
The People's Music School
1976 -
2026
FIFTY YEARS OF
DARING TO PLAY
2025-26 YEAR IN REVIEW

**The People's Music School is the largest completely tuition-free music school serving Chicago metropolitan area children, focusing on removing barriers to access for students who otherwise would not have the benefits of intensive music instruction.**



# Dear Community,

In 1976, Dr. Rita Simó opened the doors to The People's Music School in Uptown, bringing her vision of a completely free music school to life. A Dominican immigrant and a Juilliard-trained pianist, Rita had dreamt of having her own place to teach and share the joy of learning music with others. Despite all odds, her tenacity made that dream a reality that endures five decades later.

Since our founding, TPMS has provided free, intensive music education to thousands of students across Chicago who face financial barriers to accessing music education. We're not only building quality musicians, we're helping to create confident, capable young people. It's something we've been doing for 50 years—100% tuition-free.



This year, our programming reached 800 students representing over 55 ZIP codes. We delivered over 100,000 hours of intensive music education, with classes and ensembles led by 70+ phenomenal teaching artists. 100% of our seniors graduated and are pursuing post-secondary education, compared to 65% at CPS.

Our students continue to demonstrate just how far this investment can take them. Students like Zechariah, who just this year advanced into the SLAM @ Greater South Side piano program, performed at our Big Night gala, and received a scholarship to attend Berklee Aspire: Five-Week Music Performance Intensive over the summer.

This annual report offers a look into what truly sets our school apart. Inside, you'll find highlights from a remarkable anniversary year—student achievements, alumni success stories, family testimonials, and community celebrations. Together, they reflect our steadfast commitment to our mission: providing access to the benefits of an intensive music education, for students all across Chicago.

In service,

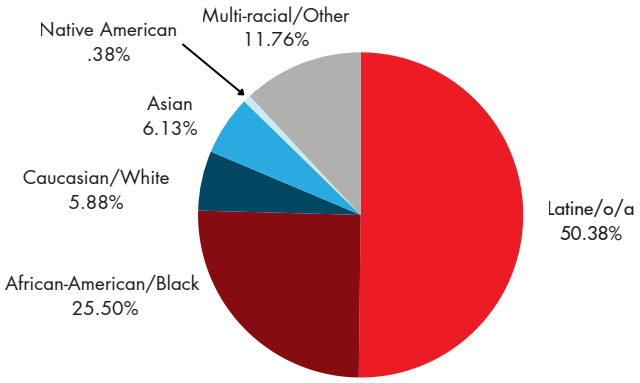


**MIRIAM OWENS**
President & CEO
The People's Music School

## OUR MISSION

Our mission is to deliver access to the benefits of high-quality, tuition-free music education. Through intensive instruction and performance, our students achieve excellence in music that transfers to other areas in life. They grow musically, socially, emotionally and intellectually, and develop a foundation of responsibility, self-esteem, resilience and purpose.





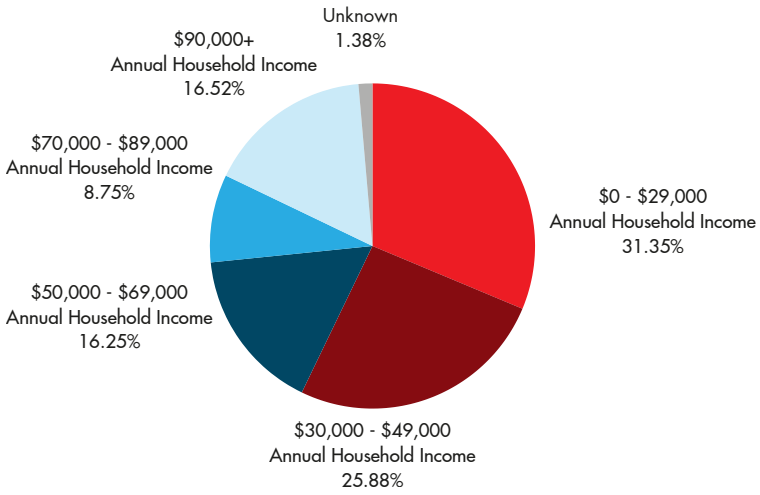

## RACIAL DIVERSITY

## OUR PROGRAMS

The People's Music School (TPMS) focuses our work where need is greatest, providing rigorous after-school music programming to 800 students who have financial barriers to access. TPMS's original community school in Uptown has persisted for over 50 years. Over time, we have opened programs in Chicago's underserved communities to expand student access and increase our portfolio of sites. Through the cultivation of musical learning and growth, our ultimate goal is to empower students with crucial life skills, support socio-emotional development, and provide transformational opportunities made possible through music education. TPMS also strengthens local communities by geographically working in the communities that we serve.

Students receive on average four hours of intensive after-school music instruction weekly, including instrumental instruction, ensemble instruction, music theory, and performance opportunities. This degree of intensive music education produces valuable life skills, such as growth mindset, resilience, and improved literacy and math skills.[1] TPMS's intensive after-school music education programs are designed to drive these benefits and to eliminate barriers to access, including financial, geographic, linguistic, and cultural barriers.

[1] "Music-based mentoring and academic improvement in high-poverty elementary schools. Journal of Youth Development."; "Planting the Seeds: Orchestral Music Education as a Context for Fostering Growth Mindsets. Front. Psychol."




## SOCIOECONOMIC DIVERSITY



Young students at The People's Music School begin their musical journeys with **General Music**, a program that teaches the foundations of music designed for elementary students in first grade.

**Music Theory** curriculum at The People's Music School trains students to think critically and apply new tools for creative self-expression. All students take a rigorous annual theory exam to assess progress.

**Lessons**, both private and group, offer students the opportunity to refine their skills, nurture their creativity, and demonstrate musical excellence. All students participate in an annual solo jury assessment to assess their musical progression.

**Ensembles** offer our students the opportunity to collaborate as young musicians, learn from their peers, and perform for live audiences. Every student has multiple opportunities to perform annually.

Our **Service, Leadership, Artistry, and Mentorship (SLAM) honors program** gives advanced, older students the opportunity to build on their skills of discipline, teamwork, critical thinking and self-assurance and apply them as they face new challenges and experience new opportunities.

**800**
students enrolled

**70+**
teaching artists

**94%**
BIPOC students

**4**
hours on average of weekly programming per student

**21**
instruments taught

**102,400**
learning hours per year

**1,389**
individual donors supporting TPMS

**100%**
high school graduation rate

**5,701**
hours of service provided by families

**100%**
have financial barriers to accessing music education

# HIGHLIGHTS FROM OUR 50TH YEAR

We celebrated **50 years of The People's Music School**, marking five decades of providing access to the benefits of a high-quality, 100% tuition-free music education for Chicago's young people. Scan the QR code to watch our 50th Anniversary video!

We enrolled **800 students** across **4 program sites**, with intensive instruction provided by **70+ teaching artists**.

Over the course of the year, we offered **30+ performance opportunities** and teamed up with nearly 20 musicians, artists, and organizations, including **Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Civic Orchestra of Chicago, Grant Park Music Festival, Chicago Blues Fest, Third Coast Percussion, D-Composed, Àkójọpọ̀ Music Foundation, Crossing Borders Music**, and more, to provide enriching musical experiences.



We held our **Greater South Side Grand Opening** at 5410 S State Street, the first time since the mid-1990s that we made an investment to launch our own physical space.

We sustained a **73% year-over-year student retention rate**, with data showing that the longer students remain in the program, the deeper and more sustainable the impact.

We upheld the pillar of **phenomenal teaching**, offering over **20 hours of professional development opportunities** to teaching artists and building our library of diverse teaching resources.






**We raised over $825,000 at our Big Night: 50 Years of Daring to Play gala**, posthumously honoring The People's Music School's founder Dr. Rita Simó.

We welcomed **4 new members to our Board of Directors**: Sally Cohen, Eric Holder, Josh Lebovitz, and David Michael.

We secured **5 new major funding partnerships** and celebrated renewed relationships with lapsed individual donors and institutional funders.



Over the course of the year, our **families contributed 5,701 hours of community service**, allowing our programming to run seamlessly and reflecting a commitment to community that has defined our organization since its founding.



We closed out the school year with our **Performapaloozathon** concert series, featuring **59 student ensembles**. TPMS congratulated the **Class of 2026,** with a **100% high school graduation rate.**



We sent **26 Summer Ambassadors** to intensive summer music programs, including **Berklee Aspire: Five-Week Music Performance Intensive, GRAMMY Camp - Nashville, Madeline Island Chamber Music, Lawrence Summer Music Institute, Birch Creek, Merit Music Piano Summer Camp,** and **Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp.**

# Rita's Legacy, Still in Motion

**By Nalini Kotamraju, Ph.D.**



I'm a proud alum of The People's Music School. I attended People's from about age 14 to 18, taking piano lessons at first and then singing in the children's choir. I returned as a college student for an internship. Now, I serve on the Board of Directors, and my mother did as well. My family has had a two-generation involvement with the People's Music School.

Part of the reason that People's continues to be part of my life is because I feel grateful for the opportunity to have participated in what the school does and what it stands for. I firmly believe that music education should be free, and that people should have the opportunity to learn music, regardless of ability to pay. And I also recognize that People's has given me so much — the opportunity to grow, to meet people, to push myself, to conquer fears. And for me, that all started with Rita.

Rita Simó was a formidable presence in my entire adolescence and adulthood. She was stubborn like nobody's business, tenacious, and persistent. She was a role model of leadership, a terribly technophobic boss, and a relentless optimist. If you ever wanted to see Rita mad, you would start using words like "do-gooders" or "charity." Because that wasn't - and isn't - what The People's Music School is about. Rita understood that music matters, that it is foundational to the human experience. And for that reason, it was incredibly important that everyone has access to it.

I think Rita would be really impressed with where the music school is now, 50 years later, along lines she might never have thought. There are many things she would be so immensely proud of—that we're in so many geographic locations, that we're serving so many more children, and by extension, families and communities. I think she would be tickled pink that we've accomplished that, based on what she started in a former beauty parlor in Uptown.



*Nalini (left) stands with Rita at a reception for the newly opened Uptown Academy, c. 1995.*

But most importantly, we're still committed to—and we still provide—high-quality, tuition-free music education. We have amplified the number of children and adults' lives that we've touched. The need is still strong for free music education, especially at the quality at which we provide it.

That's Rita's legacy continued, and we're still doing it.

*Nalini Kotamraju, Ph.D. attended The People's Music School in the 1980s as a teen in the Uptown neighborhood. She serves on the Board of Directors and is a member of the Program Committee. She lives in Oakland, California.*



# The People's Music School is My Family

**By Freya Javier**

My name is Freya. I play cello and I was a student at The People's Music School for almost 8 years. I joined when I was in 5th grade at Hibbard Elementary in Albany Park. I can still remember when my mom decided to register me for the program on a whim. We were sitting in McDonald's and I begged her to let me quit.

Almost a decade later and I couldn't be more grateful that she made me stay. I truly mean it when I say this: The People's Music School is my family. I have countless memories of eating afterschool snacks while chatting with my friends in the Hibbard auditorium. I remember the silly pass-time games during group lessons with Mr. David or the "note-guessing" games with Ms. Claire, which I found surprisingly entertaining.

As I grew older and entered high school, I started to explore my passion for music. Like all things, I wanted to get better, so I practiced more. The more I practiced, the more opportunities came my way: private lessons, the ability to play advanced music, and the incredible summer programs I participated in. I attended Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp the summer after my Freshman year. A year later, I joined Blue Lake International, where I got to tour around France, Germany, and Poland with an orchestra. And now this summer, I have the honor of attending the Lawrence Summer Music Institute. It's still unbelievable that I've been given these opportunities.

Throughout it all, I've learned two major things. First, being part of a diverse community with access to quality music education is one of the most valuable things a human can have. The People's Music School accomplishes this in the best way possible – whether it be the smiles of the staff members that greet us, or the ability to look around your ensemble and see people who look like you. All these years, I truly felt like I was in a place that welcomed and supported me, all while giving me the resources to make my dreams possible. So for that, I want to give a big thank you to The People's Music School.

The second thing I learned was the importance of musical connection. A few months ago, me and a few other SLAM students were interviewed about our experience with the program. The topic of "musical thrill" came up, which refers to the feeling of connecting with a musical piece so strongly that you start to feel goosebumps. This shows up when you're watching a performance, performing a piece with others, or simply listening to music. I believe that feeling this feeling and connecting it to the deeper meanings behind a piece is crucial to being a good musician. It wasn't until I recognized this idea that my fears of performing in front of others decreased and my desire to dedicate time to purposeful practice increased.

So to the younger students or the students who have a couple more years of being in this program, I urge you to look for that passion - the reason why you're doing this. Because the hard work and discomfort is not for nothing.

*Freya Javier graduated from Von Steuben High School in May of 2026 and is a first-year at the University of Chicago, where she is excited to be studying the physical sciences and looks forward to pursuing undergraduate research opportunities. She plans to join the symphony orchestra and chamber ensemble to further fulfill her love of music.*

# How The People's Music School Inspired Anna Pastrana's Classical Music Career



Award-winning pianist and music educator Anna Pastrana is currently working on her Master's Degree in Piano Performance at Roosevelt University while teaching piano at Oak Park School of Music and Better World Music School. But long before graduate studies and teaching, Anna was a young pianist searching for a place to grow after moving from Moscow to Chicago at age 10. What she found was The People's Music School.

After auditioning with "Für Elise," Anna was accepted to the piano program at Uptown Academy. She remembers her piano teacher, Hulya Alpakin, fondly. "She absolutely shaped me as a musician and as a performer," Anna says. "Because of her, I got a lot of great opportunities."



*Anna performs piano alongside People's Music School classmates at an event in downtown Chicago.*

Even at a young age, Anna knew she was receiving a uniquely comprehensive music education. "The education that People's Music School was giving, I remember it had everything," she says. "Theory classes, vocal exercises, music history." She credits founder Rita Simó with setting the tone for the rigorous training she received. "I remember in my jury one year, Rita gave me good comments about playing with 'freedom' when playing Chopin. That stuck with me for a long time."

Looking back, Anna says TPMS prepared her for university-level music studies. "When you go to college, sometimes students don't have the ear training background, theory background, or solo performance experience. But The People's Music School introduced us to all of that from the start."

Today, Anna still sees the school's influence in her work as a pianist and teacher. "The People's Music School not only helped me become a better musician, but it helped me to be a better teacher."

And the impact is clear: "Music is so important for development and intelligence. So when you start music education as a child, you're opening doors to so many skills already. Just like normal education, I think music education has to be available for everybody."

# First Movement

**We are grateful for our First Movement donors who have become dedicated partners in our journey towards student impact.**

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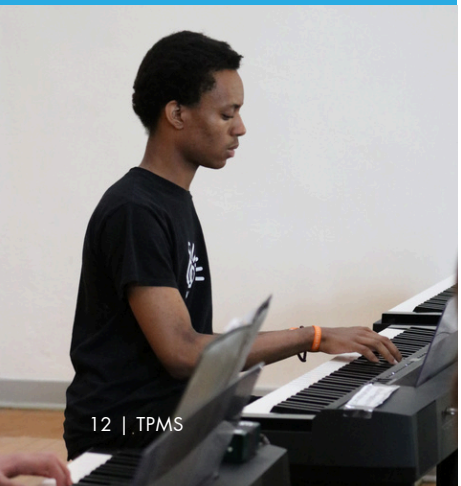



"I started TPMS in fifth grade with my glockenspiel for music theory, and I have grown so much since then. I have never been so dedicated to one thing for so long. I have been through so many sports, so many things academically - and this is the one thing that stuck. My favorite thing about TPMS is that I get to build connections with people that I otherwise wouldn't know."

**- KENNEDY G.**
SLAM @ GSS Trombone Student

I've been at People's for about 10 years, and I currently play piano. I'm very grateful for The People's Music School. Music is such a big part of my life, and I owe it all to my teachers and the staff here at People's. Piano has opened so many doors for me, from simply playing for myself to professionally playing at my church or in a band.

**- MALIIK W.**
SLAM @ UA Piano Student



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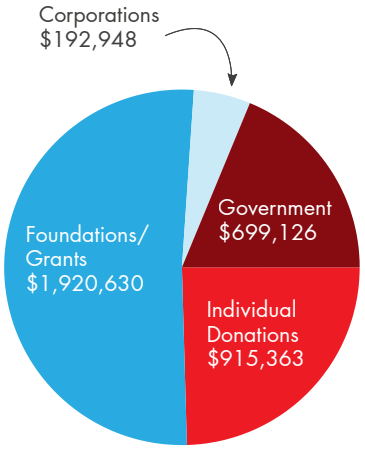
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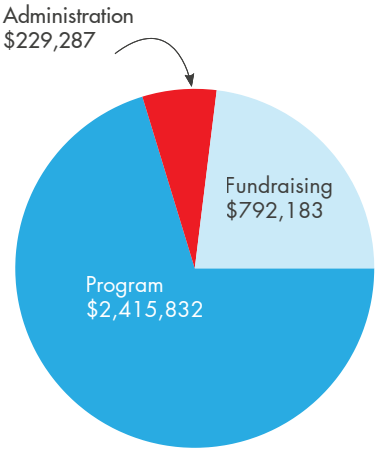
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Lucyna Skiba
Bryan Slepicka
Judice Smith
Maisie Smith
Ana Soto
Crystal Soto
Lorena Stanley
Linda Steiner
Caleb St. Jean
Christine Stephens
Michael Stratton
Lauren Stroud
Allen Stryczek
Mikal Sutherlin
Caroline Suttlehan - *In Honor of Elizabeth Gelman*
Narai Taboada
Bill and Tuula Tadevich
Camille Taylor
Alina Tello
Jordan Tepper
Adriana Teran-Ferguson
Kalkidan Tewodros
Talya Thompson
Elida Tijerina
Mariah Tolbert
Daniel Tolentino
Javier Torres
Sylvana Toskov
Andy Tran
Michael Trevino
Krystal Renee Trotter
Daniel Turgeon
Emma Tyler
Paul Ukaegbu
Huseyin Uygun
Samuel Valdez - *In Memory of Muñeca Ortega*
Cheryl Vann
Sherene Vann
Jesus Vargas
Linda Vargas
Cristina Vazquez
Herminia Vazquez
Mariana Vazquez
Michael Vazquez
Ana C Vazquez de Jesus
Aby Velazquez
Isabel Velazquez
Mario Velazquez
Aditya Vemu
Kiran Vemu
Pradyumna Vemu
Gloria Venegas
David Vidal
Vanessa Vidal
Gabriela Villanueva
Caryl Villasmil
Lucas von Kapff
Whitney Wada
Kendra Waites
Russel Walen
Bryce Walker
Floyd Walker
Renee Wallen
Matthew Wallig - *In Honor of Kristina Wallig*
Molly Walsh
Ray Wass - I*n Memory of Jim Fredenburg*
Sandra Watts
Chris Webb
Jonathan Webster
Lori Wellman
Timothy Wells
Scott Wendell
Rhonda Wener
Cheyenne Whitaker
Alina White
Donna White
Valisha White
Earmon Wilcher Jr
Kehinde Williams
T Williams
Tetorsha Williams
Steven Willis
Demetri Wolfe
Red Wondwossen
Georgia Wright
Karen Wrobel
LaToya Young
Teddy Yu
Paul Zafer and Betty Lewis
Roberto Zavala
Cynthia Zender
Ivana Zivkovic
Carmen Zuniga
Corina Zuniga

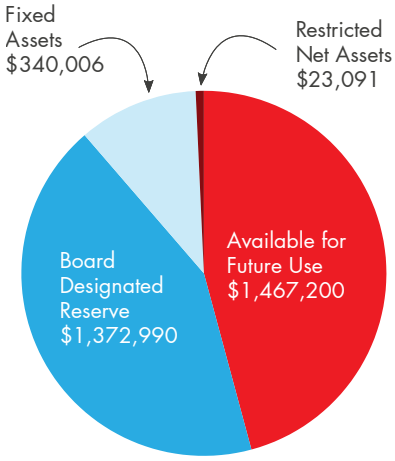
# Financials




**FY26 OPERATING REVUENUE**




**FY26 EXPENSES**




**FY26 NET ASSETS**

# Board of Directors

**Executive Committee**

**Emerald-Jane "EJ" Hunter, Board Chair**
*Ringleader, myWHY Agency*

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*Vice President & GM, Hormel Foods*

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*Vice President, Concentric Equity Partners*

**Cindy Murray, Secretary**
*Executive Advisor, Nuvono*

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*Portfolio Mgr., Senior Analyst, Driehaus Capital Management LLC*

**Manuel Chavez**
*Managing Director and Partner, William Blair*

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*Attorney, Hale Law, LLC*

**Ellen Feldman***
*Civic leader*

**Fernando Ferreyra**
*Senior Managing Director, Black & Veatch*

**Gary Hart**
*Tax Partner (retired), Mowery & Schoenfeld LLC*

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*VP | Wealth Advisor, Bernstein Private Wealth Management*

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*Dir. & Portfolio Mgr., Global Renewables & Infrastructure Securities, Brookfield Asset Management*

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*Portfolio Advisor, Vice President, Global Family and Private Investment Office, Northern Trust*

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**Nalini Kotamraju**
*SVP, Research & Insights, Salesforce*

**Josh Lebovitz**
*Vice President Group Director, Data & Analysis at Digitas North America*

**David Michael**
*Managing Partner, Gould & Ratner, LLP*

**Nancy Power**
*Chief Human Resources Officer, Ariel Investments*

**Anthony Salazar**
*Sr. Vice President, Merrill Lynch Wealth Management*

**Steven Shaw**
*Community Engagement Director, Verizon*

**Rob Whiteman**
*Better Future Advisors LLC, Partner (retired), McKinsey & Company*

**indicates Lifetime Trustee*

# Associate Board

**Yasmine Gordon, Chair**
Snap, Inc.

**Kolade Aderele**
Cleveland Avenue

**Kiran Chandrasekaran**
Bain & Company

**Elizabeth Gelman**
Civic leader

**Lizzie Mander**
Bain & Company

**Reginald McCoy**
Merrill Lynch Wealth Management

**Danny Rubin**
Bain & Company

**Brenner Swenson**
Reverb

**Michael Yao**
Bain & Company

# Teaching Artists

**Dylan Abbott**
**Carmen Abelson**
**Alex Armstrong**
**Emily Beisel**
**Joel Block**
**Bobby Bonslater**
**Rachael Botz**
**Ben Branda**
**Natalie Butler**
**Nico Carter**
**Kathryn Cederborg**
**Hsuan Chen**
**Mi Ran Choi**
**Raquel Coleman**
**Tae Corbin**
**Diego Correa**
**Fabian Correa**
**Jamaal Crowder**
**Liliana Cruz**
**Christopher Dammann**
**Kelly Dennis**
**Laura Duggan**
**Ben Eager**
**Arlecia Ebert**
**Anatolia Evarkiou-Kaku**
**El Faussane**
**Zayith Fernandez**
**Sam Frampton**
**Ariel Garcia**
**Karlyn Gehring**
**Simon Gomez**
**Lidanys Graterol**
**Mark Haworth**
**Miro Hernandez**
**Rodolfo Hernandez**
**Pilar Herrera Bermudez**
**Dan Hickey**
**Jonathan Hodges**
**Grace Hudson-Mairet**
**Christopher Jackson Green**
**Sarah Jenkins**
**Jack Kartsotis**
**Janice Lee**
**Fabricio Lock Sotomayor**
**Istvan Loga**
**Ralph Maranon**
**Cameron Marquez**
**Bethany McKnight**
**Caleb McMahon**
**Elijah Medina**
**Eric Monge**
**Jae Hyun Moon**
**Alex Moore**
**Emily Munn-Wood**
**Oliver Munoz**
**Stephon Owens**
**Rossman Palfrey**
**Helder Perez**
**An Phan**
**Adrian Quiroz**
**Kenthaney Redmond**
**Megan Robbins**
**Allison Rye**
**Bryan Tamayo**
**Jonathan Thomas**
**Michael Thompson**
**Felipe Tobar Blanco**
**Gloria Wide**
**Cedrice Young**

# Staff

**Eitan Barkow**
Instrument Inventory Coordinator

**Chelsey Bazuro**
Senior Manager of Institutional Giving

**Natalie Butler**
Chief Program Officer

**Jaila Carr**
Program Coordinator, Greater South Side

**Brandy Casseus**
Program Manager, Greater South Side

**Kathryn Cederborg**
Program Manager, Uptown Academy

**Kelly Dennis**
Senior Manager of Program Operations

**Ellie DePastino**
Senior Manager of Marketing and Communications

**Jessica Esteves**
Human Resources and Technology Manager

**Ariel Garcia**
Senior Manager of Program Initiatives

**Caro Granner**
Program Associate, Uptown Academy

**Miro Hernandez**
Program Manager, SLAM

**Kasia Johnson**
Chief Financial Officer

**Grecia Landin**
Program Manager, Albany Park

**Alo Ochoa**
Program Coordinator, Back of the Yards, SLAM

**Miriam Owens**
President and CEO

**David Perez Delgado**
Program Coordinator, Albany Park

**Jennifer Riskind**
Chief Development Officer

**Megan Robbins**
Senior Manager of Learning and Teaching

**Michael Thompson**
Development Coordinator

**Felipe Tobar**
Manager of Learning and Teaching

**Wes Woodward**
Development Associate, Individual Giving

# Get Involved

**SPREAD THE WORD**
Tell a friend, follow and boost us on social media, or host an event! We always need more people to know about the great work happening here.

**ATTEND AN EVENT**
Head to our website to see our calendar of upcoming concerts, recitals, community programming, and more. We can't wait to see you!

**JOIN A COMMITTEE OR TASK FORCE**
Composed of expert volunteers, members of our People's community, and members of our Board of Directors, our committee and task force members serve as advisors and experts that guide our work. Learn more about our committees and how to inquire about involvement.

**VOLUNTEER**
We have nearly 30 performing events per year, and we always need help! Volunteering at an event is a great opportunity to get to know our close-knit community.

**DONATE**
Every dollar you give to The People's Music School goes towards eliminating barriers to access in music education and enriching young lives in Chicago.



The People's Music School

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(773) 784-7032 | peoplesmusicschool.org
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