nice things people said when they nominated me. I have no idea who nominated me.

You've mentioned experiencing imposter syndrome; how does receiving this affect your confidence?

Ahmad: Imposter syndrome never ceases to exist. But a logical part of my brain is like, Somebody did this. You didn't nominate yourself. Other people see this work, and it must be meaningful and helpful.

How did you become aware of your artistic talent?

Olson: I was a troubled teen and was sent away to boarding school, and the French teacher set up a little pottery area in the basement of one of the dorms. This was in Colorado Springs — Fountain Valley School, which was not a prominent prep school like it is now. I was instantly in love. From then on, I was in ceramics.

You were an educational institution at Wood Gormley Elementary School. Is it safe to say this award is far from the only recognition you experience in your retirement?

Olson: I had a lot of parent involvement in the art program, so when I go out now, six years later, I feel like a celebrity. I feel so much love.

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