

Rabbi Donna Berman, Ph.D.

Rabbi Donna Berman is the executive director of the Charter Oak Cultural Center, an organization that presents professional multi-cultural arts performances and exhibits that are made accessible to the Hartford inner-city community for free or at a very low cost. Charter Oak also provides completely free out-of-school time arts offerings as well as healthy meals and snacks for over 1000 students in our urban community, where 46% of children live in poverty. In 2001, when Donna took the helm at Charter Oak Cultural Center, the organization was in a state of ruin and on the verge of closing its doors permanently. Donna breathed new life into the organization and, through her leadership, the Charter Oak Cultural Center has become one of the areas most vibrant multicultural arts centers. Donna instituted Charter Oak's policy of never turning anyone away for lack of funds and through her vision, leadership and commitment to social justice, she has made Charter Oak Cultural Center a haven for diverse groups to come together to enjoy multi-cultural arts and explore the burning issues of our day.

Donna started Charter Oak's youth programming in 2001 with four students because the children in our neighborhood wanted to learn to dance. It became clear that no-cost, non-audition-based out-of-school time arts programming is largely unavailable to young people in our community and she determined that our mission would be best served by offering high-quality classes in the arts to these students who need it the most. Today, Charter Oak is still one of the only organizations in Hartford that provides youth art programming completely free of charge to all who wish to enter the program. Over the years, Charter Oak's Youth Arts Institute has continued to grow to serve over 1,000 students, with a waiting list. This year, the program was selected as a finalist by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, distinguishing it as one of the top arts and humanities-based youth programs in the country.

Donna is known as one of the regions most moving speakers and visionary leaders. She has touched thousands of lives through her work at the Charter Oak Cultural Center.

Rabbi Donna holds a Ph.D. in Religion and Social Ethics from Drew University. In her dissertation entitled, *Nasbiut Ethics: The Articulation of a Jewish Feminist Ethics of Safe-Keeping*, Rabbi Berman developed a method for doing Jewish feminist ethics. At the core of her theology is a commitment to the Jewish tradition of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world through acts of justice. This is a commitment that she brings to her work at Charter Oak.

Donna was awarded the 2012 Elizabeth L. Mahaffey Arts Administration Fellowship through Connecticut's Department of Community and Economic Development. She was also highlighted as one of *Hartford Magazine's* 2012 Amazing Women and recently named one of Greater Hartford's 12 most influential people, also by *Hartford Magazine*, along with individuals such as Governor Dannel Malloy, Mayor Pedro Segarra and Jim Calhoun. In the spring of 2010, Donna received the Human Relations Award from the National Conference for Community and Justice. In June 2010, she graduated from Hartford Family Institute's training program in body-centered Gestalt therapy. In 2009, she was given the Dance Pioneer Award by Trinity College and in the spring of 2007 she was honored by American Friends Service Committee for her work in social justice. In 2006, Rabbi Berman received Leadership Greater Hartford's Polaris Award in arts and culture.

Donna is *rabbi emerita* of Port Jewish Center in Port Washington, New York, where, prior to her work at Charter Oak Cultural Center, she served as spiritual leader and principal of the Hebrew school for 12 years. She is the founder and co-chair of The South Bronx—Port Washington Community Partnership, a mutually beneficial collaboration between one of the poorest communities in the nation and one of the wealthiest. She has taught at Molloy College in New York, Wesleyan University and Hartford Seminary, where she teaches presently. She has served as the Jewish chaplain at Mount Holyoke College in Hadley, Massachusetts. Donna is the co-editor of a special edition of *The Journal of Reform Judaism* and is the author of numerous articles. She co-edited and wrote the foreword for, *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1973-2003* by Judith Plaskow. Donna is the co-author, with Barbara Bennett, of *Fork in the Road: A Companion for Women Who Are Going Back to School Later in Life (and Those Who Want To)*.