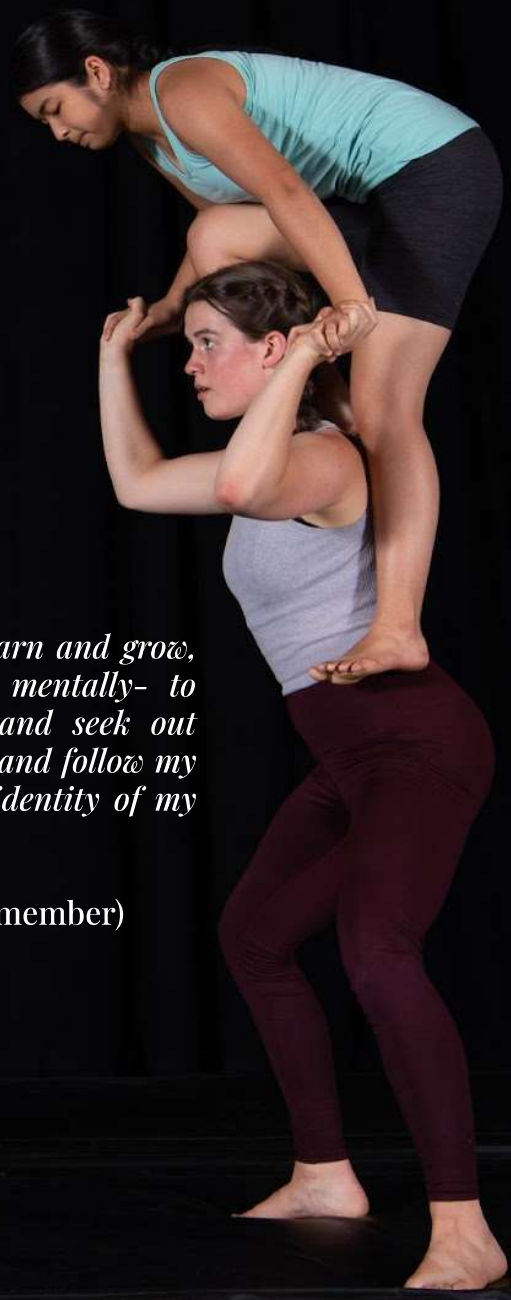




Echo Theater Company

“Annual” Report

May 2022 – December 2023



“Echo made space for me. Physically- to learn and grow, get stronger and make connections, and mentally- to evolve, be creative, follow my passions, and seek out opportunities. I was encouraged to listen to and follow my impulses; that helped me to step into the identity of my authentic self.”

- Liv Allison (current Zig Zag, youth board member)

STAFF & BOARD

Leadership

Wendy Cohen
Education Director

Phil Busse
Executive Director

Production & Creative

Aaron Wheeler-Kay
Creative Manager

Drew Simpson
Production Coordinator

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Brianna Kalk
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Joe Eichenauer
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Ned Hayes
Director

Marnie Glickman
Director

Liv Allison
Youth Representative

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Program Manager,
Echo Theater

Sequoia Allen
Program Manager,
Echo West

Josie Mae
Outreach Manager

Destiny Thompson
Front Office Coordinator,
Echo Theater

Hannah Raschke
Front Office Coordinator,
Echo West

Emma Christensen
Human Resources Manager

Susan Elshire
Financial Manager

Amy Stewart
Marketing Coordinator

The past 18 months at Echo Theater have been busy and productive, with far-reaching changes and advancements for the organization. This “annual” report covers the past year-and-half—a period of time since a change in the organization’s leadership model and the hiring of a new Executive Director, and also covering a period of time for which there was not an annual report.

Overall, the health of Echo is strong!

The report documents primary changes to the following topics:

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Prepared by Executive Director Phil Busse, Education Director Wendy Cohen & Echo Theater Company’s Board of Directors; December 18, 2023.

“Time spent at Echo gave me cartwheels, stress management, how to craft a compelling story, mindfulness, tap dance, love for my body, and most of all the profound power of collaboration. As a young adult, I feel prepared to enter the world with the excitement, compassion and leadership skills I learned at Echo Theater. This empowerment sticks with me even after moving across the country.”

- Sabina Oldham (Zig Zag alum)



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Organizational Personnel and Policies

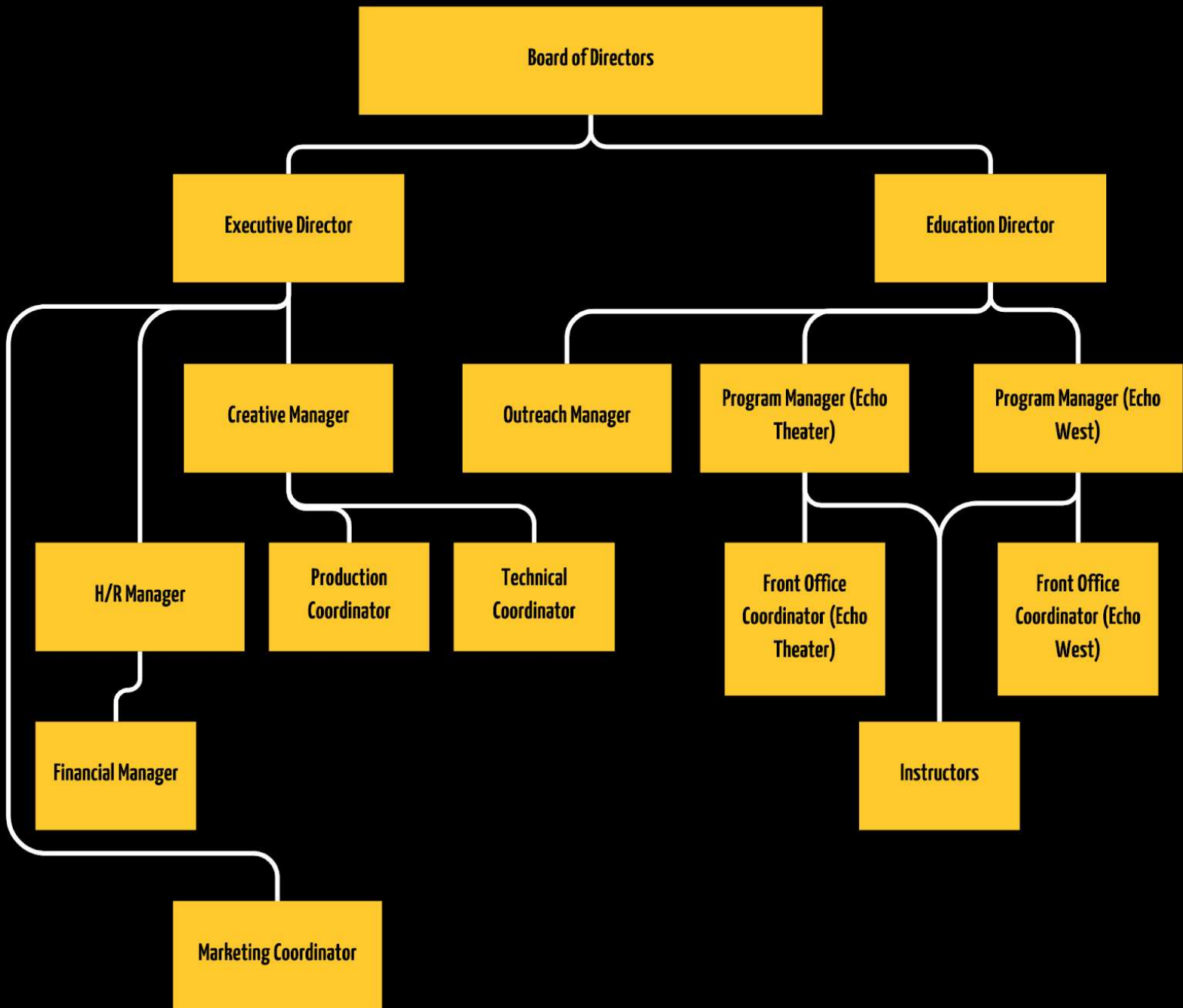
New positions, new wage rates, new organizational chart!

In May 2022, Echo enacted some major changes—a few Board members moved from Portland and changed the Board’s composition; a new Executive Director was hired; and a new format of co-directing was set up, with the new Executive Director Phil Busse and long-standing Education Director Wendy Cohen sharing leadership responsibilities.

Adding to those changes, in July 2022, a new opportunity presented itself: The Board of Directors for The Circus Project, a 15-year old organization that provided circus arts classes, voted to dissolve the organization. Over the subsequent month, Echo’s Board of Directors considered an opportunity to take over the remaining four years of The Circus Project’s lease at its west-side location, and acquire all of the equipment there. After deliberation about the opportunities and challenges, in September 2022, Echo’s Board of Directors approved the acquisition—and in doing so, nearly doubled Echo’s annual budget. Echo’s new space, “Echo West,” opened October 2022.

In turn, the expansion also presented an opportunity to restructure Echo staff such that daily operations and programming at each location—Echo Theater on the east-side and the newly christened Echo West on the west-side—is now overseen by a Program Manager, and each venue staffs a corresponding Front Office Coordinator, allowing us to provide a welcoming and supportive environment for students and staff on both sides of the river seven days a week.

Organizational Chart - November 2023



In February 2023, Executive Director Phil Busse submitted an extensive grant request to Murdock for three-year support of a new position, an Outreach Manager. In August 2023, Echo secured that grant, paving the way for increased capacity for Echo’s outreach programming and supporting Echo’s efforts to reach a more diverse community of underserved students.

Echo also has restructured and expanded its production and performance team. At the January 2023 “Resolutions” meeting, the Board and organization leadership identified primary goals for the upcoming calendar year, including creating a Creative Manager position and supporting more performances. A few weeks later, Aaron Wheeler-Kay moved into that position—and subsequently, a part-time Production Coordinator was on-boarded to oversee logistics for performances. The increase in capacity has led to 40% more performances and greater efficiency, making the new positions nearly self-sustaining.

Furthermore, with increased financial stability, Echo was able to address depressed wage rates by giving overdue raises to long-time staff, nearly doubling the salaries of core employees. Other staff members were given no less than 25% wage increases. These measures served to address staff retention issues by providing more livable wages. In September 2023, we created a part-time Human Resources position, and in December 2023, we unveiled an updated Staff Manual.

Additionally, the Board has added four new members, including a youth representative: Ned Hayes, Marnie Glickman, Joe Eichenauer and youth representative, Liv Allison.

Facility & Equipment

Inside and outside Echo Theater looks different!

During summer 2023, Echo underwent some major renovations, including a long-awaited installation of an air-conditioning system. With dozens of days over 90 during the summer, the AC allows the facility to remain comfortable—and to stay open for programming. During summer 2022, Echo was forced to close programming for several days, losing roughly \$1000 each day. Those days are gone! The AC system will pay for itself in less than three years.

As well, during the summer, the front lobby and office were remodeled, including: installing a second, ADA-compliant bathroom; opening up natural light for the office space; and building a box office and student check-in station. All told, these improvements were a major investment, just shy of \$100,000—and remodeling was done with respect to the history of the Echo Theater, including framing past show posters and mounting them on the wall in the lobby. Behind the scenes, Echo also tidied up the tech booth.

With large glass doors, Echo's lobby had been exposed—both to the morning sun that overheats the lobby during the summer, and also to prying eyes in the evenings. A creative and aesthetic option presented itself in early 2023: Morel Ink, a local and women-owned company, offered to print door-sized stickers for the front windows in exchange for a movie night at Echo Theater. Those stickers serve the dual purpose of marketing Echo's programming and filtering light into the lobby, keeping the space comfortable.

Mural

In an effort to bring attention to Echo's playful culture and vibrant programming, we took on a campaign to place a mural on the street-facing wall of the building in July 2022. Through a juried process, we selected a local artist to produce a colorful image that showcases interdependence. Echo received a permit from the City of Portland and a grant from RACC to complete the project, as well as funds from an in-house Kickstarter campaign.



Street Seats

In autumn 2022, Echo secured a building permit from PBOT to transform two parking spots in front of the building into a covered seating structure, our so-called "Street Seats." Construction of a raised-and-roofed platform has provided shade during snack breaks in the summer months, and shelter from rain for waiting parents during the winter months.

Programming

Some things old. Some things new.



Echo West

The big news in the past 18 months has been the expansion of Echo's tent to include a west-side venue. When The Circus Project dissolved in the summer of 2022, Echo was able to take over the lease of their fully equipped circus training studio in the Pearl District—and started programming at Echo West in October 2022, including on-going support for The Circus Project's youth training company, Brio.

The acquisition of a new space has posed both opportunities and challenges. The number of classes and camps offered by Echo has increased from 250 annually to more than 400; correspondingly, participants have increased from an estimated 4,000 to 6,000*, providing a 40 percent increase in tuition revenue. In Fall 2022, Echo doubled its staff, including a steady 25 part-time instructors; with all of the hiring, onboarding, training and management, it was a busy, chaotic and exciting time of growth, experimentation, and problem-solving.

With this new space and new instructors, Echo also has expanded its curriculum to include Chinese Pole, Cyr Wheel, Juggling, Balance, Aerial Yoga, Physical Comedy, Contact Improvisation, and more diverse aerial and acrobatics options for students of all ages and abilities. Increased capacity also led to more opportunities for teacher training and team-building events, such as: “Making the Container: Access and Inclusion in Movement Classes;” Summer Camp Teacher Training; Heads Up Concussion Training Course; and a CPR certification course.

* This number indicates the entire number of participants, but not necessarily unique participants, as some individuals may attend more than one class or workshop.

Youth Performance Groups

Youth performance ensembles also have thrived during the last year-and-a-half, with 15 current Tik Toks (ages 8 – 14), 17 Zig Zags (ages 14 – 18) and 13 Brio company members (ages 9 – 19). Each group trains together at least twice each week, building physical skills such as acrobatics, aerial, dance and juggling, as well as social emotional skills such as collaboration, trust-building, ensemble story-telling, and resilience. In Spring 2023, each group also produced and performed an original circus theater show to sold out audiences, showcasing their performance skills as well as their creativity, strength, and interdependence. The Zig Zags' production of *Della Clementine's Guide to Getting Lost* was the culmination of two years of collaboration and included original songs, hand-made costumes, papercraft, and a 60-page script. In addition to five public performances, *Della* played to 300 students from neighborhood schools.

In August 2023, 15 members of the Zig Zags and Brio traveled to Seattle for the American Youth Circus Organization Festival, a nation-wide gathering of youth circus performers. It was a wonderful opportunity to take classes from prominent circus instructors from around the U.S., meet like-minded people, perform for a new audience, and blend the performance groups at Echo West and Echo Theater! At the festival, Echo hosted workshops in Access and Inclusion, Ensemble-building, and Contact Improvisation; all which were unique at the event, well received and well attended.



“There are many meaningful layers to our daughter’s experience at Echo. She was not drawn to groups or teams that emphasized conformity and competition. Her experiences at Echo have prioritized collaboration, and have embraced and celebrated her individuality. She’s been coached to become a skilled and strong performer. And also seamlessly guided to grow as a caring, resourceful, aware and effective group member.”

– Gina Allison (parent of long-time Zig Zag, Liv)

Performances and Events

Echo has traditionally hosted several shows each year, including a bi-annual Adult Student Showcase as an opportunity for instructors and students to celebrate growth and creativity, and springtime shows from our youth performance ensembles, The Tik Toks and The Zig Zags. Additionally, Echo has rented the theater to community organizations and used a “co-production model” to support emerging artists by sharing the production burden and making the process more accessible.

The creation of a Creative Manager position in January 2023 and a Production Coordinator position in March 2023 has added fuel to the fire! In 2022, Echo hosted 24 nights of events; 10 self-produced shows from its performance groups, and another 14 from co-produced events, such as Acrobatic Conundrum and a live-scored Buster Keaton film. During 2023, Echo nearly doubled performances, hosting 40 nights of shows—a lineup including the “traditional” shows, as well as Tempos Contemporary Circus, ODDtease, Puppet Slam, The Follies, Kickstand Comedy, and a one-woman show, “Naked at My Age.” In addition, in late 2022, Echo acquired an OLCC license for events, and a beer sponsorship from, first from Migration Brewery and Rev Nat’s Cidery and, from July 2023 onward, from Gigantic Brewery and Portland Cider. The concession sales have been a welcoming addition for patrons’ show-going experiences, as well as a steady source of additional revenue for Echo, and additional wage opportunities for instructors who work shows as servers.

As well, in April 2023, Creative Manager Aaron Wheeler-Kay collaborated with three other artists to produce *Gruff*, a staged reimagining of the Billy Goats Gruff folktale. Inna Richards, a Belarussian immigrant, upcycled Thousands of feet of VHS tape into costumes, curtains and flower stems. Paul Evansmith composed original music and soundscapes incorporating nature recordings, sequenced orchestrations and live music. And, Bevin Victoria, a Portland -based multi-ethnic/First Nations (Mi’kmaq) performer and director contributed singing, composition, storytelling, direction and dramaturgy. With Wheeler-Kay contributing tap, aerial and acrobatic choreography/direction, *Gruff* reinterpreted a classic folktale through a lens of inclusion, non-violence and environmental justice. *Gruff* enjoyed a six show run.

In September 2023, Wheeler-Kay also began a pilot project, Common Thread. A response to a community demand for adult pre-professional training and performance opportunities, Common Thread is a group of 12 performers chosen from 26 auditionees, including five members of Echo's teaching and office staff. The new ensemble will present an original show in April 2024.

In October 2023, Wheeler-Kay began co-writing *Rella* with Bevin Victoria, a singer, actor, acrobat and folkloric dancer who co-directed and starred in Echo's April show, *Gruff*. *Rella* is an original musical retelling of Cinderella and is scheduled to premier in Fall 2024. Based on Victoria's experiences as a multiethnic person, *Rella* explores themes of self-realization, athletics and arts hierarchies, and the role of community in supporting marginalized identities. This show will bring together aerial arts and folkloric dance traditions with original songs derived from pop, musical theater and Arabic influences.

In November 2023, Wheeler-Kay began directing two additional pilot projects, Pop Rock and FutureCraft (working title), which center Disabled adults seeking support in creating original performance work. Both ensembles are part of a long term vision to cultivate a Disability-led training and performance company.

Echo West also has been utilized as a venue for performances, including the first Schrodinger's Circus, an "open mic" showcase in which performers workshop new material and receive feedback from peers. Schrodinger's Circus is slated to become a quarterly opportunity for performers to present emerging circus and performance work.

“For three wonderful years, Echo has been a part of my family’s life. Until recently our child struggled with severe anxieties, often coming through in debilitating fear to learn anywhere outside of the home, and with anyone but parents. To feel safe in a new environment with new people, she wanted to visit the space and meet teachers — with a parent. Because she needed a slower introduction with parental support, everywhere turned us down saying it just didn’t fit into their class systems. While we understood the need for boundaries, we had a child desperate to play and learn physical arts, but nowhere to go. Then we found Echo. Teachers and staff welcomed our child without a moment of hesitation, not a brow lifted about her fear or stress. Everyone was patient, encouraging, and loving, never drawing unwanted attention to her anxieties. Slow but steady, our nervous and fearful child grew more hopeful, playful, patient, strong, and brave — socially, emotionally, mentally, and physically. While her anxieties are not gone, they are now approachable, and no longer so scary or limiting. At Echo, my darling child has found support, acceptance, confidence, mentors, guides, friends, community, herself.”

- Elizabeth Holloway-Fisher (parent of new Tik Tok, Rose)



Marketing & Public Interface

New technology. New look. New functions.

Before the beginning of Fall Term 2022, Program Manager Sequoia Allen led a far-reaching campaign to switch Echo's registration platform to Uplifter. For the past decade, Echo had used a platform called ArtsPeople for class registration, tickets and donor tracking. There were two motivating factors for the switch from ArtsPeople: First, the cost was less; and second, the class registration functions were more user-friendly and streamlined, including automated waitlists, payment plans, and class credit management. With the increased size of the school, this modernized registration system has been invaluable.

Ticketing for shows also was switched to a locally-owned company, Ticket Tomato. In addition to being more customer-friendly, the platform only charges one fee per purchase (as opposed to per ticket fees) and saves patrons money.

Perhaps the biggest change was a new website! Over the course of three months during the winter of 2022/23, Echo staff worked collaboratively with a local designer to reconfigure the website's structure to better reflect programming, and to update its look. The result is an easy-to-navigate website, as well as one that is more responsive and contains more information.

In April 2023, Echo also hired a part-time Marketing Coordinator, and has created more consistent branding and social media schedules.

Financial

Expanded Bases of Support

Although COVID and in-person restrictions from 2020 and onward presented challenges for offering in-person classes, Echo set up programming and financial protocols such that the organization arrived at the end of the pandemic in strong financial health, with nearly \$150,000 in reserve.

Echo's prudent financial stewardship resulted in "surpluses" that have provided Echo with opportunities to offer across-the-board raises; to make building improvements; to explore new creative opportunities; and, to make investments towards sustainability, such as, in March 2023, Echo invested \$200,000 in a 13-month interest-bearing CD as a means to create long-term financial sustainability..

Individual donors: Widening the base of support

Echo has long enjoyed support from its patrons, and over the past 18 months, Echo has continued to expand that base with specific campaigns; a Kickstarter campaign in July 2022 (for mural) and again in April 2023 (for remodel) found support from more than 50 donors. For the first time, Echo also was accepted as a participant in *Willamette Week's* 2022 Give Guide, an end-of-year opportunity to reach a wide-ranging audience; more than 70 unique donors gave a collective \$10,000, many new to Echo's giving. Echo participated in the Give Guide again in 2023.

Grants: Expanding artistic and outreach support

Echo continues to receive annual support from RACC (roughly \$20,000) and OAC (roughly \$5,000), but also expanded its base of foundational support.

In July 2022, Echo secured a two-year grant from Miller Foundation (\$30,000 each year), and in January 2023 was awarded an additional \$20,000 to support Echo's expansion to Echo West.

To support outreach programming, Echo received funding from two regional foundations: Autzen Foundation (\$7500) and Spirit Mountain Community Fund (\$5000). In August 2023, Echo secured a three-year grant (\$120,000) from Murdock Trust to support the newly created position of Outreach Manager.

Grants

M. J. Murdock Charitable Trust



Regional Arts & Culture Council



James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation



Spirit Mountain Community Fund



Autzen Foundation



Oregon Arts Commission



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Michael Wishnie
Amanda Wheeler-Kay
Barbara Fishleder
Steven Wilker
Dev Devarajan
Mike Lonergan
Jeffrey Sher

Looking forward to next year!

