



Northeast
Storytelling



2024 - 2025
ANNUAL
REPORT

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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



Elsa Zuniga

When I joined NEST's board this January, I did not expect to be writing to you today as your President. Just as in the best stories, wise counsel and encouragement surfaced when I needed them most, helping me understand this was something I could and should do. I am reminded daily of why our community matters.

I've spent the last two decades witnessing storytelling's transformative power: in my own personal development as I strive to make meaning of the world, in boardrooms where narratives drive decisions, and in countless moments when the right story changes everything. What NEST does is a vital contribution to our world. We cultivate a fundamental human skill that builds empathy, broadens perspectives, and creates lasting change.

We've experienced significant board transition this year, which has taught us some valuable lessons. When knowledgeable members move on, they take with them not just their energy, but the stories of how NEST really works. An organization is vulnerable if the why behind our traditions, the lessons from past experiments, or the relationships that make things happen live solely in individual minds or bookshelves.

Our focus over the next fiscal year is clear: to secure NEST's long-term legacy and ensure its wisdom and impact can endure beyond the tenure of any individual volunteer. Drawing on deep roots forged over 40 years, we are intentionally strengthening the foundational structure to enable greater organizational resilience and maximize the impact of all our efforts. This internal work is designed to create clearer, more sustainable pathways for engagement and execution. We're not just preserving what we have; we are reimagining what NEST can become, grounded in the original, powerful DNA that has guided us since our beginnings at Lesley College.

With your continued engagement and our collective commitment, we're not just preserving something valuable; we're creating something extraordinary. The best chapters of our story are still being written.

With gratitude and excitement,

NEST OVERVIEW

MISSION

To provide education, advocacy, opportunities, and support to storytellers, story listeners, and story lovers throughout the Northeast. We focus on training and supporting storytellers of all types, and on promoting the art of storytelling as a vehicle for entertainment, communication, education, personal expression, healing, and change.

OUR HISTORY

NEST exists to continue the community and connections that started back in 1982 at Lesley College, now Lesley University. When Lesley launched the New England Storytelling Center and its Sharing the Fire Storytelling Congress, storytellers found each other and built deep bonds through shared tales and mutual support.

When Lesley closed the Center in 1988, these storytellers refused to let the community die. At what was supposed to be the final Sharing the Fire, they formed a new organization to keep the beloved conference and connections alive: LANES (League for the Advancement of New England Storytelling). In 2016, the name was changed to Northeast Storytelling, Inc. to incorporate a larger geographic area that included New York.

WHO WE ARE

That commitment to community is still who we are. Today's Northeast Storytelling (NEST) serves 197 members across the country and beyond, but Sharing the Fire remains our heart as the annual gathering that sparked our founding and continues to define us 40+ years later.

Our programs, including the Sharing the Fire Storytelling Conference, are designed to build community and provide members with opportunities for education, professional development, and personal expression, all in alignment with our mission.



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REPORT

Katie Knutson

I have had the honor and privilege of serving as your Executive Director for just over three years now, and I am excited to report progress on many of our goals. We have seen an increase in in-person Sharing the Fire registrations and produced a conference that made a small profit to help refill the coffers depleted by the decrease in numbers associated with the pandemic. This year has seen challenges as well, but this Board is weathering the storm and working to create systems and documentation that will ensure continued success. We are also investing in support staff for Sharing the Fire to professionalize the conference and put less strain on our volunteers.

Membership

We ended our fiscal year with 197 active memberships. This is 4 more than we had in 2024, but over 20 less than we had in 2023. It is also down almost 100 members from June of 2021.

Governance/Board News

This year, the NEST Board experienced a period of significant transition, much like a real-life version of the story “Good News, Bad News.”



The fiscal year began with key departures. Jim Brule rotated off of the Board at the close of his term, and ChaChanna Simpson resigned as President following a work promotion. We were sad to see them go, but continue to be grateful for their leadership and contributions.

The “Good News” arrived in January with the welcome of three new Board members: Elsa Zuniga, Tere Kipp, and Denise Santisteban. Our January Board retreat was filled with energy, excitement, and new ideas. Denise Keyes Page organized a house concert near the Board retreat site in CT that introduced dozens of people to NEST and the power of storytelling.

Shortly after, our story took a few unexpected twists. Jezrie Marcano-Courtney and Tere Kipp resigned from their positions for personal reasons. Even in their short tenures, they both made a substantial impact on the organization and on us, and for that, we are grateful. Our deepest sadness came in April when we were devastated by the passing of Denise Santisteban, who lost her battle with cancer. Denise was an incredible storyteller, and an organizer who curated all of the storytelling and restaurant events for the International Festival of Arts and Ideas, which just celebrated its 25th year. She was a wonderful human who was taken far too soon. Her memory continues to inspire us.

In the face of these challenges, we saw some incredible leaders step up to provide stability. A long time NEST member, Elsa Zuniga moved into the role of President shortly after joining the Board, pairing her deep love of the community with her professional expertise in technology and leadership to stabilize our footing, increase our efficiency, and move NEST forward. We are grateful for the steadfast leadership of Denise Keyes Page and Michael Isko through the time of transition. With her many years of experience on previous Boards, Denise was instrumental in guiding us through these changes.

The next chapter of “Good News” brought two significant additions to the leadership team: Christie Keegan, a long-time NEST member and former STF Chair, joined the Board in April; Karl Schatz, a new NEST member who was inspired to serve after attending just two Sharing The Fire Conferences, joined the Board in May. These two have been a welcome addition to the Board.

2024-2025 Fiscal Year Board Service Roster

We thank the following individuals for their dedication and service as members of the NEST Board of Directors during the 2024-2025 fiscal year

- Denise Keyes Page: At-Large Director
 - Michael J. Isko: Secretary
 - Jim Brule: Vice-President & President
 - ChaChanna Simpson: President
 - Jezrie Marcano-Courtney: President
 - Elsa Zuniga: President
 - Tere Kipp: Treasurer
 - Denise Santisteban: At-Large Director
 - Christie Keegan: At-Large Director
 - Karl Schatz: At-Large Director
-



Post-Fiscal Year Leadership Updates

In the period following the close of the fiscal year, we have seen some further shifts. Michael J. Isko resigned as Secretary in December. We thank him for his steady leadership and dedication to Development. The good news, however, is that Board was already focused on building stability and strength. We welcomed Konrad Wilk as our new Treasurer in September 2025 and Christie Keegan stepped up to assume the Vice President role in November 2025.

We are seeking applications for new Board members for the roles of Secretary and Member-At-Large. Will you be the next person to help us bring about the next wave of good news?

Communications

Our NEST email list is strong, and our open rate (the percentage of people who open the emails we send) is sometimes as high as 47%, a number almost unheard of for mass mailings. Thank you for caring so much about this organization! We use this list for important announcements and reminders, especially as the conference approaches. If you haven't been getting pretty mass emails (outside of the listserv), there is a chance you have opted out of email communication. Please log in to your account and opt in, or reach out to me to opt you in.

The NEST-L Listserv remains a great way for members to connect with one another. We have streamlined being added to the listserv, which is working well. We will also begin culling the listserv soon to remove lapsed members. (Don't worry, you will get a warning first.)

We continue to use social media (Facebook, Instagram) as sporadic ways to communicate with members and reach out to the general public. Please make sure to like our pages and share posts to let others know what you love about NEST. If you are interested in helping with any of the social media accounts, please let me know.

Sharing the Fire (STF)

The move to The Queensbury Hotel in Glens Falls, NY, proved to be a strategic success, with reviews of STF 2025 being overwhelmingly positive. We have a contract for two more years at this beautiful hotel and will be there next year for their 100th anniversary. Crucially, the lower fees at this new venue contributed to making this the first profitable in-person conference since the pandemic.

Tellers around the country continue to appreciate our Virtual Track (VT). It has been a life-line for those unable to attend in person. Although we did not meet our desired VT attendance numbers this year, we plan to continue the Virtual Track in partnership with Artists Standing Strong Together. The Family Track, however, had very low attendance; we will discontinue it, but plan to continue to partner with the Crandall Library to offer a family-friendly performance during the conference.

Thank you to all of you who came to STF, told others about it, presented, shared stories, volunteered, donated, or attended virtually. You make this community strong, and Sharing the Fire great. Keep up the great advocacy work! Please continue to share your experiences of STF with others, and invite them to join you March 26-29, 2026 back at the Queensbury for STF 2026.

For 2026, we welcome April Armstrong and Linda Schuyler Ford as co-chairs, with Laura Packer as our Keynote Speaker/Performer and Antonio Rocha as our Featured Performer. The theme will be “When Story Changes Everything.”

Finances

Substantial financial information is contained in other sections of this report. As an organization, we spent more money than we took in again this year. This loss has been absorbed. We were not substantially impacted by the reduction in funding to the National Endowment for the Arts or the Humanities, but this loss of funding to other organizations like ours is making remaining grants even more competitive. We do intend to pursue grants and additional sponsorships to help support the valuable work of NEST. If you are interested in being a part of our exciting new effort to lead NEST into a sustainable fiscal future - either on the Development Committee or in another way, please email me at director@nestorytelling.org. Thank you to those of you who make monthly or yearly donations to NEST. Please also consider adding NEST to your [legacy planning](#).

Future Plans

We have heard many great ideas for new initiatives and would generally like to support them. However, we need a few more Board members and more dedicated volunteers interested in stepping up to make new things happen. Right now, the Board is focusing on updating our systems, making them more sustainable, shoring up our finances, and pursuing new funding streams. Want to help with these efforts or shape the future of NEST? Fill out the survey at nestorytelling.org/volunteer to let us know how you want to be involved.

Losses

In addition to the passing of Denise Santisteban, this fiscal year also saw the passing of former NEST President Hope Lewis and former NEST Board member Michael Perry. Jo Radner described Hope as, “A strong and brilliant president of NEST, who brought generosity, curiosity, and the power of listening.” Mike Perry served on the NEST Board more recently, joining us from Pittsburgh, and performed in the closing concert (Family Olio) at our most recent STF. We celebrate the lives and contributions of these NEST superstars. May their stories live on.

Respectfully Submitted,
Katie Knutson

FINANCIAL HIGHLIGHTS

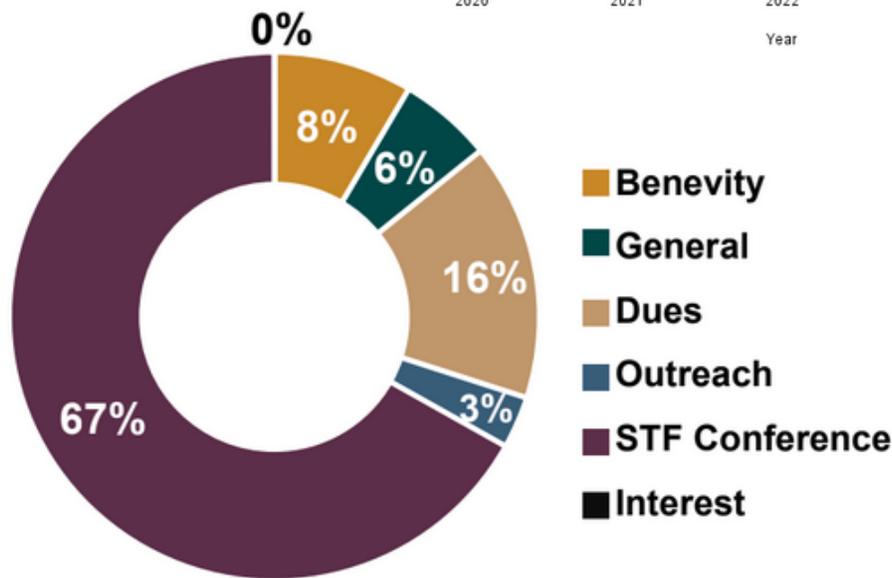
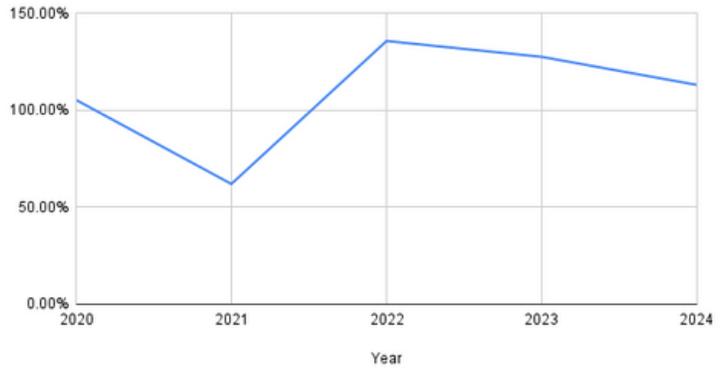
Konrad Wilk



NEST remains on solid financial footing.

We are pleased to report a decrease in our overall expense-to-income ratio year-over-year. This positive trend is due to growth across all our income streams. However our overall expenses increased.

Percentage of our income spent

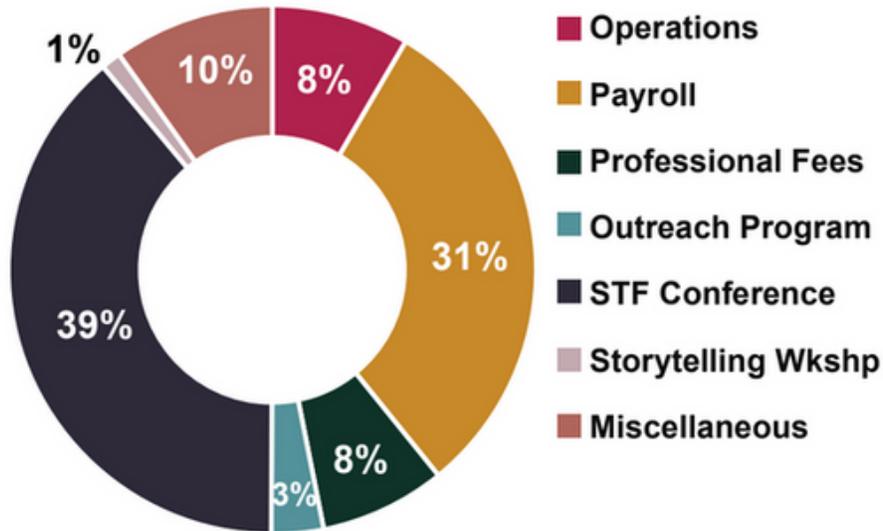


We have three income streams:

- **Sharing the Fire.** Our hybrid conference (held at Queensbury Hotel with a concurrent virtual track) saw strong performance. We achieved a 4% profit increase compared to the 2023 fiscal year and attendance was 116, including 25 attendees on the virtual track.
- **Membership.** Membership increased modestly by 3%. NEST's overall membership stands at 197 from 193 last year. Membership dues have not increased.
- **Donations.** Our most significant source of unrestricted funding comes through Employee Giving Programs (individual donors whose gifts are amplified by their employers such as Google and soon, Oracle). Donations increased by 56%.

Financial Highlights, continued

Our overall expenses increased compared to the 2023 Financial Year. This rise was due to several specific factors, including a 33% increase in payroll and a 65% increase in credit card transactions. Additionally, we invested in professional services by hiring a new bookkeeper and having our taxes done professionally.



The following issues were addressed this fiscal year:

- New accountant who setup prior year tax returns along with bookkeeping
- New treasurer (Hi!) who is working towards capitalizing our cash balances.

Going into the 2025-2026 Fiscal Year, we are focusing on four key strategic initiatives:

- **Expense Management:** Identifying and implementing avenues to lower operational expenses.
- **Revenue Growth:** Increasing our donations reach along with expanding membership.
- **Capitalization:** Finding optimal ways to capitalize our current cash balance.
- **Grants:** Submitting grant applications for new funding opportunities.

For financial statements, please see the document at the end of this report

BUDGET

	2024-2025 (Actuals)	2025-2026 (Budget)
Revenue	\$68,718	\$97,810
Sharing The Fire	\$45,785	\$48,810
Outreach	\$2,177	\$0
Grant	\$0	\$28,000
Membership	\$10,795	\$11,000
Donations	\$9,961	\$9,000
Other programs	\$0	\$1,000

Expenses	\$79,274	\$99,795
Sharing The Fire	\$31,902	\$48,271
Outreach/Presenters	\$3,616	\$2,000
Payroll	\$25,964	\$29,145
Operations	\$4,183	\$5,612
Credit Card Fees	\$2,049	\$2,100
Misc	\$3,638	\$4,625
Professional Services	\$6,355	\$6,475
Deprecation/Dues/Fees	\$1,567	\$1,567

PROGRAM & IMPACT HIGHLIGHTS

Sharing the Fire (STF)

The 2025 Sharing the Fire Conference, held at The Queensbury Hotel (“The Q”) in Glens Falls, NY, marked a crucial turning point for NEST, achieving the first profitable conference since the pandemic. The reviews were overwhelmingly positive, with attendees expressing happiness with the new venue and the town.

Key Metrics and Impact:

- **Total Registrations:** The conference saw a total of 141 registrations (116 in-person and 25 virtual), with total attendance inching closer to pre-COVID levels.
- **Financial Impact:** Lower venue fees at "The Q" enabled the conference to generate a small profit this year, helping to replenish funds depleted by prior losses.
- **Scholarship Success:** Thanks to the generosity of members and key donors, NEST was able to fully fund all scholarship requests for 2025, with funds already set aside for next year.
- **Special Recognition:** The new Doug Lipman Torch Award was created and presented to Doug at the conference. Thanks to generous member donations, Doug and his wife Pam were able to receive this award in person and a small fund remains available for future use.
- **Key Talent:** The conference featured Elizabeth Ellis as the Keynote Speaker and Vijai Nathan as the Featured Teller, guided by the theme: Dynamic Listening: Paths into Deeper Connections and More Powerful Stories.
- **Looking Ahead:** NEST will return to the Queensbury for STF 2026 (March 26-29). The decision was made to discontinue the Family Track, but a continued partnership with the Crandall Library will ensure a family-friendly performance remains part of the conference.



Worldwide Virtual Storytelling Guild (WVSG)

The Worldwide Virtual Storytelling Guild (WVSG) remains a vibrant, free opportunity for people to share, hear, and give/receive feedback on stories. The Guild meets monthly, every third Sunday, and will celebrate its eighth year in 2026. Some highlights:

- **Engagement:** Total annual attendance across monthly meetings was 85 attendees with approximately five tellers for each monthly meeting. 22 members attended the WVSG meeting held as part of the Sharing the Fire virtual track, and the WSVG listserv has 169 members.
- **Theming:** Meetings use suggested (optional) themes, which this year included Resilience, Gardens, and Bravery, to encourage diverse material, though the primary focus remains peer feedback on stories.
- **Digital Reach:** Jim Brule's YouTube recordings of the live meetings saw almost 600 views this year, extending the Guild's reach. The channel currently contains over 150 videos.
- **Role in Training:** The WVSG serves as a vital peer-to-peer training ground for storytellers, including those who will emerge from the new Storytelling Training Basics Program.

Going forward, efforts will be made to examine and update the WVSG information on the nestorytelling.org/virtual-storytelling-guild webpage and post re-invites to the Facebook page.

Storytelling Training Basics

The Storytelling Basics Training Program, a significant, long-term undertaking first announced last fiscal year, successfully launched in December 2025. This project represented uncharted territory for NEST, and we are grateful to the committee, the tellers, and to our technical staff for navigating this. Under Lee-Ellen's leadership, this dream is now a reality. See nestorytelling.org/storytelling-basics for details!

The initial set of training videos feature master storytellers Antonio Rocha, Cris Riedel, Elisa Pearmain, Elizabeth Ellis, Lee-Ellen Marvin, Valerie Tutson, and Jackson Gillman. This program is designed to provide fundamental skills for new learners and offers useful insights for more experienced tellers seeking to extend their craft.

Next Steps: Our immediate focus is on promoting the series. In parallel, we will assess member engagement and outcomes as well as the development process itself. This assessment will clarify the capacity and resources needed for future content development, enabling us to improve support for our committee and establish robust, predictable processes to boost program efficiency.

Storytelling Sundays at Westport Library

Storytelling Sundays is a bi-monthly open mic hosted at 2:00 PM on Sunday afternoons by NEST member ChaChanna Simpson, in partnership with The Westport Library. Launched in March 2024, the program was created to give NEST a consistent presence in the community and to offer a warm, welcoming space where people could share stories and connect.

- **Sustainability:** The program transitioned to a bi-monthly cadence to create a sustainable rhythm while maintaining regular opportunities for community storytelling.
- **Expanded Opportunities:** Throughout this fiscal year, the program featured several mainstage shows in the Library's Trefz Forum for storytellers to perform longer pieces in a professional setting.
- **Visibility & Reach:** A significant strength of this partnership is the Library's support. Each event is promoted by The Westport Library, professionally recorded, and hosted on the Library's YouTube page, giving storytellers expanded visibility and extending the reach of the program far beyond the room.
- **Financial Support:** A major development at the end of the fiscal year was the Library's decision to begin financially supporting curated tellers. Starting in December, The Westport Library will provide NEST with \$300 per event so that featured performers can be paid \$50 each. These payments come at no cost to NEST.
- **Future Focus:** Printed materials about NEST are being developed for distribution to introduce new audience members to NEST's mission, programs, and opportunities for involvement.

Social Justice Committee

This committee has been inactive this fiscal year, but the membership and Board share an interest in reviving it. As the Board prioritizes core organizational sustainability, this initiative requires dedicated leadership. We are seeking individuals ready to take the reins and turn aspiration into reality. If you are prepared to lead the work to rebuild and revitalize this committee, please contact director@nestorytelling.com.

CALL TO ACTION

NEST exists because of storytellers, listeners, and volunteers like you. Though donations are always appreciated and welcomed, the most valuable gifts you can give this next fiscal year are your expertise, your network, and your voice. Here are five ways to make an immediate impact:

1 Connect Us to Funding Sources

Know a business, foundation, or individual aligned with our mission?

- Submit one lead: Use our simple form to suggest a potential sponsor, grant opportunity, or event partner.
- Make your legacy part of NEST's: Consider adding NEST to your [legacy planning](#).

2 Volunteer for a Single Task

No long-term commitment required! Choose your own adventure:

- Share our story: Write a member highlight or post a pre-drafted social campaign
- Spark an idea: Join a 60-minute brainstorm for future programming

3 Share Your Storytelling Journey

Your experience inspires others to join.

- Tell us: How has storytelling made you more empathetic, connected, or confident? We may feature your story (with permission) in our outreach
- Tell others: Share your NEST experience with your network and on social media to promote our community and events.

4 Invite New Story Listeners

The most powerful way to grow NEST: bring someone new.

- Your goal: Invite 2, 5, or 10 people to Sharing the Fire or any NEST event this year

5 Nominate Leaders and Take the Reins

We need working leaders with initiative and a knack for getting things done.

- **Nominate a Future Board Member:** Recommend a NEST member ready to lead, especially those with experience in marketing, grant-writing, communications, or technology
- **Lead or Contribute to a Strategic Initiative:** We have key initiatives that require dedicated leadership to launch or sustain. Consider driving the revitalization of the Social Justice Committee, spearheading outreach, championing future rollouts of our Storytelling Training program, pursue sponsorship or grants with as part of the development committee, or managing NEST's social media presence, etc

Ready to act? Visit neststorytelling.org/volunteer to volunteer, submit leads, or nominate leaders. Every action strengthens the storytelling community we're building together.

THE NEST BOARD

(Reflecting the Board of Directors as of the Annual Member Meeting on December 8, 2025)



Elsa Zuniga

President

Elsa is a Program Manager at Google and a professional coach. After twenty years of being inspired and transformed by Northeast Storytelling, she brings her expertise in technology and leadership combined with her deep love of storytelling to help sustain the powerful community and legacy of NEST, focusing on building sustainable foundations for future growth.



Christie Keegan

Vice President

Christie has spent three-and-a-half decades performing and coaching victims of domestic violence. A former STF Chair, she retired as co-host of a storytelling program at Caffe Lena after 16 years. She is dedicated to supporting NEST as it advances storytelling beyond the boundaries of performance to inform practices throughout a wide range of disciplines.



Konrad Wilk

Treasurer

Konrad is a Vice President at Oracle who applies the principles of storytelling to his daily work, a journey that began with classes taught by Laura Packer in 2014. On the NEST Board, Konrad focuses on execution, ensuring the organization successfully advances its mission to provide education, advocacy, and opportunities for storytellers.



Karl Schatz

Director-at-large

Karl is the co-founder and Executive Director of Community Plate. He brings two decades of experience as an award-winning journalist (ABC, Time Magazine, AP) and co-author of seven books. His work with Story Sharing Potluck Suppers has been featured on national media and he was recently named one of 25 innovators tackling the loneliness epidemic.



Denise Manning Keyes Page

Director-at-large

Denise is founder of Ubuntu Storytellers, and co-producer of “Women Tell by the Decades” with Jen Munro. She is currently working on a trilogy titled “Legacy of A Wealthy Slave.” taken from the New York Times obituary of her great-great-grandfather. Recently, Denise had the honor of performing on the Moth Mainstage.

NEST STAFF



Katie Knutson
Executive Director

In addition to being your part-time ED, Katie Knutson is also a professional storyteller, teaching artist, organizer, producer, consultant, and story coach. She has performed on 4 continents, is an award-winning writer, and recently performed in the story slam in Jonesborough.



Chris Donald
Tech Specialist

Chris is a Business Analyst and Data Enthusiast. He is our go-to expert for all technical operations, managing our website and software systems (like NEON) and translating our ideas into technical reality.



Tonja Caldwell
Bookkeeper / Accountant

Tonja is a Certified Nonprofit Accounting Professional (CNAP) and Advanced Certified QuickBooks ProAdvisor. She provides NEST with essential monthly bookkeeping, financial reporting, and account reconciliation services.

Contact Us



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Statement of Financial Position As of June 30, 2025

	<u>Total</u>
ASSETS	
Current Assets	
Bank Accounts	
Checking Account	25,904.87
Savings Account	40,660.84
Total Bank Accounts	66,565.71
Accounts Receivable	
Accounts Receivable	510.28
Total Accounts Receivable	510.28
Total Current Assets	67,075.99
Fixed Assets	
Machinery & Equipment	3,481.64
Accumulated Depreciation	-2,088.99
Total Machinery & Equipment	1,392.65
Total Fixed Assets	1,392.65
TOTAL ASSETS	\$68,468.64
LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS	
Liabilities	
Current Liabilities	
Payroll Liabilities: MN Unemployment Insurance	44.65
Total Current Liabilities	44.65
Total Liabilities	44.65
Net Assets	
Net Assets With Donor Restrictions	
STF Lipman	1,639.98
STF Scholarship	1,395.06
Total Net Assets With Donor Restrictions	3,035.04
Net Assets Without Donor Restrictions	74,547.79
Net Revenue	-9,158.84
Total Net Assets	68,423.99
TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS	\$68,468.64