

Funds Distribution Report

Recipient Organization:
Refugee Choir Project

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Organization's General Goals:

The Tacoma Refugee Choir is a non-auditioned choir of refugees, immigrants, and friends who seek belonging and are committed to creating a more equitable and welcoming community. The choir is designed to quickly help people make enduring friendships, overcome barriers between people who might not otherwise interact in the community, and build a sense of community health through heartfelt conversations and uplifting music.

Date of Award:	Level:
2024 Q2	\$2,501 to \$5,000

For more information, please read the attached report from Refugee Choir Project.

8802 27th Ave NE
Tulalip, WA 98271
TulalipCares.org

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Tulalip Cares - Report Q2 2024 14.2

Tacoma Refugee Choir

<https://www.refugeechoir.org/>

Dear Tulalip Tribes Charitable Contributions,

Thank you so much for your grant last year! It made a huge difference for immigrants, refugees, and all people seeking belonging, in Pierce County and beyond. Your grant helped us open minds and hearts to a diversity of people and perspectives, and bring people together with a resounding message of welcoming that is so needed in these divided times.

In 2024 we directly impacted over 6,200 people at in-person performances, and just as importantly with your help our 40+ members supported each other through challenges, celebrated triumphs, and developed as leaders in the community.

Our **full report** is below, but first we would like to share with you some testimonials and photos from our 2024 and 2025 seasons. If there is any further information we can provide, don't hesitate to reach out!

Testimonials

"I moved to Tacoma a few months ago and hadn't realized till your show how much I missed my old home. Having the loss of home acknowledged, but also experiencing all the joy and welcoming... I received ten years of therapy at this concert."

"This is exactly what I needed."

"I didn't realize how much I needed this. I laughed and cried. It was so powerful!"

"The theme I took with me was JOY! In these dark times, we may find ourselves in despair and doubt, but we can't let oppression win."

"I didn't realize how much I needed that. My stress level this week has been so high and I have felt so hopeless. This helped so so much!"

"I needed something today! Something to uplift me and remind me that things will get better if we all do our jobs! I had breakfast with my dear friend Toni Lambo Palsson and then headed to Tacoma for a Rally for Peace put on by Orlando G Morales and the Tacoma Refugee Choir! Thank you! I have hope again and know what I need to do" (Facebook post)

Images



Marsha, A Choir member from Zimbabwe, introduces the idea of “friendship benches” to community members at our Common Threads community event in June 2025. The Friendship Bench project is an intervention developed in Zimbabwe to bridge the mental health treatment gap, something that could be very helpful in the US as part of our response to the loneliness epidemic.



Audience members meeting each other and talking after Marsha introduced the friendship bench movement and philosophy.



We were thrilled to have KD, a student participating in our youth program, join us as the soloist for our original song “City of Destiny” at our June 1, 2025 “Common Threads” community event.



Katia, from Belarus (center, left photo), introduced a very uplifting song to the Choir that was just released last year, called “Life,” by popular Belarusian band Naviband, which we performed at the “Common Threads” concert in June. Katia reached out to Naviband afterwards and they were so excited to have their song being performed by the Tacoma Refugee Choir that they posted about it on their Instagram page (photo on right). The entire song except for the word “life” was in Belarusian. As with all of our songs, the words were projected behind the Choir (in this case in both the Latin and Belarusian Cyrillic alphabets) so that community members could sing with us.



Choir members talked about the many ways we are connected and that we can be there for each other, while community members passed around and held long strands of yarn, a symbol of the beautiful tapestry we weave when we lift up and work for the good of ALL community members.

Full video of Common Threads concert: <https://livecast.pro/watch?v=3e48478b>



Tshishiku Henry is a former Tacoma Refugee Choir member and the Refugee Congress Delegate for Washington State. He was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo and arrived in the United States in 2018 after fleeing conflicts in his home country. He gave a speech called "We Are Here" at our January, 2025 Rally for Peace and Welcoming.



TRC member Kaelin Lor was one of several Choir members to conduct Tacoma Refugee Choir songs at the January Rally.



The Rally for Peace and Welcoming featured members of Umunezero Cultural Dance Group (Rwandan dance) sharing their joy through a glorious performance. Members cheered on the Choir and other performers and speakers from the audience after their performance.

REPORT

GOAL 1: TWO MAJOR CONCERTS

An estimated 300 people participated in our spring “Good Things Happen” concert on May 4, 2024. It was an amazing display of talent, Tacoma pride, and a strong sense of community. Guest artists included Congolese singer Providence Kamana, Venezuelan ensemble Tumbarrancho Gaitero, Egyptian tabla player George Sadak, and Mayor Woodards who conducted our gospel song “City of Destiny.” Attendees shared that they could feel the warmth and joy from Choir members, and felt uplifted and inspired by the sense of community displayed by people from around the world.

The second concert was originally scheduled for December, 2024, but we moved the concert to January, 2025, in order not to conflict with other holiday events, and due to a significant transition in leadership in October 2024 (Executive Director Woody Lotts and Artistic Director took over the responsibilities of founder Erin Guinup). On January 25, the Tacoma Refugee Choir broadcast a clear message of peace and welcoming at our “Rally for Peace and Welcoming” concert, held at Lincoln High School with 310 in attendance. Community leaders, poets, and individual Choir members shared unique stories of inspiration, and guest musical and dance groups reminded us of the greatness we can create when working together.

Audience members at the event said they loved the choreography of Peace Salaam Shalom with Choir members standing up one by one from the audience, and how connected the musical pieces were with themes of the speakers, which included Aimee Khuu (E.D. of Tacoma Community House), Mayor Victoria Woodard, Tshishiku Henry (Refugee Congress Delegate for Washington State), Melannie Denise Cunningham (Tacoma’s 2018 peace laureate), and others. Choir members sang solos and took conducting roles multiple times throughout the afternoon concert, part of our commitment to providing leadership opportunities and being an example of diversity and inclusiveness.

It was also wonderful and affirming to hear from audience members how much joy and hope the concert brought them, and how much they appreciated the variety of artforms on display. One audience member shared a sentiment we heard from many: “The theme I took with me was JOY! In these dark times, we may find ourselves in despair and doubt, but we can't let oppression win,” and another shared, “I needed something today! Something to uplift me and remind me that things will get better if we all do our jobs! I headed to Tacoma for a Rally for Peace put on by Orlando G Morales and the Tacoma Refugee Choir! Thank you! I have hope again and know what I need to do.”

GOAL 2: WEEKLY REHEARSALS AND MONTHLY COMMUNITY NIGHTS OPEN TO ALL

Rehearsals

At the 35 rehearsals we held in 2024, we encouraged and created space for honest conversations and for people to bring their unique gifts and perspectives. People learn in this environment that their voice and their stories matter, messages they otherwise hear too seldom. It was a particularly prolific year for the creation of TRC originals, with five new songs, and multiple members sharing songs from their countries of origin at rehearsals and performances. Choir members often led warm-ups, taught the Choir songs

they wrote, and shared other artistic talents with the Choir and with audiences. One member, for example, played the cello and many other members shared personal stories and poems at our concerts.

The emotional and practical support members shared with each other at weekly rehearsals, and the act of singing each other's songs together has helped many Choir members find their voice, a transformation that expresses itself both in Choir activities and beyond. At least nine TRC members have credited the support they felt from the Choir as a major contributor to them taking their first steps into community leadership positions, including representing Washington at the National Refugee Congress, launching campaigns for public office, and serving on Tacoma's Commission on Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (five current TRC members plus one former member). Members have also credited successes in their personal lives to the higher level of confidence they feel as a result of TRC participation, including job promotions and business expansion.

Cultural Workshop Series

January-March 2024: Community members joined us four times for this series during January-March. We created this series to allow the public to come together in song when they can, meeting a community demand to provide programming for people who can't commit to regular rehearsals, a common situation for people newer to the country. To make the series accessible to people living in different areas we hold each event in different Tacoma locations, with events held during this quarter in Eastside, West End, South Tacoma, and our organization's first event in Northeast Tacoma (at Centre at Norpoint).

We taught TRC songs and vocal technique at the first of the events; gospel choir singer and director Erica Walker joined us for a fantastic evening of gospel songs for the second; and guest artists Eduardo Mendonça and Marisela Fleites-Lear taught at the third and fourth events. Eduardo is a brilliant teaching artist who shared Brazilian music and a strong message of inclusion through music and games that celebrated community with the intergenerational and multicultural group of community members who came out to play, sing, and work together to learn new music. Both this night and the Flamenco Night with Marisela Fleites-Lear were many participants' first personal experience with these cultures and their music.

April – June 2024: We presented 3 sessions as part of this series during this period. The sessions on April 3 and April 17 were at the STAR Community Center and at the Salishan Community Center. Then-Director Erin Guinup taught Choir member favorites and some vocal technique at both fun-filled events. The Salishan CC event included learning a Filipino folk song (taught by then-Assistant Artistic Director Orlando Morales) and two folk songs from Africa: Isu Tauya pano, Mbonye, taught by former staff member Gadine Niyotwizeye-Boutin. May 21 was an evening of community *and* karaoke - a great evening of listening, singing, and fun.

September – Dec 2024: We had a wonderful time at our two community nights and heard great things from members of the public who came. One of the events was a combined member rehearsal and open community night. 55 people in all participated in the event at which people got to know each other through custom-made bingo cards that you filled out based on background, if you speak non-English languages, and other interesting things. People also created home-made holiday decorations (all coordinated by a TRC member who is an artist), sang songs together, and enjoyed snacks and baked goods made by TRC members.

The second community night was a Filipino music night at Moore Library at which musician and musical historian Roger Rigor took the stage, leading us through the story of popular Filipino music since the 1940's and the intertwined musical histories of the Philippines and the United States. Participants learned about traditional Filipino musical instruments, and learned and sang songs together. Twenty-one people participated, one of whom was a Filipino member of our Choir who grew up in California but learned that she and Roger were cousins!

GOAL 3: YEAR 2 OF SCHOOL RESIDENCY PROGRAM (PARTNERSHIP W/ TACOMA PUBLIC SCHOOLS)

We have been aware for several years of the interest among multiple TPS teachers to collaborate with us, and with the talent of Artistic Director Orlando Morales who joined the team in May 2023, we connected with choir teachers and started the program in fall 2023 at Fern Hill Elementary, Gray Middle School, and Mount Tahoma High School, producing the first year of our School Residency Program. We were able to leverage 2023-24 program successes to obtain grant funding to continue the program in fall 2024 and beyond, including a 2-year \$45,000 grant from Chorus America, a national organization with a mission to strengthen singing communities with the advocacy, connections, and resources.

During the 2023-24 school year we provided 28 in-school sessions during the school day (nearly all of which were in spring 2024): 2 at Fern Hill, 17 at Gray Middle School, and 9 at Mount Tahoma High School. The season culminated in a joint TRC-TPS performance with all three schools at the May 23 "South Tacoma Sings" concert. The program included six songs performed by individual schools, and another five performed by all three schools combined PLUS the full Tacoma Refugee Choir - over 100 people on stage singing Lift Every Voice and Sing, Jambo Bwana/Tushangilie, City of Destiny (TRC original), Everyone Can Love Someone (TRC original), and We Are the World.

The experience of so many voices together singing uplifting songs was powerful for singers and audience members alike. Mount Tahoma HS teacher Sheri-Ann Nishiyama said "my students felt fulfilled," and shared, "A student just asked me if they can join choir again. They said this made choir cool again...actually I think there's quite a few new kids who want to join choir next year because of tonight." A graduating Mount Tahoma senior said, "It was so cool to sing with you. I feel like a real musician...you mean I could sing with you after graduation? That would be amazing!"

A TRC member shared after the concert seeing the youth sing TRC song "made the songs feel more special," and a Gray MS parent said, "I want to see more of this! This is what community looks like." The event was so well-received, in fact, that a Fern Hill teacher invited us to teach a song to their entire school three weeks later. Including the teachers and the parents who joined, 325 people sang our original song "City of Destiny" at the Juneteenth bonus event!

We kicked off the 2024-25 youth program with a November 17 gathering of 75 students from Mount Tahoma High School and Gray Middle School, and resumed work with the students in spring 2025. So far in 2025 we have worked with 325 students (unduplicated) at Mount Tahoma HS, Gray Middle School, Franklin Elementary, and School of the Arts (SOTA).

GOAL 4: A NEW SHEET MUSIC INITIATIVE (SHARING OUR MUSIC WITH TACOMA SCHOOLS)

To further strengthen the intergenerational relationships between Tacoma school choirs and TRC members and audiences, we developed a pilot program (part of our larger youth program) through which we have donated free sheet music licenses to five Tacoma public schools. Artistic Director Orlando Morales has spent one-on-one time with teachers in all of these schools to review the teaching methodology and opportunities for discussions with students related to the songs' themes of belonging and community. This program has deepened the ties between school choir members and the Tacoma Refugee Choir, and has fostered conversations about how our community can show students that they matter.

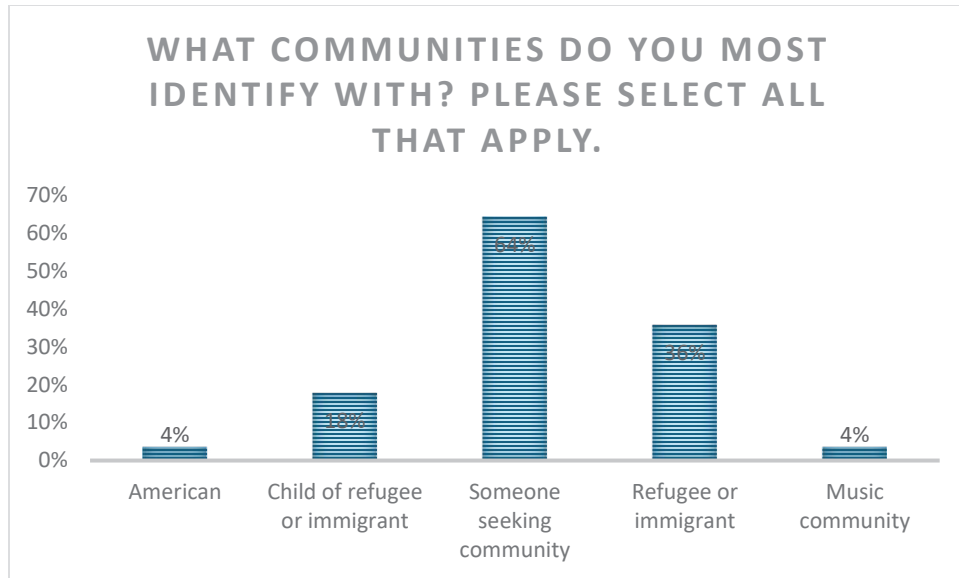
GOAL 5: TOOLKIT FOR BROAD DISTRIBUTION ABOUT CREATING BELONGING AMONG DIVERSE COMMUNITY MEMBERS

This is the one goal we set last year that we weren't able to follow through on. Unfortunately the level of funding we had expected did not come through and we had to let go of the staff person heading up this project. Like many arts non-profits post-pandemic, we ran a budget deficit in 2024 due to a lack of donor support; however, in late 2024, the organization underwent a significant revamp, adopting a new co-leadership model and naming the current CFO of the Port of Tacoma to Board Chair and a retired CPA and Financial Advisor to Board Treasurer. These changes have led to greater cash flow, donations, and concert revenue. A grant we secured will enable us to hire a development director mid-2025. As funding rebounds we will weigh program and community needs to determine whether to resume this project.

(3) EVALUATION RESULTS

Programs and events are evaluated based on number of participants and degree of observed and surveyed impact, along with feedback received after events; for example, after a concert an attendee shared, "The program was both touching and totally uplifting. The collaborations that were organized with the marimba band and the Ukrainian group were outstanding. Seeing the premiere performance of TRC's new song honoring the city of Tacoma and our welcoming community were the icing on the cake. I'm always excited for what's next!"

In June 2024 we conducted our second annual comprehensive survey of Choir members, collecting both demographic and impact data. The chart below shows that the majority of members are immigrants or refugees, or children of immigrants or refugees, while the rest joined in order to be part of the Choir community and support other members.



Beyond demographic data, key findings included:

- 90% of members agreed with the statement, “Coming to choir helps me feel more resilient and better able to handle life’s challenges”
- 93% agree with statement “the choir gives me more hope for our community”
- 83% agree or strongly agree that they feel less anxious because they attend choir.
- 83% report that the choir helps them feel less alone.
- 100% agree or strongly agree with statement, “coming to choir helps me better understand other cultures”

This information shaped conversations with choir members throughout the season and helped us identify opportunities to deepen impact. We plan on repeating this survey annually to assess longitudinal impact.