

SUCCESS STORY: How Birdseed Collective Cultivates Community



Restorative Justice

This story is part of a series of success stories focused on restorative justice work. The work featured in these stories seeks to acknowledge the impact of harmful practices and creates opportunities to heal that harm between those who enacted it and those impacted by it to transform the community.

About the Collective

Birdseed Collective is an arts-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit community outreach organization that is dedicated to improving the socioeconomic climate of Denver, Colorado through innovative arts and humanities offerings. Our goal is to transform the lives of artists, youths, individuals and communities through visionary art, civic projects and programs. The organization began in 2009 as a collaboration between Anthony Garcia, Michael Broberg and Robin Walker to create an organization committed to improving their community using their exceptional artistic skills and deeply rooted connections to their North Denver community. Since then, Birdseed has refined and expanded its mission and its footprint, offering programming, services and economic opportunities at its physical locations, including the Globeville Recreation Center, Alto Gallery and Zarape Studios, in addition to working throughout the Denver metro area.

Community Engagement

Birdseed Collective maintains accountability to the community we serve in various ways. Our board of directors is composed of members that reside in and around Denver and all play active roles in the community within our respective fields. We have an advisory committee that meets with our board of directors quarterly to discuss and offer feedback about what our organization is doing for the community. The committee is composed of a diverse group of volunteers from the neighborhood we serve and beyond. Additionally, we often survey and seek ideas and feedback from community members about our programming. This helps us in our decision-making so that we can better provide more culturally-relevant programming to our community.

Lasting engagement with our community is ensured by having our main location within the Globeville neighborhood. We have our fingers on the pulse of what is happening in the neighborhood because we are actually a part of the neighborhood. Most of our staff and many of our volunteers grew up in the neighborhood and have close ties to many current and past residents. The Globeville Recreation Center that we manage and program for has been in

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that location for decades and has been an important gathering place for the community for many of those years. While management of the building has switched hands a few times, our organization has played an active and consistent role there and in other locations nearby since our inception. We are open to the public with regular hours at minimum five days a week, plus special events outside of those days and times.

Success Through Collaboration

Birdseed Collective works with a wide array of partners and collaborators to achieve successful programming. Because our mission touches on the various facets of being a healthy human, we work with educational institutions, organizations and businesses that make sense for the particular programming in question. For our free food distribution program, for instance, we rely on local food banks, natural grocery stores, farmers markets, local farmers, gardeners, and individuals for food donations every week. Funding for this program mostly comes from federal and local government grants and donations from local businesses and individuals. While our organization does much of the programming ourselves at the Globeville Recreation Center, we also open our space and resources to many other non-profits, community-led organizations, private businesses and individuals to supply a rich and diverse variety of programming, projects and events for our community to partake in. Our basketball court is used for all sorts of activities, including youth basketball and wrestling with neighborhood leagues, Aztec dancing with Grupo Tlaloc, live music performances from local bands and DJs, and art fairs and exhibitions with third-party organizations. To battle the high pollution rate being situated near two major freeways, we have worked with numerous organizations to provide free trees and tree planting in the neighborhood in public areas and private yards.



At [Alto Gallery](#), our art gallery located a few minutes away in the River North (RiNo) Art District, we work with RedLine Contemporary Art Center and the RiNo Art District to offer free programming to the public, including receptions, artist talks, demos, workshops and performances. The gallery space is part of a bigger public-private partnership involving [Denver Parks and Recreation](#), [RedLine Contemporary Art Center](#), [Denver Public Library Bob Ragland Branch](#) and [Comal](#), wherein partners share campus space and collaborate on programming and public events, including outdoor art markets, workshops, and performances.

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Sustainability of our programs is the result of having a diverse range of funding sources. Since much of our funding is grant-based, funding sources change year-to-year. Funders' priorities change, so our organization has to be active throughout the year in researching and applying for grants. In grant seeking, rather than chasing the money, we prioritize making sure that the grants we apply for align well with our mission, our organizational capacity and what we do and excel at. We prefer general operating grants for the flexibility they allow us, but program/project-based grants play a vital role and make up the bulk of our grants-based funding. Further, built upon many successful and impactful project/program grants, our relationships with various funders also helps ensure sustainability through multi-year general operating funds. Revenue from public art commissions, our art gallery and our artist studios also makes up an important part of our funding, as do generous donations from individuals and local businesses.

Sustained Impact

Birdseed Collective's initiative to serve mind, body and soul through innovative arts and humanities offerings has had a profound impact on the community we serve. Our free food distribution program provides healthy food options and staples to hundreds of individuals throughout the year, giving out tens of thousands of pounds of food to under-served and under-resourced residents living in a food desert. In 2023 alone, our Healthy Free Weekly Food Box Program served 2,380 household members and distributed 18,077 lbs of food. Our food program gives out food every Monday at the same time, rain or shine, even on holidays, plus additional special occasions like Thanksgiving (100 turkey dinners!) and Christmas. Many residents depend on these distributions on a regular basis. Additionally, with the recent influx of migrants from South and Central America, our food program has been able to serve even more people in need, offering not only food, but other critically needed goods and services like warm clothing, undergarments, hygiene products and free bus passes (2,722 people served in 2023).

We have hosted numerous meetings for grassroots organizations like the Globeville, Elyria and Swansea Coalition as well as town hall meetings with city representatives, including a mayor's debate, offering a valuable space for public discourse and civic engagement.

Birdseed Collective has had an environmental impact in various ways as well. With funding from the Office of Climate Action, Sustainability & Resiliency, and working with the Nature Conservancy and Green Dot Coalition, our tree planting initiative has added hundreds of trees to the urban tree canopy, providing beauty and shade and helping to offset carbon emissions. Additionally, we've worked with various farmers, grow houses and gardeners to

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give away thousands of plants, including vegetables, herbs, flowers and seeds. To address the need of water conservation, in 2023 we gave away 76 rain-collection barrels and worked with groups to provide educational and instructional classes for people interested in accessible and economical methods of conserving water in and around their own homes. We've also provided free water and soil testing kits to residents.

Our critically lauded art gallery, Alto Gallery, has enriched the cultural landscape by providing nearly 90 art exhibitions open to the public, plus numerous free artist talks, demos, and workshops. These exhibitions have offered hundreds of emerging artists (mostly local and many BIPOC) economic opportunities, connections to a wider community, and have played valuable roles in their career development. Our Globeville Recreation Center is undoubtedly one of the best mural destinations in Denver, with our walls adorned by works from dozens of local, national and international mural and graffiti artists. In the Globeville neighborhood, few arts and culture institutions exist. For many residents, visiting the Globeville Recreation Center is the best place for them to see beautiful artwork and hear amazing musical talents and poetry readings that are relevant to their own culture. Additionally, with so many schools cutting their arts funding, the free arts programming we provide offers at-risk youths a positive creative outlet and source of inspiration for a future in the arts.



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Serving 7,193 youths in 2023 alone, Birdseed Collective has had a huge positive impact on the youths of our neighborhood as well. Working with generous donations from Amazon, Wal-Mart, and other businesses, we have provided tens of thousands of dollars' worth of free school supplies (including 940 backpacks filled with notebooks, pens, pencils, crayons, scissors, etc. in 2023) to local students. Our Globeville Recreation Center is open after school hours to provide young people a safe, enriching space to do homework, have a snack/meal, have fun in the gym and in other recreation areas, be creative in a class setting or on their own with access to art supplies and critically be away from negative influences in a high crime area.

Being a multigenerational community center, we also offer programming aimed at the elder population (1,996 served in 2023). Many of the residents in Globeville are aging and lack meaningful and critical social connections. Our center offers craft and sewing classes, game nights, and other opportunities for meetups that directly benefit this population.

Conclusion

Each year we aim higher, seeking to work with a more diverse body of partners and collaborators. We have been renting our space for years, but our dream is to own the recreation center that is our headquarters and the space we do the most good in. Currently, we are seeking different ways of achieving this goal. As an arts-based organization, we aim to offer more free, inclusive quality programming, while also valuing the artists that provide much of this programming and paying them fair and equitable wages. We aim to break the barriers to accessing arts and culture as well as continue to aid the populations most in need.

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Acknowledgments

Author:

[Raymundo Muñoz](#), President, Birdseed Collective

[Birdseed Collective](#) has programmed out of the Globeville Center since 2012 as a non-management organization providing healthy food distribution, community art projects and youth fine art programs. In 2014, Denver Parks and Recreation (DPR) transferred management from the prior non-profit and the facility was used as offices for Outdoor Recreation. DPR graciously allowed Birdseed to still hold our Healthy Food Distribution Program and some youth art programs. As the Globeville community always wanted to have the center remain community-based, several community meetings were held with a focus on wants and needs of the different generations of residents. After a competitive Request For Proposals process starting in December 2017, Birdseed Collective won the contract to operate and program for the Globeville Recreation Center and received the keys at the end of August 2018.



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About AEP Success Stories

The Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States is a national network of more than 200 organizations dedicated to advancing arts education. AEP has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education since 1995 and is administered by Education Commission of the States. AEP is the nation's hub for arts and education leaders, building their leadership capacity to support students, educators and learning environments. Through research, reports, convenings and counsel, leaders gain knowledge and insights to ensure that all learners — especially those that have historically been marginalized — receive an excellent arts education. To achieve its goal to expand access to high-quality arts learning opportunities for all learners, AEP gathers detailed information on success stories with the potential to be replicated in communities across the country.

The Success Stories project collects submissions from organizations that highlight successful arts education programs. These stories demonstrate the benefits of arts education and promote continued collaboration and learning for individuals and organizations working toward student achievement and success. This story is part of an initiative that highlights restorative justice work that seeks to acknowledge the impact of harmful practices and creates opportunities to heal that harm between those who enacted it and those impacted by it to transform the community.

Are you interested in sharing your arts and restorative justice work for a future success story? Please reach out to [Mitra Chamanbahar](#), AEP project manager, to share your story.

