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Bryan Stevenson, Founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative, to Deliver Keynote Address at Rhode Island School of Design's 2019 Commencement

Stevenson will accept an honorary degree along with artist Theaster Gates, author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and activist Nadya Tolokonnikova; Dr. Joseph Chazan will be awarded the President's Medal of Honor

PROVIDENCE, RI – On Saturday, June 1, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) will award degrees to 487 undergraduate and 214 graduate students at its 136th Commencement ceremony. Commencement 2019 will take place at 10:30 am at the Rhode Island Convention Center in downtown Providence, where RISD's annual [graduate thesis exhibition](#) will also be on view.

This year RISD will present four honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degrees to visionaries in contemporary culture. Founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative **Bryan Stevenson** will be honored with an honorary degree and will also deliver the Commencement keynote address. Artist **Theaster Gates**, author **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie** and activist **Nadya Tolokonnikova** will accept honorary degrees at the ceremony. Dr. Joseph Chazan will be awarded the inaugural President's Medal of Honor.

Bryan Stevenson | honorary degree + keynote speaker

Bryan Stevenson is the founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a social justice nonprofit based in Montgomery, AL. A widely acclaimed public interest lawyer, he has dedicated his career to helping people dealing with poverty or imprisonment, winning challenges against unfair sentencing practices, institutional abuse of inmates, youth incarceration and other major legal issues.

A 1995 MacArthur Fellow, Stevenson earned the 2018 American Bar Association Medal, the highest honor given by the ABA. The New York University School of Law professor has also written the award-winning memoir *Just Mercy*.

Theaster Gates | honorary degree + graduate hooding speaker

On Friday, May 31, Gates will speak at the graduate hooding ceremony as part of Commencement celebrations.

Based in Chicago, **Theaster Gates** creates sculptural and performance-based work focusing on space theory, land development and the productive possibilities discoverable in the "life within things." Drawing on his background in urban planning and preservation, he redeems

spaces that have been left behind and cleverly turns art values, land values and human values on their head.

Gates has exhibited and performed extensively, and has earned numerous awards, including a *Légion d'Honneur* commendation from the government of France in 2017 along with the Artes Mundi 6 prize and the Nasher Prize for Sculpture in 2018.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie | honorary degree

Chimamanda Adichie is a writer, thinker and activist whose voice has helped shape some of the most pressing discussions of our time. Her widely translated works include the award-winning novels *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*, along with the book-length essay *We Should All Be Feminists*, which is based on her influential 2012 TED Talk of the same name.

A 2008 MacArthur Fellow, she is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Her most recent book is *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*.

Nadya Tolokonnikova | honorary degree

A cofounder of the Russian art punk collective Pussy Riot, **Nadya Tolokonnikova** is a powerful voice in the fight against tyranny. After a 2012 public performance protesting the Putin-led Russian government, her two-year imprisonment brought wider awareness to state-sponsored injustices in her homeland.

Since her release, Tolokonnikova has cofounded the independent media agency Mediazona and collected her political thinking into two books. A recipient of a LennonOno Grant for Peace and co-recipient of the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought, she has addressed the US Congress, the British Parliament and the European Parliament on issues of global human rights.

Joseph A. Chazan | President's Medal of Honor

Joseph A. Chazan, the first-ever recipient of this new award, has made an enduring impact on RISD and the region through his lifelong generosity. A pioneering nephrologist and professor emeritus at Brown's Alpert Medical School, the art collector and advocate has donated more than 600 works to the RISD Museum and currently serves on its Board of Governors and Fine Arts Committee. From 2008–16 Dr. Chazan helped promote contemporary artists in Rhode Island by profiling their practices through *NetWorks*. His support for the Newport Art Museum, the Rhode Island Philharmonic, WaterFire Providence, AS220 and the Steel Yard, among others, helped earn him the Pell Award for Outstanding Leadership in the Arts in 2013.

RISD's joyous Commencement ceremony offers a festive culmination to years of creative exploration in the studio. Students traditionally transform their caps and gowns in idiosyncratic ways—by painting, reimagining and embellishing them to make a more personal artistic statement or simply to have fun with this colorful RISD tradition. For more information on RISD's 2019 Commencement and to view the ceremony streaming live on June 1, visit commencement.risd.edu.

A series of [exhibitions](#) leading up to Commencement will highlight new work produced by graduating students, including the *Senior Invitational Exhibition* at Woods-Gerry Gallery, *Grad Show 2019* at the RI Convention Center, a selection of graduate student works at Sol Koffler Gallery and the *Senior Film/Animation/Video Festival* at the RISD Auditorium. A

student-curated exhibition of undergraduate and graduate student work will also be on view at the Gelman Student Exhibitions Gallery in the Chace Center.

About Rhode Island School of Design

The mission of RISD (pronounced "RIZ-dee"), through its college and museum, is to educate students and the public in the creation and appreciation of works of art and design, to discover and transmit knowledge and to make lasting contributions to a global society through critical thinking, scholarship and innovation. Our immersive model of art and design education emphasizes robust liberal arts studies and conceptually driven studio-based learning in full-time bachelor's and master's degree programs across 19 majors. RISD's exceptional faculty foster student growth and development in extensive specialized facilities, enabling students to become confident, cross-disciplinary thinkers and nimble problem-solvers ready to confront the complexities of global practice in the 21st century. Nearly 30,000 alumni worldwide testify to the impact of a RISD education, exemplifying the vital role artists and designers play in defining global innovation. Founded in 1877, RISD and the RISD Museum help make Providence, RI among the most culturally active and creative cities in the region. For more information, visit risd.edu and our.risd.edu.