



## **Sounding from the Heartlands:**

*A Think Tank Centering Appalachian, Black Belt Southern, Borderlands and Indigenous Music-Based Creative Youth Development Efforts*

Delbert **Anderson**

**D'DAT**

Dj **Griffin** and  
Leyda **Juarez**

**East Lake**

**Expression**

**Engine**

Hilda **Ledezma**

**ROCA**

Isabella **Dallas** and

Anna Carson **Tyner**

**Griot Arts**

Terrence **Baldwin Sr.**

**MEOW Cares**

# CONTENTS

---

<b>Introduction by Arielle Julia Brown</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>About The Lewis Prize for Music</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Rural Think Tank Cohort</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Essays</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>D'DAT</b> (Farmington, New Mexico) Delbert Anderson	<b>15</b>
<b>East Lake Expression Engine</b> (Chattanooga, Tennessee) <i>Measuring Our Impact to the Community</i> Dj Griffin and Leyda Juarez	<b>19</b>
<b>Revival of Cultural Arts</b> (Brownsville, Texas) Hilda Ledezma	<b>22</b>
<b>Griot Arts</b> (Clarksdale, Mississippi) Isabella Dallas and Anna Carson Tyner	<b>27</b>
<b>MEOW Cares, Inc.</b> (Montgomery, Alabama) Terrence Baldwin Sr.	<b>30</b>

An Overview  
**On Sounding from  
the Heartlands:  
A Think Tank Centering  
Appalachian, Black Belt  
Southern, Borderlands  
and Indigenous  
Music-Based Creative  
Youth Development  
Efforts**

*by* Arielle Julia Brown

*listen little sister  
angels make their hope here  
in these hills  
follow me  
I will guide you  
careful now  
no trespass  
I will guide you  
word for word  
mouth for mouth  
all the holy ones  
embracing us  
all our kin  
making home here  
renegade marooned  
lawless fugitives  
grace these mountains  
we have earth to bind us  
the covenant  
between us  
can never be broken  
vows to live and let live*

bell hooks, Appalachian Elegy. 6<sup>1</sup>

**H**ere, in the earth of these fertile words, beloved ancestor, teacher, artist, activist and scholar bell hooks allows us access to a private conversation. In this intimate transmission, we witness a little sister being tenderly instructed in the ways, topographies, practices, lineages and traditions of Black Appalachia. Recalling the legacies of her beloved home, hooks works together with trans-historical references and mystically fragmented language to build an incantation toward sacred kinship with land, spirit and the forthcoming generation. The spaces between each word are pregnant with knowings, lessons and truths that only the lived experience of the little sister can fully flesh out and behold. In this way, this poem is both a recording of a process of initiation and an initiation itself. This poem speaks to Appalachian youth who are both themselves and the future/forthcoming at once. The future/forthcoming consists of youthful vision, longstanding wisdoms and practices. The future/forthcoming are inheritors and propagators of land, of culture, of resistance and of freedoms. The future/forthcoming is a circular manifestation and energy – it is the renegade marooned, the little sister and the holy ones coming back across generations, emergent and past, to continue to stand in their inheritances. The body of stories assembled in this collection of essays are a witness to the ways in which music-based creative youth development practitioners, organizers, artists, teachers and institutions are ushering in the future/forthcoming in their own communities.

Before we share the thought leadership of our partners, there are a few truths we should also acknowledge. First of all, philanthropy has a practice of being nosy. Sometimes this nosiness is about learning about the capacities of a program, effort or organization. Sometimes this nosiness is about a desire to be up-next-to works that really belong to the agents and organizers of communal vision nationally, regionally and locally. Sometimes this nosiness is about exercising and acquiring power. Sometimes this nosiness is necessary to support good work. Sometimes this nosiness does harm. Sometimes this nosiness invokes questions that are useful to practitioners even outside of the pursuit of resources a given philanthropic entity can or will provide. Regardless of the why, philanthropy by and large has a rigorous practice of being nosy. The Lewis Prize for Music is also nosy. While we have worked to codify our practices in ways that attempt to be less invasive, there is no way around the fact that applications for funding at The Lewis Prize and in philanthropy more largely often call forward inquiries into artists' and organizations' practices, work, budgets and more in ways that get up in other people's business. It is through these and other inquiries that philanthropy even learns what it should be looking

for. Philanthropy does not come forward enough to lift the ways in which it is rigorously learning from knowledges held in trust in communities and the organizations that serve and constitute them. So it is from this place of truth-telling about our nosiness alongside thanksgiving for the programs that have shared with us and each other about their practices of uplifting and supporting their young people, their future/forthcoming, that we begin to tell the story of the Sounding from the Heartlands the Think Tank.

In the spring of 2020, in the midst of the first round of our Accelerator Award cycle, our flagship grantmaking program that offers \$500,000 in unrestricted support of music-based creative youth development programs, we began to rigorously track the amount of applications we were receiving from various communities around the United States. With large and consistent applications from the coasts and large cities in the midwest, we noticed that we were not receiving proportional application numbers from the U.S. south in general including the Black Belt south, Appalachia, Indigenous communities and southern borderlands regions. We also saw finite numbers of applications from plains states. Concurrently we noticed that applications from communities with populations under 50,000 people were largely under-represented in our pools. In response to these absences in our applicant pool, we began to have discussions as a foundation about rural creative youth development. We began to ask fundamental questions including: what do programs look like, what are their specific needs, how do we reach them, how do we communicate that we want to be in partnership with them, how do we consider their shapes and work in relationship to the urban programs with which we were all more familiar. From these questions, two efforts were born. First, in early 2021, at the front end of this process, we decided to engage a call with exclusively rural programs and state arts agencies with rural networks to connect us to these programs. On this call we heard about some of the contours of rural CYD in ways that facilitated our outreach and increased awarding of rural CYD programs. This call and other relationship mapping connected us to leaders. Secondly, we decided to build a think tank space. We wanted to create a space where we could learn about the various ways that rural music-based CYD was taking place. We also wanted to create a space that could build networks and alliances across programs in various regions.

In *Leveraging Change: Increasing Access to Arts Education in Rural Areas*, researchers Lisa Donovan and Maren Brown lift a suite of case studies alongside a body of challenges for rural arts education efforts. Among these challenges,

they name geographic distance, lack of funding for arts education, policies that do not support the arts, challenges recruiting and retaining teachers in rural areas, poverty and lack of economic opportunity<sup>2</sup>. While creative youth development work centers the work of attending to the whole wellbeing of young people and their communities alongside artistic instruction, the challenges that arts education efforts face in rural communities are also aligned with what we have heard from the CYD programs with whom we have been in conversation. Perhaps the greatest distinctions between arts education work and creative youth development work are laid most bare in rural spaces. We have witnessed in past research at The Lewis Prize that the most community aligned creative youth development work also attends to the work of intergenerational transmission of cultural traditions as a part of the work of attending to the whole wellbeing of young people<sup>3</sup>. One of our most significant learnings from our rural think tank participant organizations was in the intentional design of succession plans and affirmation of youth voice and leadership in an organization in order to share ownership of the work across generations. While these programs still experience the aforementioned challenges, it's important to note that this intentionality around youth leadership and succession in rural CYD programs may be a distinction from larger – certainly in-school – arts education efforts that manage different – though adjacent – structural challenges with recruiting and retaining teachers. It's also important to note that many of the “promising practices” that Donovan and Brown list, including: local advocacy, coalition building and placemaking work, are resonant with the ways in which the CYD organizations we sat with are building solutions and pathways for young people to thrive locally.

In direct relationship to Donovan and Brown's call for the “initiation of cross-border collaborations” we moved forward to develop the rural think tank by considering our role as funders in not only supporting inter-regional exchange but also in offering funding in support of these efforts.

In order to learn more about rural CYD efforts in regions in which we had limited reach and relationships, we decided to engage programs in the Black Belt south, Appalachia, Indigenous Communities, and Borderland regions. Having engaged some of these programs as grantees in our COVID Community Response Fund, with new relationships on the other side of our calls with rural programs in 2021, and with the support of expert practitioners in these regions, we assembled a body of programs whose practices continue to inspire us. We began working with; D'DAT and the Build a

Band Program (Diné Nation/Farmington, New Mexico), Eastlake Expression Engine (Chattanooga, TN), Griot Arts (Clarksdale, MS), MeowCares (Montgomery, AL), and Revival of Cultural Arts - ROCA (Brownsville, TX). The work of these programs include supporting the development of new music by Diné young people, providing El Sistema inspired instruction to youth in Chattanooga, Tennessee, supporting new artistic production among young people in Clarksdale, Mississippi, offering of mobile music instruction to autistic youth in and around Montgomery, Alabama, centering culturally relevant music instruction for largely Latinx youth in Brownsville, Texas, and so much more.

In recognition of their outstanding work, The Lewis Prize for Music awarded each of these organizations a \$25,000 grant and contracted separately with the leaders (youth and adult staff) to join us in the five part think tank gathering. The Think Tank began with the work of becoming familiar with the practices and tactics of cultural work at each organization and moved to learning about each other's partnerships. One session focused on learning about how each program conceptualizes youth leadership via the allegory of the estuary, hold the midterm facilitation space between adults and incoming youth. We also surveyed the participating organizations and immediately shared with them their collective data around how each engages movement building, provides direct services in their community, and prioritizes particular musical practices and genres, as well as their budget sizes, revenue streams and more. Most significantly and most often, we discussed the ways in which each of these programs are a focal point in their communities as facilitators and amplifiers of youth leadership and voice.

In this work over time, we have been in the practice of learning from longstanding efforts to amplify these communities and the visions that young people have for them. We want to give thanks for the programs that shared with us about their practices on our fieldwide call in 2021. We want to give thanks to our application readers based in rural communities who have offered invaluable insight and have helped to shape how he understand this work. We want to give thanks to the partners of the convened programs who gave of their time and shared their

experiences as collaborators. This body of people and entities included: Judah Kids (in partnership with East Lake Expression Engine), Dr. Hollins (in partnership with MEOWCares), Leonette Henderson of the Aspen Institute (in partnership with Griot Arts), Flo Trujillo of Northwest New Mexico Arts Council (in partnership with D'DAT), and Armonia (in partnership with ROCA). We would like to acknowledge the organizations and philanthropic entities whose work in these communities has been longstanding and whose leadership continues to inspire us including but not limited to: AlternateROOTS, Appalachian Community Fund, Appalshop, Center for Rural Strategies/Rural Assembly, First Peoples Fund, Highlander Research and Education Center, Intercultural Leadership Institute, National Association for Latino Arts and Cultures, Pa'i Foundation, SIPPCulture, Southern Power Fund, Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative for Economic and Social Justice, Waymakers Collective among others.

Finally, we want to give thanks to our convened organizations and the individuals who represented their leadership including: Terrence Baldwin Sr., Terrence Baldwin Jr., Isabella Dallas, Anna Carson Tyner, Hilda Ledezma, Brandon Vázquez, Delbert Anderson, Alexandria Holiday, DJ Griffin and Leyda Juarez .

Living and building on the literal and symbolic frontlines of freedom struggles across the U.S., these programs and their leaders are engaging the transformative power of music and art-making to hold essential dream space for the youth of their communities. We invite you to sit with the practices, thoughts, and questions of these five organizations. We invite you to join in our humble listening to these intergenerational sharings. Finally, we invite you to consider how you might support these and other entities, persons and organizations doing the work of supporting youth and indeed the future/forthcoming of these communities.

---

<sup>1</sup>bell hooks, "Appalachian Elegy (Sections 1-6)" in *Appalachian Elegy* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2012)

<sup>2</sup>Lisa Donovan and Maren Brown, *Leveraging Change: Increasing Access to Arts Education in Rural Areas* (Grantmakers in the Arts, 2017)

<sup>3</sup>Arielle Julia Brown et. al., *Midcasting Toward Just Futures: Creative Youth Development's Waymaking To Systems Change Through and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic* (The Lewis Prize for Music, 2021)

t l p m

About  
**The Lewis Prize  
for Music**

t l p m

t l p m



The Lewis Prize for Music believes that music in the lives of young people is a catalytic force to drive positive change in our society. It is a five-year \$20 million philanthropic initiative founded and funded by Daniel R. Lewis dedicated to achieving equitable systems change that results in all young people having access to creative youth development music.

#### MISSION

The Lewis Prize partners with leaders in diverse and vibrant communities who create positive change by investing in young people through music. We believe young people with access to creative youth development music learning, performance and creation opportunities will mature into thriving individuals.

#### VISION

Communities have the leadership, commitment, and resources to provide diverse creative youth development music programs for all young people.

#### FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN

Daniel R. Lewis

#### BOARD MEMBERS

Stefon Harris  
Rebecca Fishman Lipsey  
María López De León  
Omari Rush  
Valerie Dillon, *Board Member Emeritus*

#### STAFF MEMBERS

Arielle Julia Brown  
AnnaLise Cason  
Kenneth Courtney Jr.  
Karen Cueva  
Annette Fritzsche  
Ann Gregg  
Alexis Jackson  
Shenika John Jordan  
Traci Slater-Rigaud  
Dalouge Smith, *CEO*



★  
D'DAT

★  
REVIVAL OF  
CULTURAL ARTS

★  
GRIOT ARTS

★  
EAST LAKE  
EXPRESSION  
ENGINE

★  
MEOW CARES, INC

# Rural **Think Tank** Cohort



## EAST LAKE EXPRESSION ENGINE

CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE

East Lake Expression Engine is an after-school and summer music program that seeks to develop the creativity, discipline, problem solving skills, social skills, and spiritual maturity of its students through musical instruction and collaboration in a gospel-centered environment.

[eastlakeexpressionengine.com](http://eastlakeexpressionengine.com)



## D'DAT

DINÉTAH/FARMINGTON, NEW MEXICO

D'DAT is a band fusing Indigenous musical traditions, LatinX, Southwest, Jazz, Funk and Hip-Hop. D'DAT Management brings multiple new projects to life in 2023. Each is focused on developing multi-cultural, cross-genre live shows that share traditional Indigenous storytelling and innovate through cross-cultural collaboration of band members, Delbert Anderson, Nicholas Lucero and Michael McCluhan. Together, Their work re-imagines art, music, dance, theater and poetry and paves new paths for artists in underrepresented areas.

[ddatlive.com](http://ddatlive.com)



## GRIOT ARTS

CLARKSDALE, MISSISSIPPI

Griot Arts aspires to be a cornerstone institution of the community, empowering artists to become the modern-day “Griots” of our land, narrating a new conversation in the community. We see the arts used as an avenue to revitalize and re-energize the people and communities in the Mississippi Delta with a clear view of the past, and a hopeful vision of the future. We use the arts as a tool to build the skills and confidence needed for our young people to realize their full potential in college and creative careers.

[griotarts.org](http://griotarts.org)



## MEOW CARES, INC.

MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

We are a nonprofit organization created to enhance the community through music education. MEOW is an acronym for Music Education On Wheels. This speaks to our ability to be mobile with our purpose. We realize the importance of having access to quality musical experiences impacts the growth of young learners. This is why we are driven to carry out our mission while being innovative, in turn moving music education forward.

[meowcares.org](http://meowcares.org)



## REVIVAL OF CULTURAL ARTS

BROWNSVILLE, TEXAS

Revival of Cultural Arts is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that holds under its care the Carlotta K. Petrina Cultural Center located in the Historic District in Brownsville, Texas. In partnership with the City of Brownsville and numerous other partners, ROCA oversees all programming at the Brownsville George Ramirez Performing Arts Academy in the heart of Downtown Brownsville. Our Mission is to create opportunities that will engage the community to experience art, music, dance, film, community theater, and cultural events with an emphasis on music education for everyone.

[revivalofculturalarts.org](http://revivalofculturalarts.org)

# Essays

“

*When it comes to vision, we need to be able to simplify our goal: All we want is a chance to involve everyone in an art form.*

**Delbert Anderson** | D'DAT

*We use music as a tool for transformation, leveraging students' latent musical talents to restore their sense of confidence, of self-worth, and of their place in a supportive community.*

**Dj Griffin and Leyda Juarez** | East Lake Expression Engine

*We at Revival of Cultural Arts have a mission to create opportunities that will engage the community to experience art, music, dance, film, community theater and cultural events with an emphasis in music, performing arts and visual arts education for everyone.*

**Hilda Ledezma** | Revival of Cultural Arts

*Through arts or job training our students leave feeling empowered, and with the ability to use their voice to carry on traditions and the stories of their families before them.*

**Isabella Dallas and Anna Carson Tyner** | Griot Arts

*We realize the importance of having access to quality musical experiences impacts the growth of young learners.*

**Terrance Baldwin Sr.** | MEOW Cares, Inc.

”



# D'DAT

(Farmington, New Mexico)

## Delbert Anderson

D'DAT Management, Inc. is a musical project based company who collaborates with artists and art organizations with an emphasis on Indigenous youth and Communities in Farmington, New Mexico. D'DAT creates many projects to uplift Indigenous artists and their cultures. With projects in multiple mediums of the arts, one particular program flourishing through the arts sector and our community is “Build A Band” – a crash course in Music Artistry and Business. With relationship building and thoughtful anticipation, young people don't just have the keys to a successful band, but better yet, a team of emotional citizens in the community.

Many programs talk about collaboration and relationships but hardly any have advocacy on HOW this process will work. I studied the traits that kept my own family of seven together and put these traits into a curriculum for “Build A Band”:

- Unconditional Love
- Respect
- Service
- Discipline
- Order
- Sacrifice
- Fun

In Farmington, everything operates on a very small scale, however, when we partner with others we become much larger. With a smaller community it's crucial to treat each event, meeting and partnership with the utmost respect. In a partnership, we always look for “strengths” that are our “weaknesses”. I believe many times organizations partner when they both have the same strengths. In a smaller community, we search for our opposites.

“Build A Band” specifically partnered with community arts centers to launch the program because it made them reach out to their communities and open their doors with music equipment for everyone to use. In order to keep our partnerships we need consistent intervention/evaluations to ensure our partnerships works efficiently. For example, one of our partners, Cortez Cultural Center, has great administrative skills that make our creative ideas come to life. One day during our collaborative event, I was told by their executive director, “It's your job to be creative, and our job to make it happen.” Our partnership is strong not only because Cortez Cultural Center can always deliver but, we also “give back” as much as possible. Over the course of many years, it was evident and discussed that D'DAT would give something back more than their art. We started giving opportunities and funding to the Cortez Community.

When it comes to vision, we need to be able to simplify our goal: All we want is a chance to involve everyone in an art form. Our vision is very music centric, but within music, there were many other jobs created in the program for non-musicians. Anyone can join “Build A Band”. As a small organization in a small community we have the advantage of knowing everyone. We take the time to know one another and make it clear to the community why everyone needs the arts. Our vision also includes keeping trust alive. There are times when Indigenous Elders want to use a certain space for their personal events, many times we waive the contract and go by pure honesty and trust. I like to say the handshake still exists in Farmington, New Mexico. These types of acts open your trust and doors to the community. It's easier to have communal vision when everyone trusts one another. Larger organizations are not able to do these things because of the amount of people they must work with, more yet, the amount of people they don't know personally. But imagine if a large organization took a chance.

Sustainability all falls within our youth and leaders. Training our youth for the positions we hold now and consistent communication of why our responsibilities are crucial in the community is always addressed. There is also a huge responsibility on our mentors. There needs

to be a clean, simple bridge for information to be passed on to the next generation. Many organizations write the information in a book and ask the youth to read and absorb the information. True mentorship, I believe is hands-on experience with the youth and mentor. To master any skill requires consistent contact with the subject matter. Meaning our youth are given a chance to always work with our structures. The more our youth work with our organization, the better our sustainability will be.



For D'DAT, impact is measured on how far the information and skills are utilized from our young participants. Someone who embodies our "Build A Band" impact is Alexandria (Alex) Holiday. Looking back at her experience, Alex shares, "I had no idea if music was something I wanted to pursue in my

life outside of high school and college band. I doubted myself. I just knew that I loved it, I wanted to sing, and I had no idea if I could ever make it happen." She goes on to share that before D'DAT, she "had written poems and little songs that I wasn't fully confident in...But in the





program I was allowed to have creative freedom in writing songs in genres I had never written in before but I was also guided by my mentor in things I could change, stay on pitch, musical and technical skills I had never learned before. That gave me confidence to start composing my own songs...”

Once Alex began to join a band, she was able to collaborate and share her knowledge with others while applying it to a larger group. Alex began to focus on the meaning of her content, becoming a mentor and role model for our youth. She began to be an activist for traditional preservation, the youth and women. Alex explains, “As I went through the program, it was important to us to incorporate traditional melodies into the music we created. I think that was one of the things that most inspired me to not only want to be an ambassador and an activist, but to try to reach people in different ways such as combining my love for my culture with my love for music. In doing so, I still hope to retain our culture for future generations.

Alex became an ambassador for the Diné people, youth and women throughout the United States. Her artistic content was so meaningful it was recognized by many organizations and communities. Her content also had

healing which came with so much responsibility. With Alex becoming a leader so quickly, she came back full circle and we hired her for our organization’s South Africa Project. “It was so important to me that Delbert and his colleagues didn’t just let me graduate the program and let me be. They continue to provide me with opportunities and continue to mentor me...Although I am still young in my career right now, I know I have gained this love for the community and mentorship that I have experienced in this program. We need that for our rural communities trying to make their way in the arts.”

In retrospect, it’s hard to believe how much impact the “Build A Band” program had on one student. Alex’s journey reflects the true meaning of creative youth development. Different when the youth can take your program and elevate it to something we as leaders couldn’t achieve at our time! What is the use of a teacher if the student can not pass the abilities of the teacher? It’s all about others, not us.





# East Lake Expression Engine

(Chattanooga, Tennessee)

*Measuring Our Impact to the Community*

**Dj Griffin and Leyda Juarez**

A community could be compared to a body in a couple of ways. Both have many parts that work together, and both can have issues that can cause some parts not to function effectively. In East Lake, our community suffers from a systemic lack of resources and development from the municipal system and community organizations. Arts and music programs are one of several cultural artifacts that are sorely lacking from the social landscape in this neighborhood. East Lake Expression Engine is one of many organizations that aims to correct some of the issues that the community faces.

East Lake Expression Engine is a music education program for underprivileged children from the East Lake neighborhood of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Our location is right in the heart of the neighborhood of the kids we serve. And we are also a block away from both the elementary and middle school, which helps with accessibility for the students and families.

We use music as a tool for transformation, leveraging students' latent musical talents to restore their sense of confidence, of self-worth, and of their place in a supportive community. We have worked to create a stable and supportive environment for children to learn to express themselves personally and musically, and build lasting relationships with their mentors and fellow students. Through high-intensity daily instruction, group and ensemble classes, and a proven peer-learning model, we encourage discipline, creativity, and teamwork. We partner with the YMCA and other local partners to provide programming, training, food and to be able to offer our after school services free of charge. We have partnered with so many other organizations that have also taken upon themselves to fulfill a need for the youth in our community. Through these partnerships we have been able to tend to their physical, mental, and spiritual needs. I believe that having multiple parts moving in unity with each other is a sign of a healthy community.



The sustainability of our program lies with each student that joins. Though we have very gifted teachers that lead the classrooms, we intentionally allow room for the students to teach or guide newer students. We do this to condition our students to be comfortable in a leadership position. And when the student moves to highschool, they have the opportunity to become one of our interns.

The intern program grew out of an immediate need that we saw in the community: in order for some of our middle and high school students to continue attending the program, they also needed to be able to work part-time to help support their families. So instead of them working at a fast-food restaurant, or at a grocery store, we figured that we could give them competing wages and they will still be able to grow more in the program. This has unexpectedly turned into a major part of our program much faster than we imagined.

It is open to any students in our program aged 14 and up. We offer vocational training in performance and music education to them as well as training in a variety of transferable job skills. Interns' duties include mentoring and teaching younger students, leading our musical workshops alongside staff members, and assisting with

daily program setup, logistics, and administration. All of these opportunities, along with mentoring from staff and guest artists, provide training that will help interns to both obtain and retain employment in future.

From the perspective of senior staff, the ability to be flexible is one of the many goals that we aim for in the young leaders. Every intern has consistently shown major improvement in their flexibility in the program. Whether it was a spontaneous game to hold the attention of a group, or if we were down an instrument teacher and needed them to fill in, they have gotten the job done.

Another impressive thing that I have witnessed is how they create and maintain a culture within themselves. They have become each other's safe place. I have heard from them that becoming an intern has shaped them in a way they have never expected. They feel encouraged and equipped to handle any situation they face, both in and outside of Expression Engine. Many of the interns have taken leadership roles in their schools, have enrolled in music camps, or have joined their school band. I've seen their confidence grow as they have become more comfortable with their place at the Engine.

From the perspective of a young adult on staff I'm able to better connect to some of the interns and younger students of the program. I say this because most of us have been through similar things which makes it easier to

support each other. Also, it helps that I am closer in age, because I feel that I can better relate to them which allows them to be more trusting. I have worked with East Lake Expression Engine as an intern for 4 years. I knew then that the Engine would help me develop skills for my future career. As Engine's Office Assistant and current sophomore at Lee University majoring in Elementary Education, I am responsible for communicating with families, I help manage the interns, and support the flow of the program.



We hope that through the success of our program we would eventually lead to a higher value and appreciation for the power of music education and arts as a whole in our city. And we also strive to inspire those in power to make arts education just as accessible in all neighborhoods.

There is no way to accurately measure the value of our program. Every child who has been in Expression Engine has experienced some measure of impact. Even the smallest amount of positive impact in their lives is counted as a win. We have been able to contribute to children who are now seeking teaching careers, and have mastered multiple instruments. We have also been able to simply be a safe place for children and create good memories. We have to measure the success of our program by the amount of children we are able to serve because they are the undeniable hope for bringing permanent positive change to our community and in due course, the whole city of Chattanooga.





# Revival of Cultural Arts

(Brownsville, TX)

Hilda Ledezma

The miracle of music and the fortune of having good friends and partners has been the perfect formula for our organization, Revival Of Cultural Arts, to bring creative youth development through the arts to low-moderate-income families in our communities in Brownsville, Texas. We at Revival of Cultural Arts have a mission to create opportunities that will engage the community to experience art, music, dance, film, community theater and cultural events with an emphasis in music, performing arts and visual arts education for everyone. Our core values which are integrity, humility, compassion, empathy, kindness and determination give us the passion to thrive in becoming a beacon of hope and a youth connection to the performing arts, as well as to supportive services that address food insecurity, nutrition, homelessness, and much more for an overall wellbeing of our students and their families. Our network and support systems are vested in our commitment to be inclusive and in our efforts to creating a holistic approach to our programming. We believe that experiences in music education, performances, culture and the arts gives us a different outlook of life and choices; especially to young people who find a safe haven in organizations such as ours, thereby receiving the music education, guidance and opportunities to grow musically, professional and for some, a career path in the performing, visual arts and music education.

The success of our sustainability is having the full support of the families we serve who are committed to working together and strategizing on creating funding opportunities



to make sure our programs are continuous and sustainable. Our organization requires that the board of directors commit to leading cultural events and fundraisers to help fund our annual budget. Also, we have a community of benefactors, and the support of our city who believes in investing in human capital and opportunities that expose children and youth to music and all forms of arts.

Our organization prioritizes creating programming and a support system for our young students, paving a path for them to be vested as ROCA Scholars. As ROCA Scholars, our students are encouraged to participate in workshops, events, performances and volunteer opportunities that include recycling, nutrition, environment and civic engagement as well as performances to support other nonprofits and cultural events. We at ROCA believe that our youth are our present, our gift, and that we must commit to their young adult development. Creating these opportunities for them will ensure that we contribute to forming sensitive, empathetic, conscious generations





that will continue to address the needs of others, especially for distressed communities in our city. Connecting through the arts enriches our lives and makes us all better people.

ROCA Scholar Interns are prepared and capacitated to be student instructors in music such as piano, drums and guitar. They also prepare to be involved in student-led programs, like our mariachi, conjunto and jazz band. This gives them work experience, leadership opportunities, and also an annual paid internship to compensate them for their efforts. For us it's very important that our youth understand that their time and talent is an investment with great value. As they refine their artistic skills and invest time to prepare for a performance or teach, they are creating opportunities for themselves to monetize and improve the economy of their household. This brings a sense of pride and the realization of finding a way to be self sustainable. We highly encourage that organizations that work with youth find ways to compensate them and encourage self sufficiency.

Brandon is currently a ROCA Scholar, and thanks to the recommendation of his piano teacher and mentor, has also become a piano student instructor. He was officially one of the students in our first summer camp seven years ago. Recently we were talking about this experience and it had us reminiscing of the many events, classes and the fun times. He also mentioned that this was the first time he was introduced to music and the arts and that for many kids, the summer months are a great opportunity for them to try something different at the request of their parents, and this was his case. At his young age he had tried other sports, such as karate and softball but there was something about music that attracted him to this magnificent world. Doing music for him has been a channel and way to invest his time productively, he added. Watching classic cartoons was an inspiration for him as he watched and listened to the many classical pieces that were used in many of the productions he liked. This became a connection for him. The complexity of the music was a great attraction and Brandon felt an inner calling to learn more.

Thanks to the support and encouragement of his family and music teacher, he chose piano as his main instrument. Brandon knew that making this decision meant hours of practice and dedication, also sacrificing other activities that at his young age were very tempting. He is proud that he has learned to balance his time. Brandon mentioned that the music he was creating and learning made it all worthwhile and has given him the patience and determination to pursue other challenges, like piano competitions, in which he has successfully placed in the top rankings. He also shared that maturing into a young musician during a world pandemic took more than determination. The challenges that came with it were detrimental for him. Having to continue lessons virtually and not having human interaction with other fellow students was a time that Brandon credits his wellbeing and mental stability to making music. Brandon's commitment to his music education has also challenged him to overcome obstacles such as transportation, he has now learned to use public transportation and uses his bike regularly to get to class.

As we talked about the world pandemic, I too can attest that the arts are a safe haven for many of us. This life experience for ROCA expanded the opportunities to connect directly with our students and their families, wherever they were during this time. The challenges were greater for our families who live in hotels, in their vehicles, and who rely on their phone for the internet. Major challenges were food insecurity, transportation and legal status. I recall making a home visit to a family who had just moved a couple of blocks from our center. They had a child that had just been released from an immigration detention camp. I wanted to make a connection with this child. When we delivered the food and other items to the family, I met him, he hardly said a word, and of course he didn't

know me. I got to introduce myself and our organization. I told him that we were hoping he would join our conjunto music program. His mom had told me he liked the accordion. I knew that would be our connection. He just shook his head "yes" and I promised I was going to be back. Thanks to receiving our first official grant in 2020, the Lewis Prize Covid Response Fund grant, we were able to purchase a variety of instruments, including this young man's first musical instrument from our organization, his own accordion. I will never forget the hope I saw in his eyes, and the joy I felt in my heart. Writing about this assures me that the hope I saw in his eyes meant that our organization was making a difference in young lives.





For us at ROCA, music education is very important, and we know the benefits of this discipline are endless. Our measurable impact includes the advancement in learning the skill and also the performances. But most importantly, we see our impact when we see students respect their instruments and when we witness families reunite because of a child's performance. Overall, we measure our success by the many young lives we inspire to be creative, good people and find harmony in their lives through the arts.





 **GRIOT**  
— ARTS INC —



# Griot Arts

(Clarksdale, Mississippi)

Isabella Dallas and Anna Carson Tyner

**G**riot Arts is a nonprofit organization in the rural Mississippi Delta. We provide high quality, high intensity arts programming and job training for our entire community, regardless of background or restraint. At Griot we strive to place power and ability into the hands of the young people of Clarksdale. Through arts or job training our students leave feeling empowered, and with the ability to use their voice to carry on traditions and the stories of their families before them. “Griot” is a West African term that means storyteller and culture keeper. Our mission is to instill the spirit of a Griot into the hearts of our students so that when the time comes for them to move on they can do so successfully. In the future we plan to expand so that we can provide a safe and enlightened environment for even more students to explore art, themselves and their futures without restriction.

The two branches of our organization, Griot Arts Center (youth programming) and Meraki Roasting Company (workforce development), each serve our wider purpose in different ways. GAC serves our younger students and provides the arts-focused curriculum and social-emotional learning, while Meraki gives young adults the ability and space to reflect on their futures while working and learning soft skills, such as communication, team building, and time management. We are an organization focused on storytelling, so we measure our impact through the stories of our students and how their stories interact with the story of Griot as a whole. We believe that our youth are the future of our community, and we facilitate their growth through our direct programming and through the ethos of our program. At Griot, we take an empathetic, individualized approach to creating leaders and culture keepers that prioritizes our students and their stories.

“As a newcomer to the Delta who had a great love of coffee, I sought out the nearest coffee shop and discovered the gem that is Meraki. I fell in love with the organization as a whole, Griot Arts Inc, and their initiatives to create change in the community on big and small levels. While the Open Mic Nights and community game nights

drew me in, the pandemic changed the way we as an organization had to grow to reach people. We started dropping off supplies and had drive-by instrument pickups. We saw a huge loss of students but our desire to impact the community never faltered. Griot’s commitment to pouring into the community by instilling our students, young people, staff and surrounding community members with the ability to pass on their own stories was inspiring. The Delta is so rich with its history, residents and yes, even the soil, that equipping those involved with the ability to share their histories and the stories of their own lives and the lives of their families is a huge part of what we do. Legacy after legacy will be remembered and told through our spaces. The walls will be filled with love, passion, excitement and laughter that will hopefully continue for years to come.”

~ Isabella Dallas, former Program Director

“As a native of the Mississippi Delta, I remember when Griot was founded. When I was fifteen and Griot had been around for a few years, I got involved in their open mic nights. I went with a childhood friend and sang while she played guitar. I felt comfortable and confident when I was at Griot. I connected with a group of my peers who, because of the actively segregated school systems, I never would have met otherwise. The summer after I graduated high school, I worked in the coffee shop when the workforce development program was in its infancy, and did some volunteer work doing organizational and inventory projects. After I graduated from college during the pandemic, I chose to move back to my hometown and work with the youth that Griot serves on the arts programming side. Griot reconnected me to my community after I had been away for six years of school and renewed my faith in Clarksdale.”

~ Anna-Carson Tyner, young person involved with Griot Arts current Program Director

Youth leadership is built into our programs and manifests naturally as our students age. Younger students in our youth programs look to the older students as examples of Griot's principles and mission. By extension, the older youth program students see a shining example of commitment and leadership in our workforce development students. Due to Covid, both of our programs were faced with drastically low numbers, but the slow build back from that has given us the opportunity to really let our students' voices be heard as we've continued to grow and shift throughout the pandemic. With Griot meaning "culture keeper," our students see themselves as leaders not only at Griot, but in the wider community. Our students have demonstrated leadership ability outside of Griot in their schools as youth ambassadors, as well as being driven to participate in multiple extracurriculars in addition to Griot. Workforce development students have shared their skills with our youth program students through teaching semester long classes. Because of this, our youth program students express interest in joining the workforce development program and giving back to Griot and the community in that way. Though not a requirement of our workforce development program by any means, taking on responsibilities on the youth programming side builds extra confidence and leadership ability in our workforce development students. Our youth leadership flows within our organization as well as outside of it.

Since our founding, we have sustained and developed partnerships with community stakeholders such as churches, other local nonprofits and community foundations, and individuals in the form of board members, community advocates, teaching artists, and educators. Our Teach for America network has been invaluable as they recruit students to join Griot from within their classrooms, and directly support Griot as teaching artists with the youth program. This partnership has fueled most of our youth programming from when we opened our doors until 2020 due to the lockdown. Teach for America's involvement has fostered our strong foundation and value of education. Our students receive daily educational and social emotional support largely due to the strong foundation that was brought with TFA.

As we continue to expand as an organization, we look to expand our partnerships as well. While maintaining our relationships with longtime community partners, we are beginning to foster more industry partnerships, as well as broadening our reach from mainly local to regional and state entities. We actively search for partners who share our artistic and community centric focus, such as StoryWorks Theater, with whom we have a developing partnership, and

Delta Arts Alliance. These like-minded organizations engage in reciprocal resource sharing with us, creating a mutually beneficial partnership that caters to our shared values. DAA has been a huge asset to our organization because as we are a waning population our pool of teacher resources are limited. DAA fuels a majority of our unique arts classes like African Dance, Drumming and Choir and Mural Work. Students have been given performance opportunities and had their artwork displayed in neighboring communities because of these incredible partnerships. StoryWorks is using some of our space for their operations and greatly assisting in the expansion of our capacity and aiding in making theater more accessible to our students and our community.

An additional venture that is still in early planning, is forming a tiny home community for the students of our workforce development program. This program would partner with other community organizations like Habitat for Humanity and The Fuller Center for Housing to create an affordable, achievable and accessible opportunity for our students to take a part of their lives into their own hands. We have observed that without reliable and safe housing, our students' lives get thrown into a constant state of chaotic flight or flight. We want our students to thrive and grow above what current circumstances may be placed in front of them and believe that this would be a huge step in the right direction.

One of the most important issues in our community is that, in many ways, it is not a sustainable place to live. Lack of economic opportunity, no consistent/reliable source of healthy food, a growing unaffordable/unlivable housing problem, and poor school systems have decimated our community in the past twenty years. At Griot, we know we cannot fix all of those problems alone, but we believe in a future here for young people, and we are doing everything we can to make that future a reality. Creating a center for the arts will impact the community economically as it makes Clarksdale a more attractive place to live, stimulating growth and development in other areas of our community. Having a program that caters to Clarksdale's various demographics will assist in building a more equitable community that is comfortable with its diversity, and flourishes because of it. We want Clarksdale to be seen as a stronghold for the arts. Having a physical community space increases community buy-in in other areas and keeps young people engaged with their community on other levels. The dream we have for Clarksdale and for the youth we serve is a dream that is becoming more tangible every day.



**MEOW**  
MUSIC EDUCATION ON WHEELS  
**CARES**  
INCORPORATED

# MEOW Cares, Inc.

(Montgomery, Alabama)

**Terrance Baldwin Sr.**

**M**EOW Cares Inc. is a nonprofit organization created in 2016 to enhance the Montgomery, Alabama/Tri County community through music education. MEOW is an acronym for Music Education On Wheels, speaking to our ability to be mobile with our purpose. We realize the importance of having access to quality musical experiences impacts the growth of young learners. This is why we are driven to carry out our mission while being innovative, in turn moving music education forward. We service our community through applied music lessons at our storefront location, enrichment programs at multiple schools and community sites.

Our mission at MEOW Cares is to educate, inspire, heal, and replenish the world through music education using an authentic connection with human spirits. Through our mission, we plan to find relevant ways to insert our efforts throughout the community. Our programs include: applied music lessons, Spectrum Jam (music class for special needs youth), Camp Kids Groove (summer enrichment) and STEAM Academy.

Since our inception, impact has steadily increased, despite the hurdles of COVID 19. This is apparent through the growing demand within our community for our programs. All of our community partners become recurring partners which lends to the need and effectiveness of our work. Valiant Cross Academy is an example of one of our



partnerships. VCA is an all boys school in Montgomery that creates a unique learning experience for its scholars. Much of the learning that occurs here comes from the community businesses who all have a vested interest in these boys having an intimate educational experience which assists in some of the traditional methods. We consider our encounter with these students to be impactful and different from what they experienced in traditional schools. This partnership is mutually beneficial in that we provide our services, and we get to attach our mission to theirs which spreads the love for music and community further than we could on our own.



Partnerships and communal visions go hand in hand in our area. For example, we partner with The River Region United Way (RRUW). They do a yearly needs assessment, and reach out to its community partners to apply for grants to fulfill the needs based on the assessment. This gives much more purpose to our work as opposed to just teaching music. Our very first encounter with RRUW resulted in us taking our Spectrum Jam program to Lowndes County where we worked with special needs students. Since then, we have developed an ongoing partnership that allows us to work with these students year round. We have even seen a few graduate, and we maintain contact with these students. We are surely becoming a staple in that area with our work. Be it mental health or gun violence awareness, we can teach and prepare students to be better learners, have higher self esteem, and learn to problem solve through music.

Creative youth development is a concept that I haven't seen much of in my community. The more that I am learning about it, the more I realize that youth leadership is something that exists whether you nourish it or not. As a person in leadership, you are either preparing the ground for a new crop or stifling it. Being from the south, we are known for not being as progressive as other regions. Some reasons may include the strong hold to traditions, the preservation of power, and others. But one thing is for certain, communities change as the experiences of the

youth change. The future is not dependent on the past, but the cultivating of the newness that exist within our youth. There are many times as a leader that I am confused on what direction to take my programs. As I collaborate with other leaders, I realize I'm not alone in this confusion. Redundancy and lack of resources are both factors in this block. But one thing that I have learned is that I always find inspiration in talking to my young staff members. Allowing the energy of young people to guide activity leads to moments where I am able to find new revelations on how to approach teaching music. That said, I am interested in how much more we can grow through creative youth development through intentionality. Creating spaces, gathering data, and having structure is imperative to guiding our organization and community into the future.

As time goes forward, systems change is in full effect in our community. I am sure that it is not as progressive here as in other areas, but as I look at leadership in my area there are more diverse people in positions. I think this is a result of systems change that is occurring from a federal level. Over the past 5 years, my city has elected the first Black mayor, more and more female judges and other elected officials. The more our culture evolves, the more of this change will be normal practice for our future. By allowing our youth a seat at the leadership table, there can be less harsh transitions in the future and alignment amongst generations.





# the lewis prize for music

community | collaboration | leadership

[thelewisprize.org](http://thelewisprize.org)

© 2023 The Lewis Prize for Music

Cover painting: *Create Some Good* by  
Zoey Ratliff and MacKenzie Newson at Griot Arts  
and photographed by Staci Lewis