



MISSION BELONGING

2025 ANNUAL REPORT



combat loneliness. build community.
#MISSIONBELONGING
www.missionbelonging.org

Artwork by Mission Belonging Vice-Chair, USMC Veteran Joe Merritt

Dearest Supporters & Friends,

The work that is now Mission Belonging — previously known as CBAW — began in 2010 with a personal determination to ease suffering, in others and in myself. Working at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, I recognized the dissonance between a country at war and the glossy sheen of social media. When we gathered around a table and made art together, we felt that loneliness lift.

The language of intentional vulnerability and sacred witnessing may have been foreign to the military health system, but the need was undeniable. The program grew into Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and Ft Belvoir Community Hospital, where I met Joe Merritt — an artist and Marine who'd lived through very different things than I had, but arrived at the same conclusion: we must witness one another to survive.

From the very beginning we've seen that creative expression can build connections across lines that usually divide people. Through research partnerships we've begun to see how our programs can affect health outcomes quantitatively.

In 2025, the ground shifted beneath us, as it did for so many organizations. Some grants we'd counted on were cancelled. Our donor community stepped up to close the gap, and we moved forward with resolve. We launched a new online platform to better understand our community and the impact we're having, and to give our participants a safe all-human place, free of ads or AI, to connect. We deepened our partnerships with LGBTQ+ organizations to reach more gender-diverse veterans as transgender service members faced sudden discharge; and we completed the third and final year of our first-ever research study.

A Summit Impact Fellowship gave me space to step back and see the organization clearly — leading me and our board to rename ourselves Mission Belonging, a name that reflects what we'd actually built. I also spoke about this work at the Masters of Scale Summit in San Francisco.

None of this would be possible without the unwavering support of our donors, volunteers, participants, and community partners. Joe often says, "Hope is an action word." I marvel that we all actively hoped our way here. We need one another, and hope, more than ever.


Seema Reza, CEO



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history

THE BEGINNING

Co-founder, Seema Reza, creates an arts program at Walter Reed to serve wounded, ill and injured service members recovering in the DC Area.

HBO DOCUMENTARY

HBO Documentary, *We Are Not Done Yet*, features the work and impact of our programs.

EXPANDING REACH

CBAW reached nearly 7,585 participants through virtual and in person programs this year.

ADVANCING THE FIELD

Independent research found that participation in our programming was associated with a significant reduction in suicidal ideation severity.

NON-PROFIT FORMED

Community Building Art Works Board, composed of veterans, artists, and advocates, forms 501(c)3.

WORLDWIDE IMPACT

We opened virtual programs for healthcare workers and civilian participants, providing a place of belonging. These programs have brought together 6000+ participants per year from 6 continents.

MISSION BELONGING

Community Building Art Works Board votes to adopt a new name: Mission Belonging, which more concisely reflects our work.



2025 highlights



**LAUNCHED WRITING IN THE
ARENA: A CREATIVE ARTS
PROGRAM FOR MILITARY AND
VETERAN MEN**



**SUMMIT IMPACT
FELLOWSHIP**



**INTRODUCED OUR ONLINE
COMMUNITY PLATFORM, CIRCLE**



**AUGUST STRATEGY
MEETING**



**THIRD ANNUAL
"DAY OF BELONGING"**



**RENAMED THE
ORGANIZATION TO
MISSION BELONGING**



**HILTON MARK CENTER
PARTNERSHIP**

2025 at a glance

6,416

participants served

308

programs delivered

46

artist facilitators

6

continents

“This program has helped me to find parts of myself I thought I lost. It has given me a creative outlet and a safe space to share.”

— Program Participant

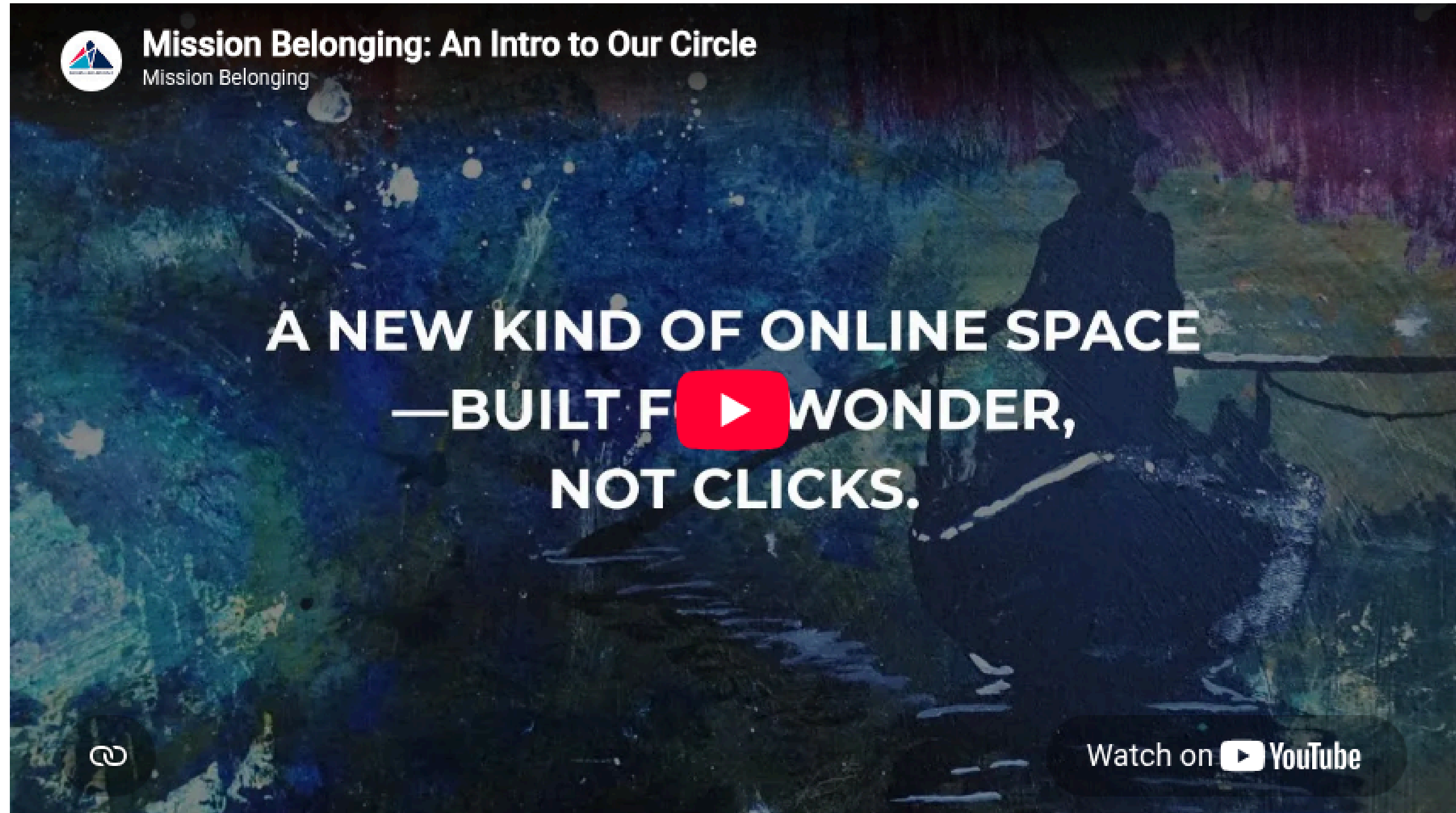
“I love the reliability of MB programming. Although we can’t always attend, each participant can count on each program to occur and moderators and instructors to be there.”

— Program Participant

Our integrated, custom-built survey process improves our capability to understand member engagement over time, learn from demographic insights, and improve our programs.

the mission belonging circle

our online digital community center



We launched Circle in November of 2025.

At the end of the year, there were 309 participants and counting.

Day of Belonging 2025



Clockwise from Top Left

- Director of Programs, Ashy Palliparambil greets an attendee
- Welcome by Lauren Campbell, Strathmore
- National Anthem by Wytold
- Keynote by Dr Adam Saperstein
- Nature Journaling with Liz Lockett
- Gift bags donated by Amazon Military
- Woodworking with Steve McCombs
- Closing performance



Co-presented with Strathmore, this full-day, in-person celebration of art, resilience, community, and military service, featured live performances, engaging creative activities, and appearances by special guests.

2025's celebration was moved to a new location to accommodate more than 110 participants from more than 16 states.



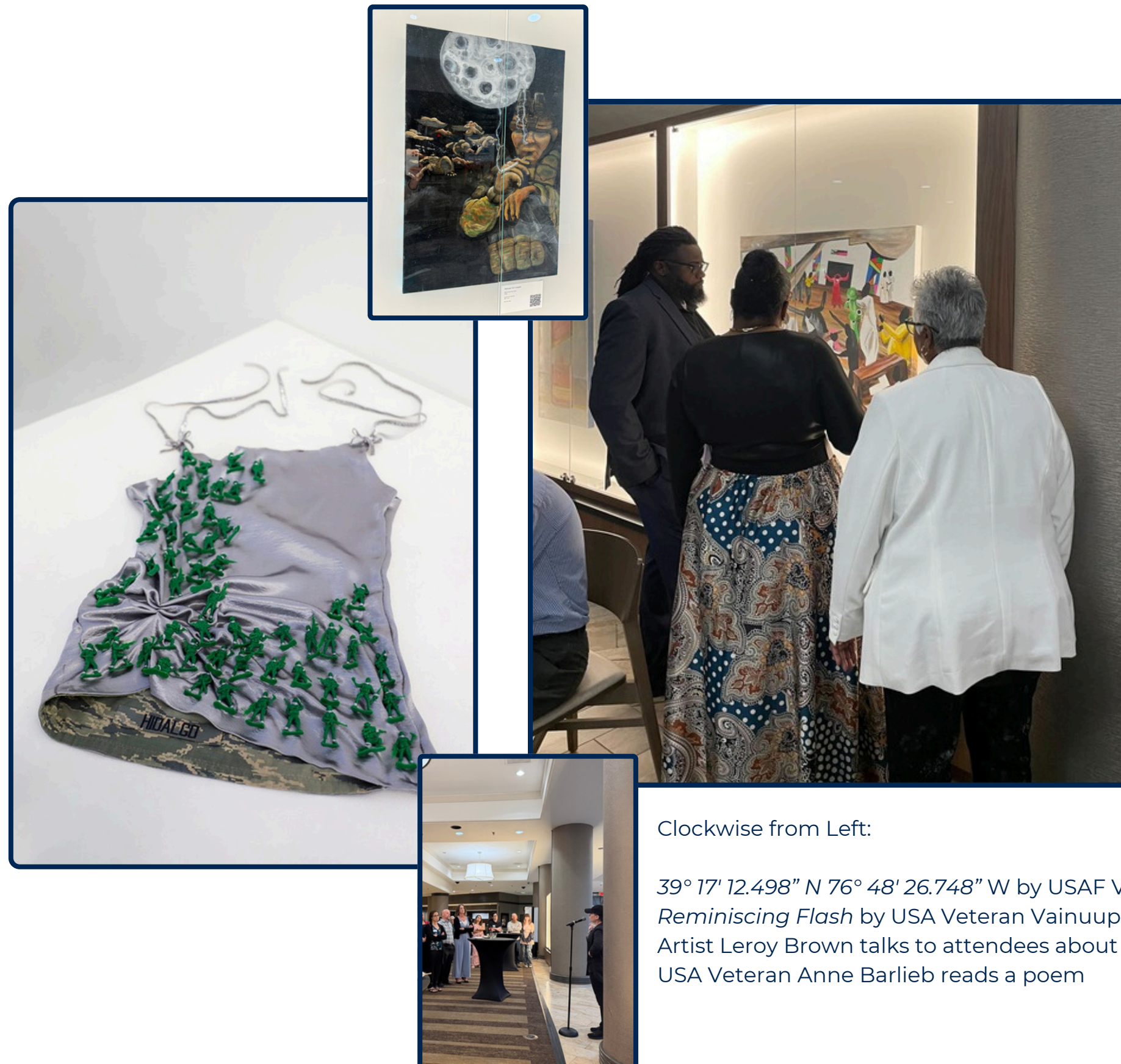
In October 2025, we launched Writing in the Arena, a program for military men.

The program uses the tested and proven curriculum of our More Than One Story program for women and non-binary veterans.

Both are monthly programs using live, interactive online art and creative writing workshops held over several weeks to create “Virtual Community Centers”. Participants in each of these programs attend an orientation and complete a pre-survey comprised of validated survey questions and are surveyed on a regular basis. Research support is provided by the AMES Research Center at Kennesaw State University.

Hilton Mark Center Exhibition Series

In November of 2025 we launched our partnership with Hilton Alexandria Mark Center with the opening reception of Warrior: From Survival to Creation, an exhibition of artwork by veterans from the Mission Belonging artist community. Hung in the lobby of the Hilton Alexandria Mark Center, directly across from one of the largest military office buildings in the capital region, this partnership brings art that speaks to the experiences of veterans to military leaders. Changed twice yearly, with receptions held in November and May, the exhibition is curated by artist, veteran, and Mission Belonging facilitator Valerie Acosta-González.



Clockwise from Left:

39° 17' 12.498\" N 76° 48' 26.748\" W by USAF Veteran Leslie Hidalgo
Reminiscing Flash by USA Veteran Vainuupo Avegalio
Artist Leroy Brown talks to attendees about his work
USA Veteran Anne Barlieb reads a poem

Program Partners



The Steven A. Cohen
Military Family Clinic
at Easterseals



our team

Our small operations team works with our board, advisory board, partner organizations, and faculty to keep our community connected and growing.

In 2025 we welcomed Haley Bannister and Adrian Ayala to our operations team.



**Seema
Reza**
Chief
Executive



**Ashy
Palliparambil**
Director of
Programs



**Ben
Weakley**
Director of
Development



**Haley
Bannister**
Programs &
Outreach
Coordinator



**Rob
Haney**
Marketing &
Comms. Manager



Adrian Ayala
WITA Program
Manager



Alexis Laryea
MTOS Program
Manager

2025 board of directors

Mission Belonging's executive board is composed of veterans from 4 branches of service, military family members, and accomplished contemporary artists.



Alleria
Stanley



Colin
McKee



Amelia
Bane



Joe
Merritt



Seema
Reza



Amanda
Kelly

advisory board

Our Advisory Board includes remarkable, dedicated leaders in philanthropy, industry, military and veterans issues, and mental health.



Anselm
Beach



Akhil
Iyer



Christiana
Musk

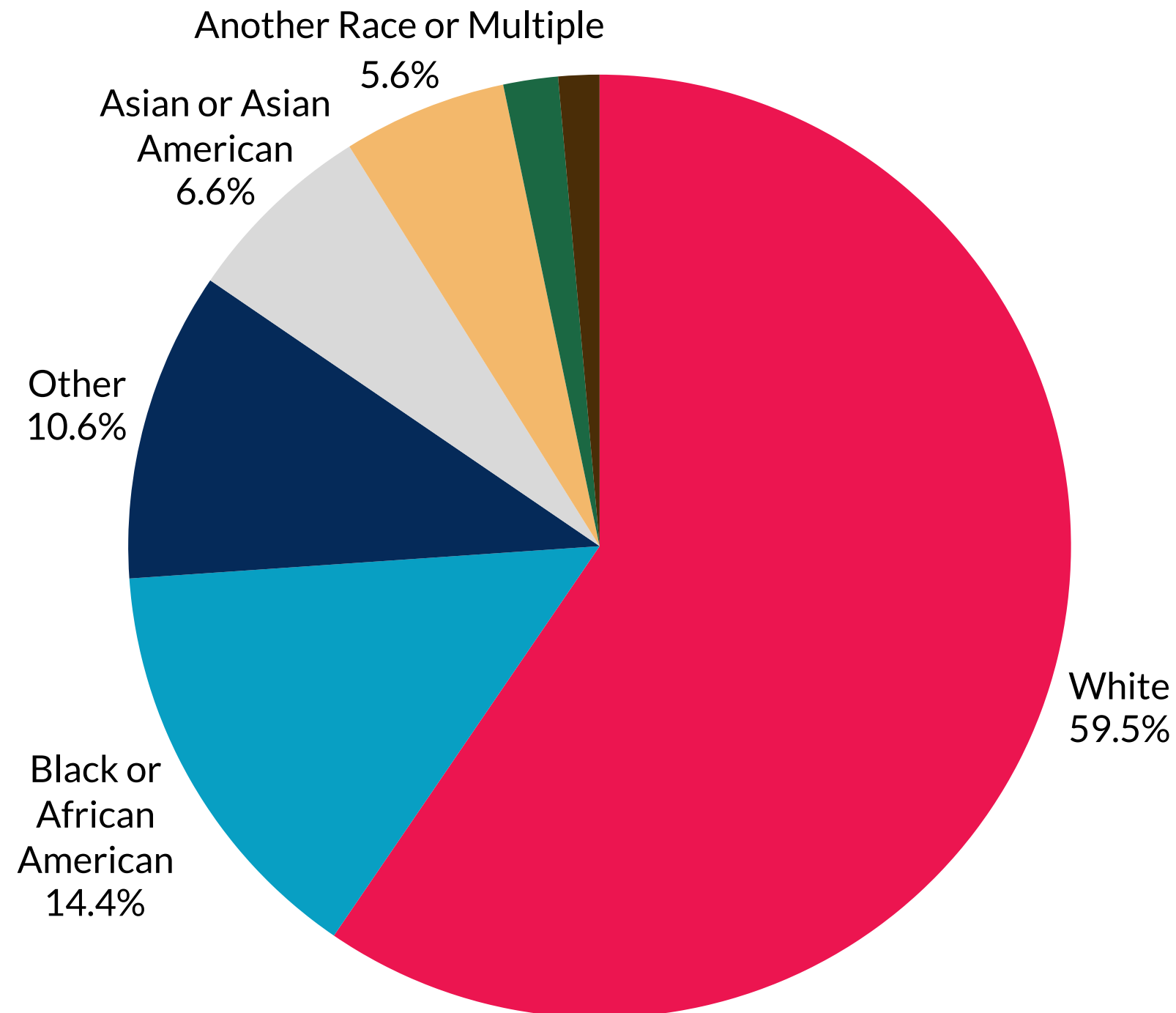
our model



our community

When people tell us how they feel, we believe them. It is central to everything we do. The diversity of our participants closely mirrors the diversity of the broader American population.

OVER
5,000
UNIQUE
PARTICIPANTS



TOTAL SURVEY
3,000+
RESPONSES

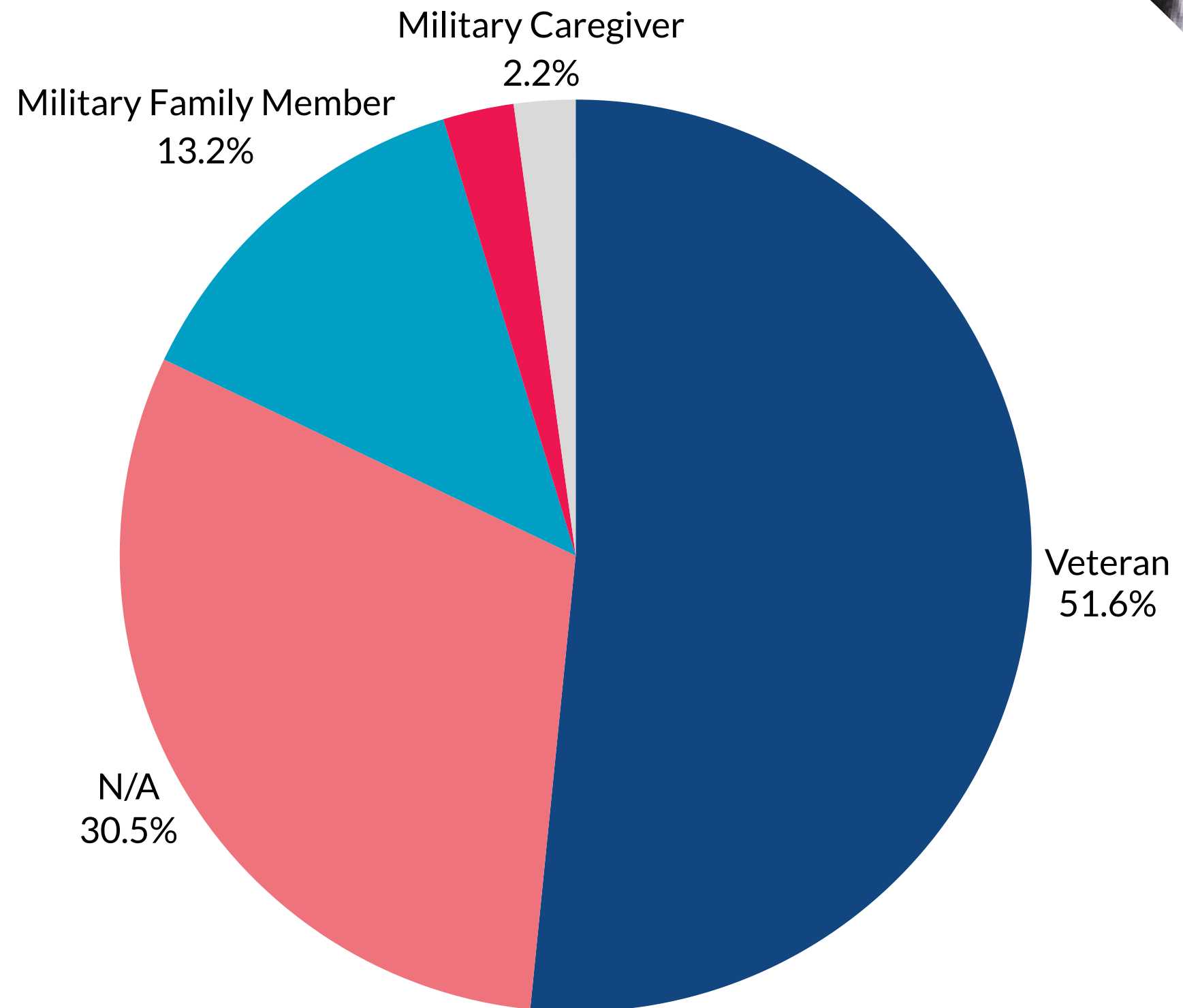
our community

When people tell us how they feel, we believe them.
It is central to everything we do.

Our programs bring Veterans &
military-connected people
together with the citizens they
served.

49% of program participants
are civilians.

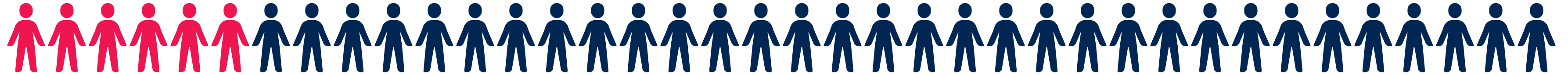
The combination of all
populations is what makes our
community so special.



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our programs are effective

DATA FROM MORE THAN ONE STORY: VIRTUAL COMMUNITY CENTER FOR WOMEN & NONBINARY VETERANS



6 in 38 reported suicidal ideations before MTOS



Only 1 in 38 reported suicidal ideations after 1 year of MTOS

Participants experiencing suicidal ideations reduced

from **15%** *to* **> 3%**

"Learning how to tell my own story saved my life."

— Alexis Laryea, Army Veteran, More Than One Story participant, and now Program Manager of MTOS

Alexis came home from Afghanistan partially blind and newly diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, having just lost her sister and grandmother. She started in a Mission Belonging art class drawing stick figures. Today, she runs the program that helped her find belonging.

"I don't have to try to hide anything, I don't have to make myself be more than I am."

Alexis' Story is the Mission Belonging Story

She started with stick figures. The program met her exactly where she was.

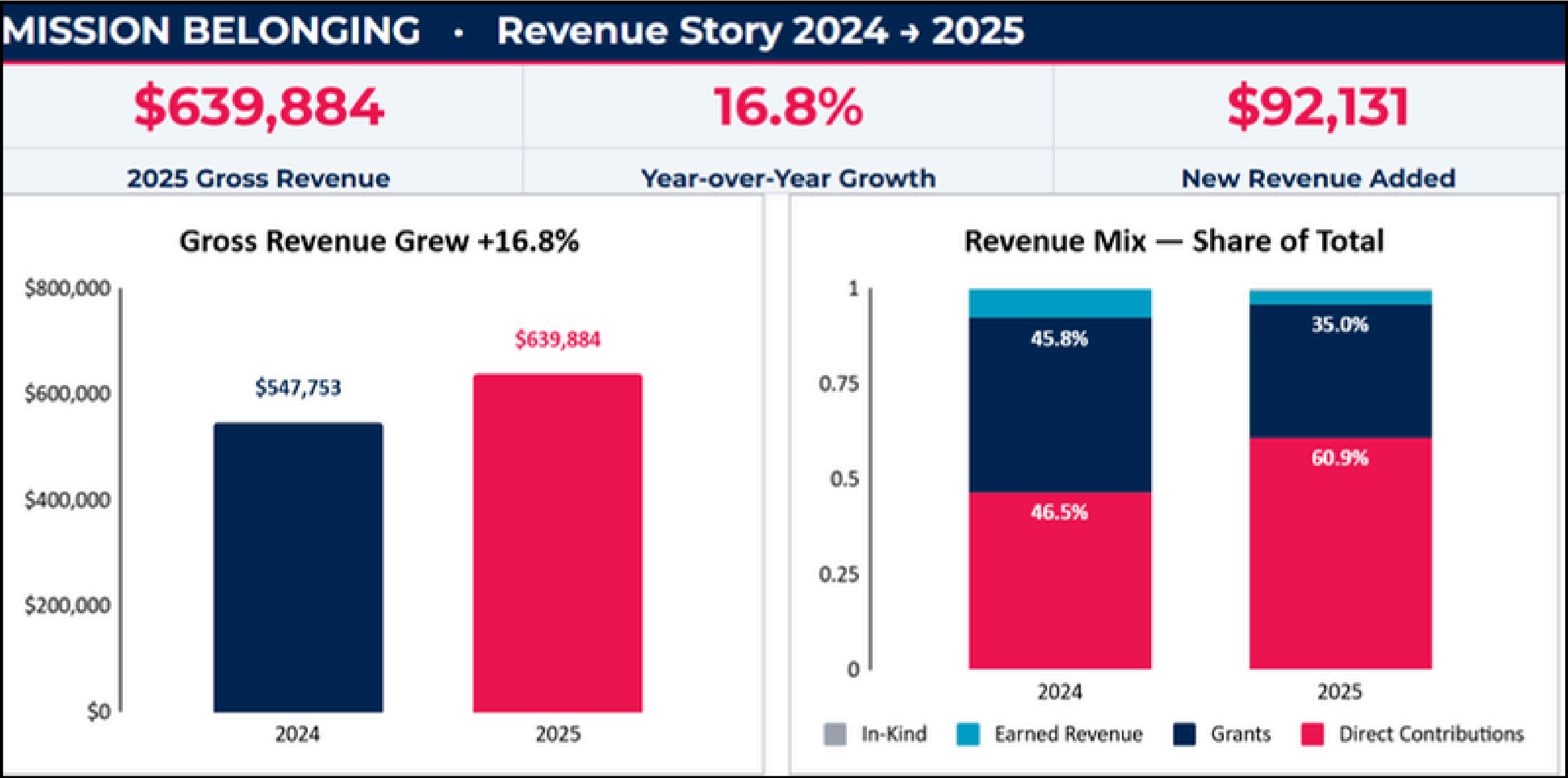
Creative expression gave her a way back into her own life — new medications, physical therapy, and a graduate degree followed.

She is now a licensed counselor, a nationally certified counselor (NCC), and the Program Manager of the very program that changed her life.



funding

Revenue grew almost 17% from 2024 to 2025 as we continued to diversify funding sources. Increases in individual, corporate, foundation / trust, and other organization direct giving, as well as non-government grants, offset a decline in government grants due to lost federal funding.



Funders & Partners



STRATHMORE



The Steven A. Cohen
Military Family Clinic
at Easterseals



Mission Belonging is deeply grateful for the support from these funders and organizations. To have partners who witness the impact and understand how it restores and inspires the people we serve is a privilege, and we take great pride in the opportunity to do this work alongside them.

in 2026 we will

Ensuring our sustainability and pacing our growth to match our capacity is at the top of our list of goals for 2026.

We will also prioritize building partnerships where we collaboratively advance the field of knowledge around what community-based expressive arts and writing can do to counter loneliness and social isolation.



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REACH MORE COMMUNITIES

Expanding partnerships with best-in-class non-profits, increasing special program offerings and extending our reach into new communities to meet new veterans and service members continues to be a priority for Mission Belonging.

FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY

With a shift away from federal funding, we will pursue program sponsorships, grant writing, innovative fundraising initiatives, and relationship building with new funders. We are committed to finding the right partners to help us keep our programs free, high quality, and accessible. Ensuring that our values, planning, and processes are well-documented and easily understood across the organization will prepare us for challenges and opportunities we can't predict as we grow.



INCREASE IN PERSON EXPERIENCES

We believe the future is hybrid. Our annual Day of Belonging and other live events give our community opportunities to connect with each other in person, having new art experiences, and strengthening their bonds in real life. We will continue to support in-person partnerships and community events for tabling outreach to increase awareness and participant recruitment.

ADVANCE THE FIELD

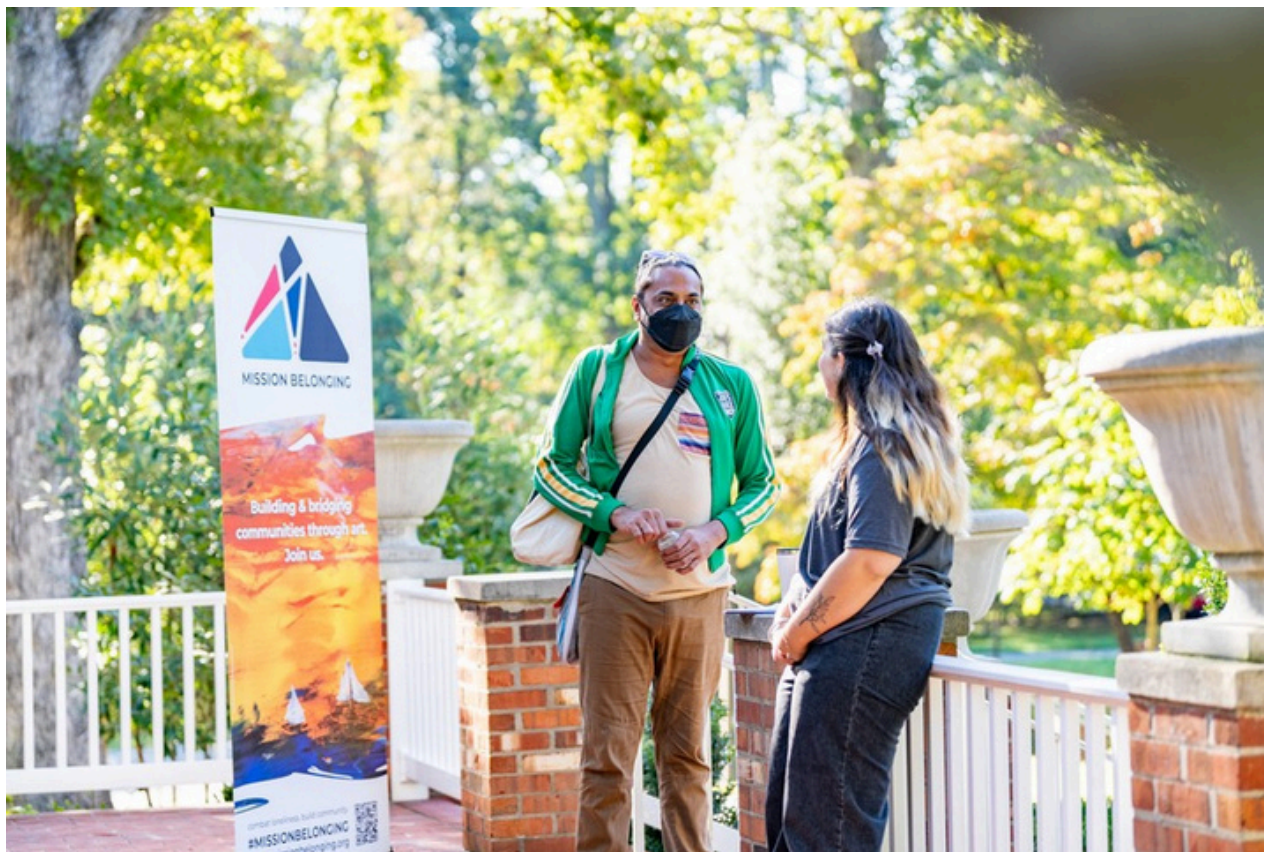
With partial funding from a VA Suicide Prevention grant and a partnership with AMES Research Center at Kennesaw State University and USUHS, our first published research opens the door for us to more deeply understand the impact of art and poetry on loneliness and belonging. More research partnerships will allow us to build and share the knowledge necessary to bring this work to more people who need it."



learn more & get involved

See our calendar of events [here!](#)

[Browse artwork made by our community members here!](#)



[Contact Us](#)

[Donate](#)



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HIDDEN PAGES