

Barrio Alegría

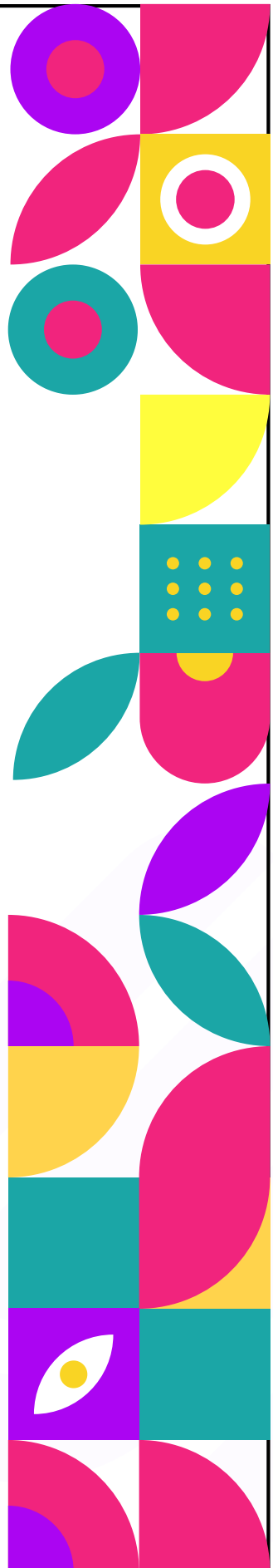
ANNUAL REPORT

2025



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Certified Family

Carver	Shelton
Moore	Robinson
Ford	Jones
...	...
Carter	Pope
Simpson	...
...	...
Heming	...

...we already recognize
...certain qualifications
...to meet certain standards

Photo by Michael Hartz

About Barrio

What is Barrio Alegría?

We get that question a lot. And the simplest answer is this:

Barrio Alegría is what happens when art, love, and neighbors decide to build a future together.

Founded in Reading, Pennsylvania more than a decade ago, **Barrio Alegría began as an act of imagination—a group of artists, dreamers, and neighbors** transforming porches into stages and alleyways into classrooms. What started on one city block has become a regional model of creative placekeeping: the practice of using art not to decorate a neighborhood, but to preserve its soul. Today, Barrio Alegría is a community transformation organization that uses art, storytelling, and collective action to strengthen the cultural, social, and economic fabric of our neighborhoods. We do this through three interconnected pillars: Creative Placekeeping, Community Development and the South of Penn Initiative.

Creative Placekeeping protects culture while sparking imagination. Through art, performance, and storytelling, we turn streets, parks, porches, and public spaces into living galleries shaped by the people who inhabit them. This work honors local histories and invites neighbors to see beauty, dignity, and possibility in their everyday surroundings.

Our Community Development work builds stability through trust and shared responsibility. Using microloans, financial literacy, and mutual aid tools like our Time Bank, we invest in people and strengthen local networks so opportunity circulates within the community.

The South of Penn Initiative is neighborhood transformation led by residents, not outsiders. It supports community-led ideas, builds local leadership, and aligns resources around resident priorities to create lasting, people-powered change.

Barrio is not just an organization. **It is a living ecosystem, a rhythm of neighbors empowering neighbors, artists guiding youth, and residents shaping the story of their own community.** Our programs—from Storytelling Through Dance to Adulting Sucks to the Microloan Program—all share one heartbeat: the belief that when people are given tools, trust, and a stage, they can transform their world. Now entering our second decade, Barrio Alegría stands as both anchor and amplifier. We remain rooted in Reading, even as our model inspires other communities to see art not as a luxury, but as infrastructure for belonging.

Barrio Alegría is more than a name. It's the promise that creativity can heal, that joy is resistance, and that our story deserves to be told.



Photo by Annalis Ortega

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

THE EXPERIMENT CALLED BARRIO

When Barrio was born, there were no words to describe what it was. She was born from poetry, from music playing in the street, and from the ingenuity of managing grassroots finances. There were months when we could either pay for internet or rent, but not both.

Still, Barrio's spirit—like our city's—remained relentless and pragmatic, always seeking progress. We began with Storytelling Through Dance, a program that shouldn't have worked. **We had no stage, no actors, no budget; only neighbors willing to move together and imagine something new.** The Reading Public Library opened its arms, and together we transformed its castle into an agora for the people. It took magic, not resources, to bring this dream to life.

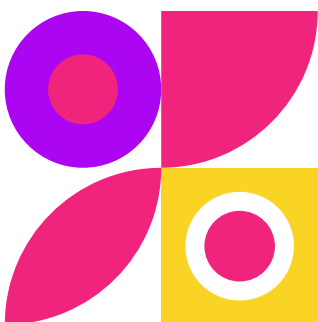
In many ways, 2025 was challenging for many organizations. But **where others closed their eyes in fear of the darkness, Barrio kept its eyes open** and found others who were trying to navigate too. Its captain, more Alonso Quijano than Tony Stark, steered it by his heart. Not through success alone, but through failure, our toughest and kindest teacher.

Our understanding of leadership has transformed through this work. One person can do very little without a hand on the pulse of what people want. Leadership, we've discovered, is more about following and caring than commanding. **It's about listening so deeply that the community's heartbeat becomes your own.** The neighbors of Reading, the ones who wake early, pull tickets from windshields, open their shops, walk to and from the bus station, cross under the bypass to Shillington because that too is Reading, they are our compass.

Because we are a community, sometimes our ideas collide like asteroids, but we've learned to orbit the same sun: a healthy and thriving community for all. And it is important for us to keep our goals in mind when the seasons change. Next year, due to a loss in funding we have paused programs like Storytelling Through Dance and the Timebank. We had to make adjustments to our staff, and we even had conversations about what it would mean to not have Barrio at all. But these changes have pushed our staff to **rise to the challenge and demonstrate leadership values** beyond their experience. They are courageously slashing self-limiting beliefs to show up in spaces that were not built for them.

Ten years after we began, neighbors in Reading's South of Penn now speak of their streets with hope. **Where they once saw decay, they now see possibility.** In 2025, we began exploring community land trusts to help families keep their homes. In 2026, we hope to launch this work in a small but meaningful way.

With your support, we can turn what we've learned into lasting systems of care and belonging.



Daniel Egusquiza
Executive Director



BARRIO BY THE NUMBERS

These numbers, collected from January to December 2025, do not tell our whole story.

Event Participants	2,428
Professional Training Hours	200
Loan Repayment rate	95.28%
Timebank Exchanges	203
Artists engaged	226
Community happenings	124
Microloans issued	48
Volunteer Hours	895.5
Businesses started with our help	9
Program attendees	2,428
Community events supported	6



READING THE NUMBERS

What They Really Mean

What you see here is not a spike or a fluke, but a long arc of consistency, trust, and relationship-building. These numbers are cumulative proof that Barrio is not just surviving, but steadily becoming a stronger place for people to land.

When we talk about event participants, we are talking about neighbors who show up to community happenings of all kinds. **Not just festivals or performances, but trainings, exchanges, meetings, workshops, and shared moments of learning.** These are people choosing to be present with one another.

Our loan repayment rate tells a deeper story than financial responsibility. It speaks to trust. Community members repay their loans not because they fear consequences, but because they understand that their repayment makes it possible for someone else to receive a loan next. **This is collective stewardship in action.** Through our microlending program, nine businesses have been started or supported. The impact goes beyond job numbers. Stability, dignity, confidence, and momentum matter too. These effects live in the stories of change featured throughout this report. Every microloan issued represents a moment when Barrio chose to believe in someone's dream. Ten years ago, others believed in this experiment called Barrio Alegría. **We are still here because that belief keeps getting passed forward.**

Barrio also supported six community-led events dreamed up and organized by neighbors themselves. Our support took many forms: funding, coordination, artist connections, staff time, materials, and promotion. Beyond what we can count, **we helped amplify countless other grassroots efforts by saying yes, sharing resources, and opening doors.**

Our Timebank remained active, with some exchanges happening organically and many facilitated by Community Development Fellows. This reflects both growing trust and the importance of gentle structure to help mutual aid flourish.

At its core, Barrio is an incubator for people. Through our fellowship program, community members gain professional skills like community engagement, marketing, conflict navigation, note-taking, delegation, and event planning. These are transferable skills that live with fellows long after their time at Barrio ends. We define artists broadly and intentionally: any neighbor with a cultural experience worth sharing. With this definition, **we have uncovered musicians, poets, storytellers, and culture-bearers who enrich our community simply by being fully themselves.**

None of this would be possible without our volunteers. They show up in sun and rain, often with children in tow, setting up tents, carrying tables, supporting programs, and holding space. While national volunteerism is declining, **Barrio continues to receive requests from people who want to help. We take that responsibility seriously and continue finding meaningful ways to welcome them in.**

Finally, we made a strategic choice to call what we do 'community happenings.' We are not an event production organization; **these happenings are tools for connection, trust, and participation.** We call them community happenings because they move the community, not metrics.

This year, they trained 40 neighbors, fueled nine businesses through microloans, launched five new business pitches, powered hundreds of Timebank exchanges, and supported six neighbor-led events. **These numbers don't mark activity—they mark trust.** Trust built slowly, repaid forward, and carried by people who keep choosing to show up together.



Community Development

Building Economic Dignity

Photo by By Isabella Morgallo

MORE THAN A PROGRAM

At Barrio Alegría, we believe creativity alone cannot sustain a community — dignity must be built alongside it. Our Community Development Pillar exists to make sure our neighbors don't just dream of better lives, but finance them. When people no longer have to choose between survival and joy, they stop surviving and start living. They go from hustling to dreaming. You see it when a single mother who once joined our financial literacy class to “make ends meet” starts teaching her children to save for what they love. When the question changes from “How will I get through the month?” to **“What can I build next?”** — dignity becomes the new currency. That's when neighborhoods begin to heal.

At Barrio Alegría, our Community Development work is built on results, not rhetoric.

Our financial literacy courses graduate 92% of participants. That alone tells a story of relevance, trust, and follow-through. But what matters more is what happens next. Graduates don't disappear. They maintain a relationship with Barrio, allowing us to track their story arcs over years, not quarters—how habits change, confidence grows, and stability takes root.

People who engage with our Community Development programs rarely stop at receiving support. They give back. **They volunteer, mentor others, repay loans beyond what they received, and reinvest in their neighborhoods. Participation becomes contribution.**

Our **more than \$128,000 in microloans** do more than improve credit scores. They have helped start businesses, keep existing businesses open, and secure jobs. For many borrowers, a small loan is the difference between closing a door and opening one.

This is what dignity looks like in practice: people trusted with opportunity, staying connected, paying it forward, and building something that lasts.

When that happens, **success stops being a snapshot and becomes a pattern.** We don't measure impact only by who received help this year, but by who is still standing, still building, and still connected years later. The strength of our Community Development work is not that people pass through Barrio Alegría—it's that they remain part of it.

That is how communities grow durable. Not through one-time interventions, but through relationships that compound. Not by lifting people up once, but by creating systems where they can stand, return, and bring others with them. This is the work beneath the creativity—the foundation that allows imagination, enterprise, and belonging to endure.



BOSCOV THEATER

BARRIO ALEGRIA ADULTING SUCKS



The House of BOSCOV THEATER

MOVIE TICKETS	
ENTRADAS DE CINE	
REGULAR	10.00
DISCOUNT / DESCUENTO	8.00
<small>Seniors (65+), Students, Military, First Responders</small>	
CONCESSIONS	
CONCESSIONES	
POPCORN / PALOMITAS	5.00
CANDY / CAMELLO	3.00
<small>Assorted Candy, Ice Cream, Milk Shakes, Hard Candy, Caramel, Assorted, Baked & Pastry, Biscuits, Cookies, Milk, Tiramisu, etc.</small>	
WATER / AGUA	2.00
READING DRAFT SODA	2.25
<small>Apple Berry, Black Cherry, Blueberry, Lemon, Lime, Orange, Raspberry, Strawberry, Vanilla, etc.</small>	
SELTZERS & BOTANICALS	2.25
<small>Apple Berry, Black Cherry, Blueberry, Lemon, Lime, Orange, Raspberry, Strawberry, Vanilla, etc.</small>	
BEER / CERVEZA	6.00
<small>House of Boscov, Pilsener, Lager, IPA, etc.</small>	
WINE / VINO	7.00
<small>Chardonnay, Merlot, Pinot Noir, etc.</small>	

Wine Supplies Last
Gummy Sharks
 \$3



Photo by Michael Hartz

Adulting Sucks, our financial literacy program for young, *and not-so-young*, adults graduated **40 participants** this year.

The most meaningful outcomes didn't happen in the classroom alone, but the classroom is where they began. Participants started by **examining their relationship with money**: the emotions, beliefs, and habits they carried with them, often shaped by scarcity, stress, or silence. Naming those patterns was the first shift. From there, **they learned the fundamentals of budgeting**—not as restriction, but as planning. **They practiced mapping monthly expenses**, distinguishing needs from wants, and using simple tools to regain a sense of control.

As the course progressed, saving stopped feeling abstract. Participants set realistic goals and learned how small, consistent actions could build momentum. **They unpacked how credit actually works**—how scores are formed, **how interest accumulates**, and how to use credit without being consumed by it. For many, it was the first time credit felt understandable instead of intimidating. In the final sessions, participants were introduced to investing and long-term planning. Conversations shifted. Questions changed: ***“Could I buy a home? What would it take? Who do I talk to?”***

That curiosity didn't fade after graduation. **It reshaped daily habits**. Graduates paused before spending, **planning for the month instead of the moment, choosing long-term stability over short-term survival**. Several participants started mapping paths toward homeownership. Others explored entrepreneurship, with some going on to secure microloans through Barrio—buying equipment, investing in inventory, and growing businesses that once lived quietly in kitchens, porches, or text threads.

Graduates didn't leave with just a certificate. They left with a new relationship to money—and to themselves. They learned that their choices matter, that their futures are worth planning for, and that asking questions is a form of courage. And importantly, the community didn't end on graduation day. Participants stayed connected, checked in on one another, and continued sharing resources and encouragement. **This is what it looks like when knowledge meets empowerment—and when a class becomes a catalyst.**

Because of this program, **forty people didn't just learn how money works**, they learned how they work. They learned that their choices matter, that their futures are worth planning for, and that asking questions is a form of courage.

And perhaps the most beautiful part?

The community they built didn't end on graduation day.

They still check in on each other.

They still show up for each other.





STORY OF CHANGE

Alejandro Rafael

Photo by Ben Hasty

When Alejandro Rafael arrived in Reading from Mexico, he carried more than a suitcase. He carried the weight of starting over. Just two months into life in the U.S., he felt disconnected from the culture around him and uncertain about what his future could look like.

Back home, Alejandro had owned a small business selling shirts. In Reading, he believed his path had narrowed to a single option: factory work. It wasn't a lack of ambition that held him back, but a lack of visibility. He didn't yet know that a supportive community or resources existed to help him dream bigger.

Alejandro joined *Adulting Sucks* at a moment when he was quietly grieving what he had left behind. During one of the early sessions, he shared with the group that he was new to the city and had sacrificed a lot to be there. In return, he found something unexpected: comfort. The space felt safe enough for him to speak openly about his dream of reopening his business in the United States.

A turning point came during the very first workshop. Alejandro volunteered for a theater-based activity about money. As he listened to another participant, also an immigrant, share their story, something shifted.

"At Barrio, I found a community of like-minded people working to formalize their small businesses and create jobs through their work," Alejandro said.

Today, Alejandro is actively working toward rebuilding his business. With support from Barrio Alegría's Community Development Lead, he is structuring his business, connecting to resources like City Hall and the Small Business Development Center, and participating in networking opportunities he never imagined himself in before. Along the way, his confidence has grown. So has his sense of belonging. Alejandro now volunteers at Barrio events, not just as a participant, but as someone invested in the same community that helped him see a future beyond survival.

Alejandro's story is not just about financial literacy or entrepreneurship. It is about what happens when someone is invited into a space where their past is honored, their present is supported, and their future is allowed to expand.



Photo by Paola Disla



Creative
Placekeeping
Art as Homecoming

Barrio doesn't just "beautify neighborhoods."

Barrio keeps the soul of a place alive by inviting the people who live there to become its storytellers, dancers, caretakers, and architects of joy.

Creative placekeeping, for us, isn't about murals or concerts alone. Those are the visible ripples. The work is deeper and more specific.

Over the past year, we put neighbors at the center of more than **4 music performances** in unexpected alleyways and storefronts. Our Creative placekeeping department had **more than 25 workshops, and community gatherings**, where neighbors were audiences, but creators and leaders.

We turned 2 porches into stages, allowing neighbors to see their own streets as places worth gathering. **We transformed 2 alleyways into concert halls**, reclaiming spaces once associated with neglect and turning them into places of music, safety, and shared pride.

Through OJOS this year, **22 neighbors borrowed cameras** to document their lives, their families, and their neighborhoods. A borrowed camera became a tool of agency. A way for a young person to say, *"This is my life, and it matters."*

We also **supported traditions that already existed** but needed space to breathe. Each year, neighbors gather for a shared Thanksgiving meal hosted at the home of the neighborhood matriarch as a tradition we help sustain. Food, stories, and memory doing what they've always done: binding people together.

This is what creative placekeeping looks like at Barrio. We listen first. We protect stories from being extracted or relocated. We invest in experiences rather than objects, knowing that what lasts is not a structure, but the feeling of being seen, welcomed, and claimed.

Most organizations try to bring culture into a community. Barrio begins from the belief that culture is already there, vibrant, multilingual, ancestral, and worthy. Our role is not to replace it, but to help it shine, strengthen, and sustain itself.

And when that happens, a block doesn't just look different. It feels different.

Remembered. Seen. Claimed. Loved.

Barrio's work doesn't just change a block. It changes how people experience the block. It makes home feel like home.



Through the Eyes of the Beholder

OJOS began with a simple discovery: a Reading High student documenting her world with a borrowed camera and a heart full of hope. That spark grew into one of Barrio's longest-running programs — a decade of neighbors using photography to tell their own stories, in their own voices.

Today, OJOS is part of our larger Creative Placekeeping pillar, which brings creative projects directly into the community. The idea is simple: when people document their lives, they begin to see their neighborhood, and themselves, with new possibility. Art becomes a bridge to belonging, confidence, and connection.

In 2025, we held two OJOS sessions **with nearly 30 participants**, many borrowing a DSLR camera from Barrio to capture two weeks of their lives. Together with a professional photographer-mentor, participants selected their strongest images and showcased them at a full gallery exhibition inside City Hall's Council Chambers. Every piece sold belonged entirely to the artist. **Barrio didn't take a single dollar.**

In a time when neighborhoods are too often defined by deficit, OJOS does something quietly radical: it puts the lens in the hands of the people who live there. **It doesn't extract stories**, brand them, or move them elsewhere. **It builds confidence, skill, and pride** exactly where those stories belong.

We are currently looking for ways to keep this program sustainable because it produces durable impact with modest resources. A borrowed camera becomes a lasting shift in how someone sees themselves. **A few long-outdated \$600-dollar cameras have gone far beyond that value in ten year's time.** Each year the project changes how neighbor participants relate to their block, their city, and their own voice. And because **artists keep 100% of their sales**, the value created circulates directly back into the community.

It should be supported because it has become infrastructure for ownership for people who will continue to see, document, and care for their neighborhood long after the exhibition ends. A program with a decade-long track record, clear outcomes, and **no interest in spectacle for spectacle's sake.**

And it should be funded now because visibility is fragile. When people are not invited to tell their own stories, others will tell them instead. OJOS ensures that this generation of neighbors is seen on its own terms—while the opportunity, the momentum, and the trust are alive.

Because when people practice seeing, and being seen, they don't just take photographs. They begin to claim their place in the story of the city.



STORY OF CHANGE

Barrio Alegría

Photo by Angie Jimenez

Social media alerts rang in by the minute.
Concerned gatekeepers addressed City Council members about a perceived travesty.

The city's self-proclaimed leaders were abuzz with the latest drama:
"Some group, Berry-o Alegre, is putting people in harm's way!"
"They're going to destroy the pagoda, who allowed this?!?"
"There's so many other beautiful places, why would you want to be in an active construction zone??"

Current and former elected officials publicly aired anxieties and disgust at the gull of irresponsible delinquents who dared to do the unthinkable...a free yoga workshop in the city's most iconic location.

The pagoda was fenced off, awaiting for much-needed repairs to begin. But the parking lot remained a public, open, and beloved vista for neighbors and visitors alike.

As soon as a flyer for Yoga Overlooking The City was published, a stir ensued. But for all the fuss made by "leaders" who felt they hold ownership of the public space at the base of Reading's most recognizable landmark, the wave of defence that countered it was even more potent.

Yoga enthusiasts, Barrio allies, and people with no connection beyond wanting to see fun things happening in Reading pushed back. They responded in comment sections, through memes, and public comment portions of public meetings.



The argument presented a clear division: folks who believe that public spaces are owned by the public, and others who see the public as a nuisance that must be kept an arm's length away from things of worth.

Unbeknownst to the people voicing their opinions, this wasn't just a back and forth about not asking permission from the "right owners" – this was a conversation about creative placemaking and placekeeping.

It didn't matter that Barrio had of course gotten a special event permit, blocked off the parking lot with police barricades, and made sure participants were cared for. What aggravated gatekeepers was that they saw the use of the space without their explicit consent was an impropriety.

But for Barrio, we not only followed the rules, but we adhere to the belief that this city is the people's. Luckily, others in the city administration understood this principle as well and allowed for our friendly, inclusive, healthy, safe, family-friendly event to go off without a hitch.

And the gatekeepers were thwarted, even as they introduced a city ordinance that would have prohibited any activities near slated construction sites (which is a hilarious and ironic measure to take as the city continues to wrestle with crumbling, collapsing buildings even on its main corridor). That ordinance was introduced at a city council meeting and could not elicit even a second motion to proceed to a vote.

The people had spoken loud and clear to their local representatives; spreading joy, building community, and claiming ownership of this city is, in fact, dangerous...but only for those who want control to be centralized and the public to remain submissive.

Where are we going next?

And how do we get there?

In a world where the future feels uncertain and, at times, frightening, where divisions wait just around the corner and relationships are constantly being tested, Barrio Alegría stands ready at the 5, 6, 7, 8 of a salsa choreography. Balanced. Listening. Grounded. Poised to move.

Because where others see gloom, we see possibility. Where others brace for loss, we see opportunities to adapt, to change, and to survive together. This work is not easy. A global pandemic reminded us how fragile the ground beneath our feet can be. But it also showed us something equally important: not that we need catastrophe to come together, but that when we do, we emerge stronger on the other side of the story.

Barrio Alegría is an agent of change, and that change is happening in real time, shaped by real people, in real neighborhoods.

At our core, Barrio exists to help communities imagine and build futures that feel possible. We do this by creating spaces where people can meet one another with dignity, where creativity becomes a tool for connection, and where economic opportunity is rooted in trust. Our work is not about spectacle. It is about relationships. It is about staying present long enough for transformation to take hold.

With that understanding, the Barrio Alegría Board and staff recently came together to do something both practical and courageous: to look ahead. Not just to the next grant cycle or the next season of programming, but to the next three years of Barrio's life. From those conversations, three domains emerged as essential to our future and to the future of the community we serve.

First, Barrio must continue to exist as a strong, visible, and independent entity. For us, visibility is not about recognition for its own sake. It is about ensuring that our work, our impact, and our values are seen, understood, and protected. Telling our story clearly and widely allows Barrio's voice to remain present in regional and national conversations about community, culture, and economic dignity. Visibility is about survival. It is about influence. And it is about honoring the trust our community has placed in us.

Second, we must secure sustainable funding beyond traditional sources. This means deepening relationships with private donors who share our goals and values, and who believe that community-led solutions are not only viable but essential. These partnerships give Barrio the flexibility to respond to real needs as they arise. They allow us to innovate, to take thoughtful risks, and to remain rooted in people rather than restricted by programs.

Third, the Barrio board voted to create a committee to research a housing strategy. This is a long-term and ambitious vision, grounded in a simple truth: cultural vibrancy, economic opportunity, and community stability cannot exist without secure housing.

None of this will be easy. It will require ingenuity, pragmatism, and sustained commitment. These are often described as American values, but we do not find them in history books alone. We see them every day in our neighborhoods. We see them in the way people stretch limited resources, support one another quietly, and dare to imagine new futures for themselves and their families. Barrio Alegría's next chapter is about meeting that everyday courage with structure, care, and vision. It is about keeping our feet on the ground while lifting our eyes to the horizon. It is about building something resilient enough to hold the future, whatever shape it takes.



DEVELOPMENT A closer look

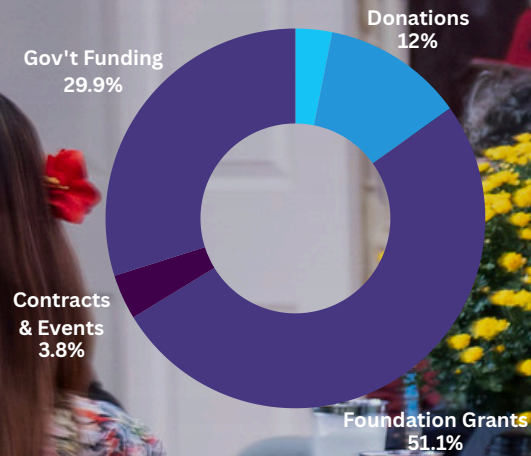
Government and foundation funding remains essential to Barrio's work but is inherently unpredictable. In response, 2024 marked a strategic shift toward more resilient and diversified fundraising.

Leadership expanded relationships beyond familiar circles, securing contributions from five new business partners and amplifying Barrio's stories beyond its usual reach. These efforts strengthened organizational visibility and helped the annual Barrio Lights Gala meet its fundraising goal.

Sustained relationship-building with corporate partners culminated in record sponsorship revenue at the Barrio Lights Gala, the highest in the event's history.

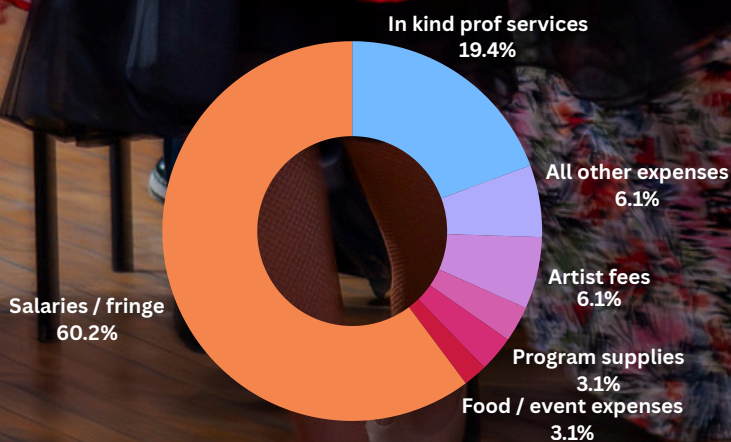
2025 REVENUE

- In-Kind Mgmt Services
- Donations
- Foundation Grants
- Contracts & Events
- Gov't Funding



Expenses

- In kind prof services
- All other expenses
- Artist fees
- Program supplies
- Food / event expenses
- Subcontractor
- Salaries / fringe



2025 EXPENSES

Photo by Ben Hasty

South of Penn Community Building



The South of Penn Initiative is simple at its core:

It helps neighbors take care of each other and their neighborhood.

In a community where many families have lived for generations, but where resources haven't always kept pace, SOP focuses on strengthening what already exists—the people, the stories, the porches, the talent, the pride.

SOP is one piece of the larger South of Penn Taskforce, a multi-partner collaboration coordinated by the Wyomissing Foundation. Together, we align housing, financial, and community-building efforts so this work unfolds as part of a coordinated neighborhood strategy, not a stand-alone program.

At the center of this work is the South of Penn Coordinator. The role is equal parts organizer, listener, advocate, and connector, someone who turns everyday conversations into shared action and neighbors' ideas into real projects. For more than a year, that role has been carried by SOP neighbor and Barrio cheerleader Annalis Ortega. She walks the blocks, knocks on doors, celebrates wins, surfaces concerns, and often becomes the microphone for voices that don't always get heard.

What We Do

SOP doesn't rely on outside fixes. Instead, following years of Barrio framework, we work with neighbors to restore homes, activate public spaces, and create activities that make the neighborhood feel alive again. Here's what that looks like:

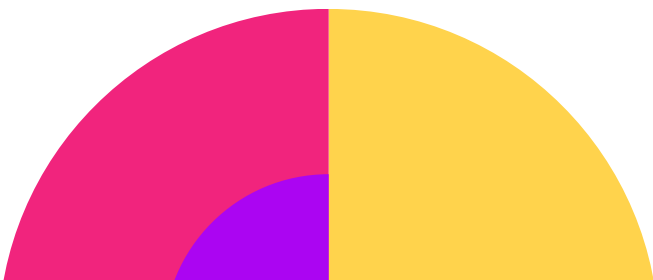
- Facade improvements that help long-time residents keep their homes safe and beautiful.
- Block parties, porch concerts, and youth activities that bring joy and connection back into the streets.
- Volunteer leadership development so neighbors can lead projects, not just watch them happen.
- Murals, community tours, and cultural programs that celebrate the neighborhood's identity.
- Partnerships that support homeownership, stability, and wealth-building — urgent needs in a community facing rising rents and redevelopment pressures.

Why It Matters

Once underused and overlooked, the Reading Iron Playground has undergone major renovations thanks in large part to neighbor stewardship and years of programming led by SOP coordinators alongside residents. What emerged wasn't just a better park, but a shared civic living room. The playground has hosted concerts, movie nights, art events, Easter egg hunts, tree lighting ceremonies, block parties, and countless informal gatherings that turned a formerly unsightly public space into a welcoming common ground. This matters because public space shapes how people relate to one another. Families who once passed by now stay. Children recognize faces. Elders sit and watch the neighborhood move around them. A park becomes a signal: this place is cared for, and so are the people in it.

This approach is working and it's still growing.

SOP is helping create a neighborhood where residents feel like they belong, where they have power over their future, and where their stories shape the landscape.





Porch Concerts: Reclaiming Space, Reconnecting People

Yes, we host concerts. They feature culturally relevant music, often performed by artists who live in or come from the very neighborhoods where the concerts take place. Yes, people gather to listen. They sign in, they linger, they bring chairs, they bring friends. A feeling takes hold. A kind of shared energy that makes neighbors say, “Why can’t we have this here too?”

But Porch Concerts are about far more than performances.

Many of these concerts take place in areas that have experienced decades of disinvestment. They happen on porches, in alleyways, in pocket parks, and in spaces that some might describe as overlooked or unsightly. To us, these are not forgotten places. They are the routes people walk every day, the corners they pass on their way home, the spaces where life already happens. By placing music there, we are not importing culture. We are revealing it.

Porch Concerts are an intentional act of reinvesting energy into places that have been taught to expect neglect. Music changes how a space feels. It alters how people move through it. For a few hours, a walkway becomes a gathering place. A porch becomes a stage. A block becomes a living room. Neighbors who may not usually stop to talk linger, listen, and recognize one another.

The impact extends just as deeply to the artists. Time and again, performers tell us that these concerts reconnect them to their community in ways they did not know were possible. Some share that they had stopped singing or performing altogether, often because they were once told they were not good enough. Performing at a Porch Concert helped them remember who they are, not just as artists, but as neighbors with something meaningful to offer.

These concerts have drawn attention far beyond the block. Porch Concerts have been featured in state and national publications as an example of how to put the community back into community development. But for us, the real measure of success is quieter. It’s in the way a space feels different the next day. In the way people remember that something beautiful happened right where they live. Porch Concerts remind us that culture does not need a grand venue to matter. It needs presence, care, and an invitation. And sometimes, all it takes to change how a neighborhood is experienced is a song, a porch, and the courage to gather.





STORY OF CHANGE

Kaysha Rivera

Photo by Anthony Orozco

Before the porch concert, Kaysha Rivera carried singing inside her like a fragile thing. For four or five years, she stopped singing altogether, quietly comparing herself to other singers and deciding she did not measure up. That belief had roots. In fifth grade, she was surrounded by strong voices and assumed hers did not belong. Later, in New York City, she sang often and freely. But when she moved to Reading, doubt returned, familiar and sharp, telling her she was not good enough.

That doubt did not stay contained. Singing was one of the things Kaysha loved most, and when she stopped, other parts of her dimmed too. The voice in her head grew louder: "If I failed at this, what else might I fail at?" She began showing up cautiously in her daily life and in her neighborhood, holding back before she even tried.

The invitation came unexpectedly. Annalis asked Kaysha if she would perform a few songs at a porch concert she was hosting. Kaysha said yes immediately because something in her knew this was a moment to push herself toward what she loved.

Right before stepping up, fear rushed in. Kaysha told Annalis she could not do it. Then Kaysha saw faces in the crowd, people who cared about her. The fear softened. After finishing the first song, something shifted. Finding her voice was really about finding confidence. She noticed herself smiling, and she kept going.

Then her speaker stopped working. Without planning it, Kaysha began to sing a cappella. Later, friends told her it was the most powerful part. That day changed how Kaysha sees herself. Her voice is not just 30 for entertainment. It can transform. She unlocked a door she had kept closed for years. Now she shows up differently, in music and in life.





Photo by Keeb Photography

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Fellowship model

At Barrio Alegría, leadership is not hired — it's grown.

Throughout the year, fellows build a practical leadership toolkit rooted in everyday community work. They learn how to say no without guilt and yes with intention. They practice techniques for resolving difficulties, navigating conflict, and working through tension without breaking trust. They plan and execute events from start to finish, learning delegation, group dynamics, motivation, and how to move a team toward a shared goal.

They also learn the less glamorous but essential skills that keep community work alive: managing deadlines, building and tracking budgets, leading meetings, taking effective notes, handling invoices, organizing shared archival systems and coordinating logistics such as BEOs. Fellows learn how to communicate internally with clarity and care, how to engage participants authentically, and how to manage time when everything feels urgent.

Most importantly, fellows learn how to lead with others, not over them. They discover how to listen, how to facilitate rather than control, and how to adapt when plans shift. These lessons don't live in binders. They live in meetings that run long, events that don't go as planned, and moments when a fellow realizes they can step forward because someone trusted them to try.

The year was not without challenges. Turnover tested our resilience, and transitions demanded flexibility. But the fellowship's design proved its strength. Rather than collapsing, the structure evolved. Incoming fellows received tailored onboarding, individualized development plans, and quarterly reflections that kept everyone anchored in growth. The result was a more responsive, living model of professional development rooted in community values.

"At Barrio, I didn't just learn to lead projects. I learned to lead myself."

— 2024 Fellow, Community Development Pillar

The impact is measurable — and deeply personal.

- 9 fellows participated across all pillars.
- 67% completed their full term.
- 3 fellows advanced to higher leadership or full-time roles within Barrio.
- 2 alumni launched independent community projects inspired by their time here.

Each fellow brought their own story of transformation. One turned a passion for photography into an arts-based youth mentorship program. Another discovered a talent for community finance, helping residents access their first microloans. Together, they carried the spirit of Barrio into every block, mural, and meeting they touched.

Today, the fellowship has become more than a staffing model — it is probably obvious at this point that it is a philosophy.

We don't just train professionals; we nurture purpose. We teach the kind of leadership that starts with listening, that measures success in impact, not ego. And as our fellows grow, so does Barrio — a network of changemakers, each one carrying forward the belief that joy and justice can be built, one story at a time.

2026 Barrio Team



Daniel Egusquiza



Anthony Orozco



Noelia Montero



Katherine Acosta



Angie Jimenez



Kaysha Rivera



Paola Disla



Elaine Lopez



Annie Pernalette



Annalis Ortega



Luisa Corporan

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Barrio Board 2025

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Daniel Egusquiza
Nora Elmarzouky
Brian Kelly
Carissa Johnson
Arleny Pimentel
Mateo Toro
Sharibel Ureña
Erica Caceres
Jacob Rice



Barrio Alegria
where change happens