



# 2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Building a culture of powerful,  
responsible citizenship  
across the nation.



## A MESSAGE FROM OUR CEO



**All politics is pain relief.** This is a refrain I've been sounding all year, before and since the election. America today is steeped in pain and grief, so often unnamed and unaddressed. The pain of years of grinding inequality and the erosion of everyday dignity. The pain of years of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan subcontracted to one percent of us. The pain of a blip of "racial reckoning" followed by a wave of anti-equity backlash. The pain of a pandemic, the deaths and devastation of which we never properly grieved together.

A presidential election is a crude binary instrument for pain relief. It can never be enough. It can easily make things worse.

I've recently been reading the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin's engrossing new book, [An Unfinished Love Story](#). On one level, it is about how she and her late husband Richard Goodwin built a life of purpose and service and consequence. On another, it is about how Richard Goodwin shaped the politics of the 1960s, as an aide to JFK then to LBJ and finally to RFK. On yet another level, it is about how their love of this country persisted despite the dashed dreams and disillusionment of that era.

I'm at the part of the book where Goodwin has come up with the phrase "the Great Society" to announce Johnson's sweeping and ambitious agenda of domestic policy reform. And it made me see something clearly about his times and ours.

Greatness in America can never emerge from the will of a president. The only enduring source of greatness in the United States is a people capable of living together, seeing the humanity in each other, and dealing with our common problems through our differences. As Ella Baker put it: strong people don't need strong leaders.

This report on Citizen University's work in 2024 describes many strong people, who remind us that to have a great society, we have to build it first in Lansing and Shreveport and Muskogee and Philadelphia. We have to make our neighborhood greater and more inclusive, our faith networks greater and more humble, our schools greater and more wise, our arts institutions greater and more attuned, our businesses greater and more humane, our courts greater and more just.

At CU we teach that "power plus character equals citizenship." This year we trained people from dozens of states to practice civic power and cultivate civic character and then go back home to embody at a human local scale the greatness that is possible when we see, read, join, organize, empathize, argue, compromise, serve, build, and heal like citizens.

What we reminded these civic catalysts was not to quit on each other and on their fellow Americans; to love this country through the pain and broken promises, because the story is not yet finished. And what they've reminded our passionate, dedicated team at CU is that all across this land, civic renewal is not just possible; it is underway.

**Thank you for believing in our work.**

— ERIC LIU  
Co-founder and CEO



**The only enduring source of greatness in the United States is a people capable of living together, seeing the humanity in each other, and dealing with our common problems through our differences.**



# 2024 AT CITIZEN UNIVERSITY



We knew this was going to be a civically taxing year for many Americans. To combat the pervasive sense of disconnection and disempowerment, we linked arms with local leaders and focused on fortification.

From Seattle to Omaha to Miami, we convened civic catalysts who were not just yearning for new ways of convening and activating their communities — but for a sense of connection and motivation for themselves. Catalysts came in feeling depleted, and left rededicated. They brought home new tools and tactics for sparking citizenship in others, and they themselves felt a renewed faith that the work of building a culture of powerful, responsible citizenship matters. Read on to hear more about their stories and accomplishments...

## CIVIC SATURDAY FELLOWSHIP



**This year, we ran Civic Saturday Fellowship cohorts for individuals and helped existing networks embrace the Civic Saturday model, enabling them to lean on one another to accelerate the creative ways they're embedding gatherings into their communities' culture.**

**We've also deepened the coaching, one-on-one support, and connections among Fellows to help this community feel prepared and supported in creating connective, activating gatherings.**

**97%** of this year's Civic Saturday Fellows shared that their personal understanding of citizenship (and the skills needed to foster it) deepened over the course of their time with CU.



**"I have been a part of so many different fellowships and leadership opportunities but I have never felt so seen, fortified, and appreciated for what I do in my community and how I lead. I truly feel supported to take on what is next for me and my work."**

— SHAREEFAH MASON (DALLAS, TX)

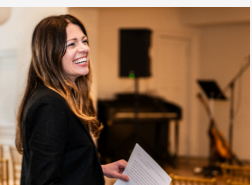
### SPOTLIGHT: KATE TUCKER (AKRON, OH)

"In the heart of the pandemic, I moved back to Akron, Ohio, and for months I didn't know anyone on my street, I had no idea who lived next to me." Even though Kate Tucker grew up in Akron, this certainly didn't feel like home. So she decided to do something about it.

ROSA PINTO and PERLA OCHOA have adapted the Civic Saturday model to support their Latinx community organizing in Nebraska as a place to recharge, strengthen relationships, and nurture belief in their work long term. They were eager to provide these kinds of gatherings, "places where people can come together to be neighbors, to support each other and restore our faith in one another," as Perla put it.

We equipped nearly **50** new Fellows to host Civic Saturday-inspired activities, resulting in a 100% increase in gatherings from last year and reaching thousands of neighbors across their communities. Fellows from throughout the 5 years of cohorts have continued to sustain gatherings as regular rituals, from STEVE SMITH in Lincoln, NE to ERIKA OLSON in Bothell, WA.

She used the Civic Saturday model to start a new ritual as an antidote to disconnection and has spearheaded Civic Saturday Akron — joyful, abundant gatherings of often 100+ people that forge friendships, activate a spirit of service, and unite Akronites of many identities over a shared care for their city. And in 2025, our staff will travel to Akron to equip even more of her neighbors to host gatherings that expand Kate's beloved Civic Saturdays into a city-wide movement.



# YOUTH COLLABORATORY



**Our Youth Collaboratory program for spirited and imaginative high schoolers doubled in size this year, with 40 students across the nation diving deep into how civic power grows and flows.**

**By tuning into the challenges of their communities, they're practicing the skills and commitments of citizenship. They each created Power Projects, engaging over 2,000 peers and neighbors.**

**40%** of students felt increased confidence in saying, "I can get my friends to create change in my community" after completing the program

JOANNE LIN of Camas, WA dedicated her Power Project to making it easier for high school students to find clubs and activities that resonate with them.



OMARI HALLMAN is building community in the truest sense, starting right in his local park in Rockville, MD. He's creating events where teens can connect, play games, and build connections, helping them feel less isolated and more committed to engaging in civic life. His next goal is to expand his events with city council support, making these gatherings a permanent part of his city.

ROHAN TYAGI'S environmental justice workshops are more than just educational sessions — they're collaborative gatherings that draw out students' input. After hosting his first workshop on mapping environmental issues in the Bay Area, Rohan saw how powerful it was when young people had a direct hand in deciding what environmental actions mattered most to them.

**"Whenever I think that something is not right at my school, I use my power as a student to talk to administrators and teachers about it, and I end up realizing that I am more powerful than I think, and it just took initiative and a passion to want to change things for the better to help find a solution."**

— CAROLINA CALVO (MEMPHIS, TN)



**"When Ciera applied, we really had no idea what the experience would be. Now, we have a teenager excitedly talking about starting a school newspaper. She loves her cohort and has learned so much from each and every one of them. The courage that she developed has already shaped her future aspirations."**

— DONYELL ROSEBORO, MOM TO CIERA ROSEBORO (WILMINGTON, NC)

[Read about Ciera's newspaper →](#)

## SPOTLIGHT: SHAYLEE SZARAZ (SALINE, MI)

For Shaylee, preventing gender-based harassment was personal. Her experiences motivated her to advocate for what other young women really need at her high school in Michigan. She had an idea about how to start a new project, but she didn't feel powerful enough to launch any meaningful community action.

Through our Youth Collaboratory, she studied how power flows, used civic skills to organize others, and worked through challenges in order to establish a school-wide initiative, in partnership with the group Know Your IX. "CU has shown me that real power is more than just ticking off tasks," she shared. "It's amazing to think that by truly caring and stepping up, I can make real change happen."



**This year, we expanded relationships with educators and community leaders and equipped them with our experiential curriculum that supports young people in forming their civic identity.**

**We also returned to deepen relationships with, and learn back from, previous partners which fortified their ability to serve the youth in their community – and helped us make responsive program improvements.**



**112** community leaders in Florida, Illinois, and Louisiana joined our trainings this year.



In Miami, we worked with over 80 near-peer organizers from the national youth-led advocacy organization Rhizome. This was our largest Citizen Redefined training to date, and Rhizome took this content and planned ways to infuse their own trainings with a reimagined sense of the American context and what patriotism can look like in practice.

**"The frameworks Citizen University introduced have been in the water ever since last winter. The language that organizers are using has shifted dramatically, including something as significant as people thinking of themselves as 'patriotic' after the exercises with the flags. They've started to see patriotism as something they can proactively define rather than inherit or reject. That's been a huge cultural shift."**

— JACOB MERKLE, CO-FOUNDER AND CEO, RHIZOME



**SPOTLIGHT: COMMUNITY RENEWAL (SHREVEPORT, LA)**



"Civic engagement starts with how we treat each other every day in our communities and with our youth," shared community coordinator JAYME TITLOW. "As we learn to support one another, we unlock deeper levels of power in our communities."

Returning to Shreveport, LA this summer, we saw how Community Renewal, an organization designed to strengthen social bonds in neighborhoods, has been infusing civic skills into their youth programming since our first training in 2022 with people like Jayme. She used her experience in our Citizen Redefined program to create a sense of safety in her after school club so that young people could have more open conversations about politics and civic participation.

Her colleague MICHELLE WALTER is using what she learned to help young people work through conflict. She used grounding exercises to teach her students how to stay level-headed and act with a sense of civic character – learning how to take responsibility for the neighborhood they share. Citizen Redefined fortified the team at Community Renewal in ways that ripples out into each of their Shreveport neighborhoods.



# CIVIC COLLABORATORY

**Our National Civic Collaboratory members deepened bonds of trust and affection throughout our four gatherings this year.**

**They circulated mutual aid to propel field-changing initiatives around community service, civic media, youth leadership, and more.**

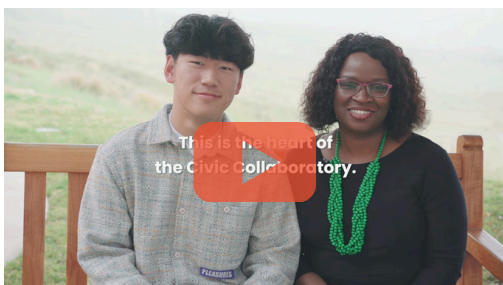


**100+** National Civic Collaboratory members participated in gatherings held in Simi Valley, Washington DC, and virtually, where they offered tangible commitments of support to 10 powerful national civic initiatives. Projects like...

- Former Congressman Brian Baird's vision to help local communities showcase the value of service
- A national Trust in Elections campaign spearheaded by Living Room Conversations
- An initiative to propel Participatory Democracy through narrative change, visioning, and radical imagination

This year, we also partnered with our friends at CoGenerate, cross-pollinating our Civic Collaboratory model with their work of bridging generational divides.

CoGenerate infused expertise on deepening intergenerational relationships and trust into our National Civic Collaboratory programming — and in turn, they piloted their own Civic Collaboratory model for their national network. We co-produced a video that illustrates the impact of these enriching and empowering bonds.



We also cheered the ongoing success of the ATL Civic Collab and burgeoning Arizona Collaboratory — we're proud that this social technology is being adapted to strengthen place-based networks across the country.

The Chronicle of Philanthropy profiled the National Civic Collaboratory in their series, The Commons. It spotlighted the unique conditions that nurture both enriching friendships and transformative projects.

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

## Can 50 Nonprofits Really Build Something Together? A Hopeful Idea Begins to Spread

Inside an effort dubbed "mutual aid on steroids" that's getting a tryout in cities like Atlanta, Chicago, and Lexington, Ky.

By *Drew Lindsay* | AUGUST 14, 2024

“This evening and throughout the proceedings, [Eric] Liu tells the group members that their strength lies in shared bonds of trust and love. As sappy as the line could seem, it draws affirming nods and applause.”



Jamie Bennett, interim CEO of Americans for the Arts, has attended collaboratory meetings almost from the beginning. “In my first two, three, four years, it was probably the only transpartisan space I was ever in,” he says. “I really began to meet people all across the political spectrum, all of whom were committed to this country working better.”

[Read the article →](#)

“Another powerful Civic Collaboratory gathering around the kitchen table with many generations coming together to build brighter futures. One thing that struck me is all of the myriad ways folks are building community, instigating in different ways to share power with proximate leaders in lots of diverse contexts.”

— PARVATHI SANTHOSH-KUMAR, AMERICA'S PROMISE ALLIANCE

# OUR CATALYST COMMUNITY

Our network of trained civic catalysts, now over 500 strong, are doing for their communities what Citizen University has done for them.

They're igniting renewed commitment to practicing civic skills like critical thinking, power building, and healthy debate.

They're inviting their neighbors into activities that are trust-strengthening, faith-building, and heart-filling. They're living like citizens and contributing to a culture that compels others to do the same.

These connective, community-rooted approaches will not single-handedly solve the immense challenges we face as Americans — but our challenges cannot be solved without them.



Finding connection through the CU community, MICHAEL COOPER and LESLIE GARVIN teamed up to host a post-election Civic Saturday in Raleigh, NC to help their neighbors connect and find common ground.



While writing his book about the power of libraries as civic spaces, SHAMICHAEL HALLMAN interviewed his fellow CU alum, ERIKA OLSON, about the gatherings she hosts at her library.

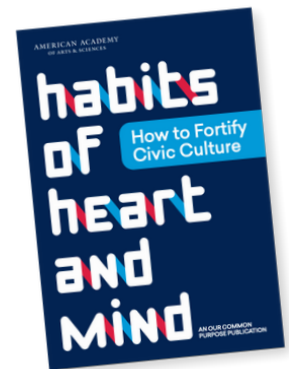


# CIVIC CULTURE CHANGE

This was also a year of fortifying the field and forging partnerships.

We brought our program offerings to groups like Civic Nebraska, CoGenerate, Community Renewal, Northwestern University, and Rhizome and co-created transformational trainings for their networks.

Eric's stewardship of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences' Civic Culture Working Group, composed of 16 civic leaders across sectors, generated new wisdom to propel the Our Common Purpose project. The resulting report, [Habits of Heart and Mind: How to Fortify Civic Culture](#), has become a galvanizing north star for our field. We've worked to generate greater funding for, and news coverage of, the tapestry of organizations working within the civic culture landscape.



From our participation in the New Pluralists' network, to Eric's leadership in the American Bar Association's Task Force on Democracy, to national news coverage of the strategies outlined in the report, the momentum around civic culture is driving deeper commitment to this democracy-fortifying work.



# THANK YOU FOR POWERING OUR WORK

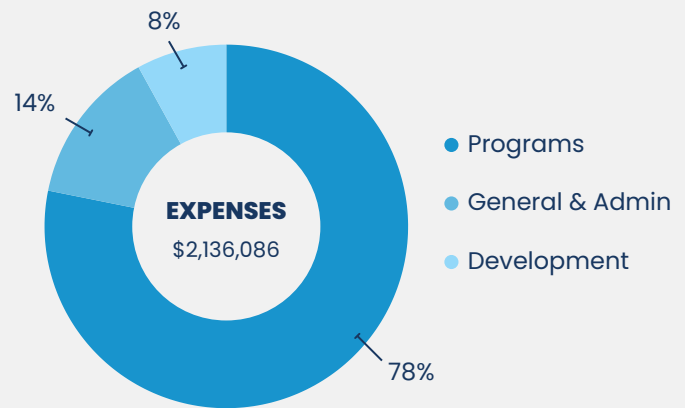
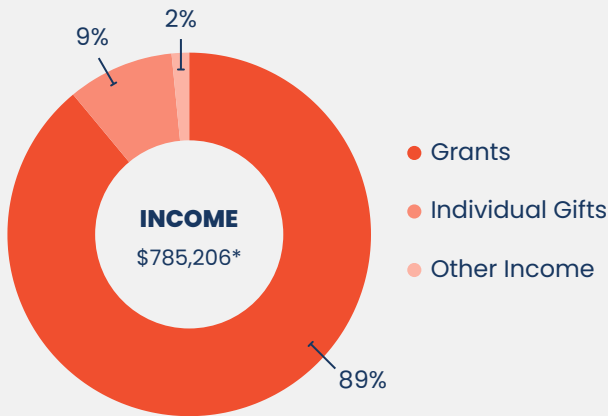


Every contribution to our work is an act of civic faith – an affirmation that building a culture of powerful, responsible citizenship is vital for our country and communities.

We are deeply grateful to the donors and funders who propel our work. Our FY2024 funders, listed to the right, span the civic field, focusing on youth development, spiritual transformation, bottom-up power building, and democratic renewal.

- Bezos Family Foundation
- Fetzer Institute
- Hearthland Foundation
- Hewlett Foundation
- John Templeton Foundation
- New Pluralists Collaborative, a sponsored project of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors
- Omidyar Network
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- Stand Together Foundation

## PUTTING YOUR SUPPORT TO WORK



\*In FY24 (Jul 23–Jun 24), Citizen University spent down funding from multi-year grants received in prior years. Only new income received in FY24 is represented above.

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