

 Arts of Life

# ANNUAL REPORT

## Fiscal Year 2025

**Arts of Life + Circle Contemporary**

Arts of Life advances the creative arts community by providing artists with intellectual and developmental disabilities a collective space to expand their practice and strengthen their leadership.

### MARVIN YOUNG

*Taxi Cab, 2025*

Graphite, pen and crayon on paper  
53 ¾ x 40 ½ in.

## A Letter From Our Founder

When asked how we started, I often say I was just young and naive enough to think that if we built something amazing, people would recognize it and join us. I didn't understand that Illinois ranked at the bottom for I/DD funding, that a scarcity mindset led providers to not "allow" people with I/DD to leave their program for a career in the arts, and that the reimbursement rate was well below national standards. We've worked hard for slow and steady growth and would not be here, 25 years later, without your dedication to our vision of a more equitable creative landscape.

I'm proud of the work happening in our programs. Although it's difficult to pinpoint what was and is most meaningful, a few things continue to stand out:

- **Our Artists' Resilience:** This celebratory year for our community has also come with challenges. Once again, our artists have shown their undeniable strength, leadership, and advocacy. Our participation in the Disability Pride Parade proved what we see every day - our artists are guiding us to a more equitable future.
- **Our Committed Staff:** Our staff's compassionate dedication over many years is remarkable. Progressive Art Studios, like Arts of Life, combine more traditional care with artistic support. In work that is equal parts demanding and rewarding, I've witnessed the strong bonds that develop and how they change the staff's own creative practices. We learn from each other and are better for having this unique experience.
- **Our Long-term Community Partners:** Our ambitions were too big to accomplish on our own. I'm proud we've been working with the School of the Art Institute and DePaul University since we opened our doors. Through internships and project support, these institutions continue to shape Arts of Life. Of course, our list of partners is extensive, and I'm grateful to each for recognizing the importance of our artists' work.
- **Circle Contemporary Collaborators:** Since launching Circle Contemporary Gallery, our artists have engaged with contemporary creatives from around the world. This program exemplifies our mission: showcasing our artists' work alongside their peers, disrupting the "Outsider" narrative, and challenging the broader art community to embrace all artists.
- **Our Visionary Donors:** In the months leading up to our opening in January 2000, over 100 donors took a leap of faith with us. In the intervening years, thousands more joined this

stalwart group. Your unwavering support gives us the confidence to work toward a world we believe in, even when it seems impossible.

Because the world wasn't as connected 25 years ago, I didn't understand our work's broader importance. I focused on building an environment that met the needs and desires of the 12 people in that one room. Today, our community has expanded beyond my imagination. In reality, Arts of Life continues to be a leap of faith. We strive, push, and iterate in order to best support the 80+ artists in our rooms. I'm so grateful to everyone who continues to leap with us. It has been my pleasure to lead this organization for 25 years. I look forward to what we will bring about together next.

Warmly,



**Denise Fisher, Founder/Executive Director**



The **sense of community** is stronger here than anywhere else I have ever been, and I have felt so welcomed and appreciated by everybody at Arts of Life from the very first time I walked through the studio doors. The work that this organization does is so valuable, not only to the artists that they support but to **Chicago's arts community as a whole.**

Hale A, volunteer

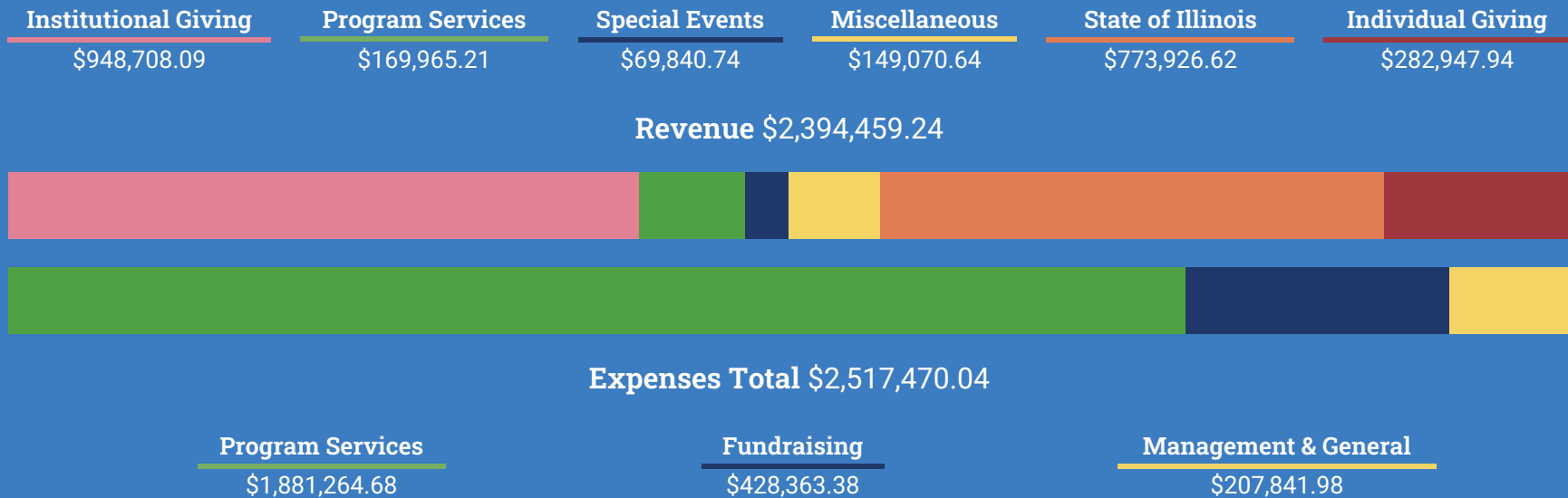
Arts of Life - Circle Contemporary

Reached **114,800+** on Social Media ♦ **311** artworks sold ♦ **2,700+** Volunteer Hours ♦ **40,900+** Artist Program Hours ♦ **32** Events & Exhibitions

Including those hosted at

Intuit Art Museum, The Outsider Art Fair New York, N:News Museum Yeonhui, Herabony Art Prize Tokyo, EXPO Chicago, Facility, Chicago Artist Coalition

Unaudited FY25 financials



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