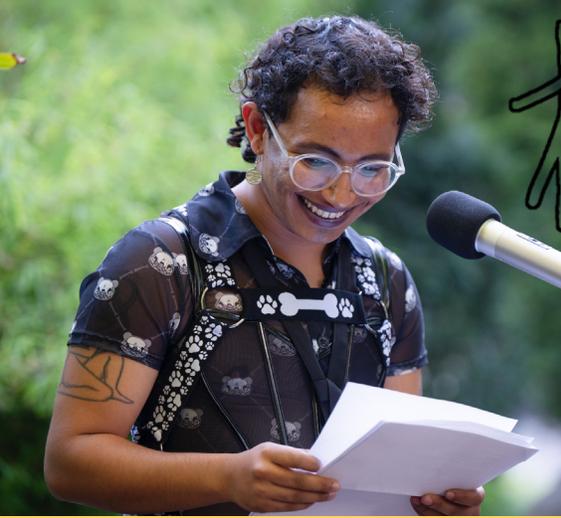


City of Asylum
IMPACT REPORT
2025



شهر پناهنده
Ciudad de Asilo
CITY of ASYLUM
匹茲堡避難城



WELCOME

City of Asylum is built on a simple belief: creative expression must be protected and celebrated out loud, in public, with no barriers to entry.

In 2025, that belief feels more urgent than ever. Across the country and around the world, the freedom to create, imagine, speak, and dissent is being challenged through fear, fatigue, and a narrowing of what feels safe to say. Many of the writers who come to City of Asylum have fled these conditions. Increasingly, communities in the United States are confronting them as well.

We protect writers whose voices are threatened, and we invite our neighbors to listen, because when people encounter ideas and lived experiences beyond their own, curiosity grows, empathy deepens, and communities become more resilient and more just. That is the kind of city we are working to build together.

I am deeply grateful to the writers, artists, volunteers, supporters, board members, and tireless staff who carried City of Asylum forward this year. The pages that follow highlight many of the accomplishments of 2025. But what a report cannot fully capture is the life of this place. On any given day, writers, musicians, students, neighbors, volunteers, and first-time visitors gather here to share ideas and experiences, browse the bookstore, enjoy a meal, or simply spend time together. City of Asylum exists because people believe these moments of connection matter.

Together, we are strengthening the conditions that allow creative expression to thrive in our city. This work continues because it must. It is foundational to the kind of city we choose to be.



Hannah East
Acting Executive Director



Mission

City of Asylum builds a just community by protecting and celebrating freedom of creative expression. We provide sanctuary to endangered writers and artists, so that they can continue to create and their voices are not silenced. We offer a broad range of free literary, arts, and humanities programs in a community setting to build social equity through cultural exchange. And by transforming dilapidated properties into homes for our programs, we anchor neighborhood economic development.



A necessary cultural hub for literature, music, and expression, where these spaces are increasingly monetized and rare."



Our Story

City of Asylum Pittsburgh was co-founded in 2004 by Pittsburgh Northside residents Henry Reese and Diane Samuels, inspired by author Salman Rushdie's work supporting endangered writers and his connection to the International Cities of Refuge Network.

City of Asylum began by welcoming one writer-in-residence into a Northside home. Over the past twenty-one years, the program has grown to offer sanctuary to eighteen writers and their families. Seven artists currently reside in Pittsburgh through the program, making it the largest residency in the international network.

Today, City of Asylum presents more than 120 free programs each year, reaching audiences of more than 20,000 people in Pittsburgh and online.

City of Asylum's public programs feature local and international writers and musicians, both acclaimed and emerging, with a particular focus on multicultural voices and literature in translation. These free programs extend the impact of City of Asylum's sanctuary residencies for exiled writers by inviting the public into conversation with artists and ideas from around the world. Through these encounters, our programs strengthen curiosity, empathy, and understanding in the community.



YEAR IN REVIEW

Data from 179 Community Survey replies.



85%

Understand people and other cultures better as the result of public programs

70%

Reported conversations with someone new at a public program

88%

Said mission's relevance is increasing or rapidly increasing



4.6/5

Effectiveness in protecting freedom of expression

4.9/5

Importance of community engagement efforts to mission

4.6/5

Importance of Bookstore to mission



4.7/5

Effectiveness in reaching our mission

4.9/5

Importance of free public programs to mission

4.8/5

Importance of exiled writer's sanctuary to mission



Pittsburgh has gained international acclaim as a literary space generally, and for endangered writers in particular, because of City of Asylum. It's a critical player in the cultural fabric of the city."



EXILED WRITERS SANCTUARY PROGRAM

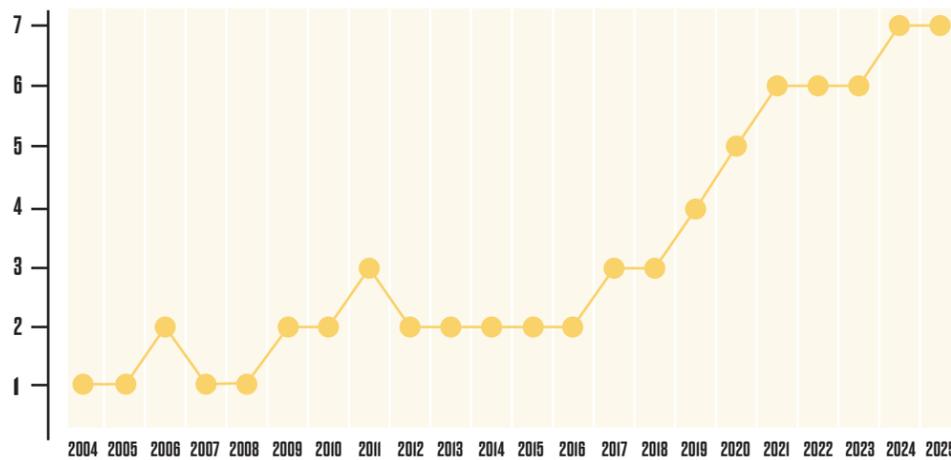
I am grateful for the community of support at the local, national, and international levels that has sustained the writers' program this year. Our partnerships with universities, educators, and mission-aligned organizations provide a livelihood and platform for City of Asylum writers-in-residence to contribute their creative and intellectual work to the Pittsburgh community and beyond. When we come together in community for a performance, reading, or workshop led by a City of Asylum writer-in-residence, the power of original, creative expression invites us to turn our attention towards our common humanity and to learn from our differences, in a space of care and respect.



Catherine Skolnicki
Residency Manager



History of Residency Growth 2004-2025



“**Thank you, City of Asylum. Every city needs one of these. Take care, take advantage of the so-called freedom we've got in this country. Every city should have one of these. Every one.**”

- Jerome Jennings, May 2025



2025 WRITERS IN RESIDENCE



Rania
Rania completed ***Under the Neem Tree***, a collection of short stories translated from Arabic by Elisabeth Jaquette and forthcoming in February 2027 from **The New Press** (US) and **Comma Press** (UK). The book received an English PEN Translates award in early 2026. In May, she appeared as a panelist at the **PEN America World Voices Festival** in New York City. She also curated a **film screening and conversation at City of Asylum** featuring Syrian filmmaker Reem Alghazzi's documentary ***Becoming Iphigenia***.

Research Scholar at the University of Pittsburgh 2023-2026

Thank you to our partner universities, **Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Pittsburgh, and Chatham University**, whose support makes it possible to host writers-in-residence.



Olena
Olena's bilingual poetry collection ***Orpheus and Eurydice***

in New York (English translation by Oleksandr Frazé-Frazénko) was shortlisted for the 2025 Walcott Prize and released by Arrowsmith Press. She also completed ***New Calypso***, a long-form poem nine years in the making, translated from Ukrainian by Oleksandr Frazé-Frazénko and published in October 2025 by Lefty Blondie Press. **City of Asylum** hosted **Olena's book launch** on October 21, featuring Ukrainian musician Lesya Verba on bandura and actor Christopher Rivas. The performance was also presented at Carnegie Mellon University through the Center for Arts and Society.

Research Scholar at the University of Pittsburgh 2023-2026



Anouar
Anouar completed his novel ***The End of the Third World***. In

May, he appeared as a panelist at the PEN America World Voices Festival in New York City. In November, he presented a **City of Asylum program** featuring a reading from the novel and a conversation about its themes and Algerian social and literary history. Anouar was delighted that the event was attended by one of his heroes, American and Algerian activist, translator, and writer Elaine Mokhtefi.

Research Scholar at Carnegie Mellon University 2022-2025



Oleksandr
Oleksandr wrote and published the novel ***Nothing Is Under Control*** in both English and Ukrainian. The book was launched at **City of Asylum in June 2025** with musical accompaniment. Alongside his literary and film work, he co-organized benefit concerts for Ukraine, co-produced a play based on Ukrainian folk tales, curated exhibitions, and created a poetry and music event at St. Nicholas Church with fellow City of Asylum writers. He also completed the documentary novel ***Rivka***, based on the life of a 97-year-old Jewish woman and exploring Jewish life in the Soviet Union through war, Stalinism, displacement, and personal memory.

Research Scholar at the University of Pittsburgh 2023-2026



Volodymyr
Volodymyr's novel ***Petrykor***, translated from Ukrainian

by Mark Andryczyk, will be published in 2026 by the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute. His play ***Signals of Being***, also translated by Andryczyk, was published by the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute in 2025. In August, **City of Asylum** hosted a **reading and conversation** with Volodymyr and Andryczyk exploring the three works they have collaborated on together.

Research Scholar at the University of Pittsburgh 2023-2026



Mukhtar
Mukhtar's book ***SemiCities: From Village to Semi-City***

- Gender, Urbanism, and Class was published in November by Sefsafa Publishing and Distribution in Cairo. The book explores social transformations in rural Egypt and the emergence of what Mukhtar calls "electronic masculinity," drawing on nearly 13 years of research, finalized during his first year of residency. In March, he moderated a **Carnegie Mellon University Center for the Arts in Society program** featuring anthropologist Samuli Schielke. In July, Mukhtar presented new short stories at **City of Asylum** in a **reading and conversation**.

Research Scholar at Carnegie Mellon University 2024-2027



Bertony
Bertony joined City of Asylum in September 2025. In October,

he presented his work at the Haitian Studies Conference at the University of Pittsburgh. In November, he participated in a poetry reading and conversation hosted by **Carnegie Mellon University's Center for the Arts in Society** exploring themes of Haiti, exile, belonging, and humanity.

Research Scholar at Carnegie Mellon University 2025-2027



Scan to see referenced articles

PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

My colleagues and I were honored to present 134 unique arts programs in 2025, which brought us everything from stories from the Dominican Republic to the sounds of the Indian hammered dulcimer.

Thank you for joining us in supporting emerging artists like debut author Michelle Adams (whose book went on to win the Stone Book Award) as well as the student musicians of Pittsburgh Creative and Performing Arts High School. And thank you, too, for joining us in celebrating more established artists: writers like Damon Young and MacArthur “Genius” Anne Carson as well as musicians like Roger Humphries and DownBeat “Artist of the Year” James Brandon Lewis.

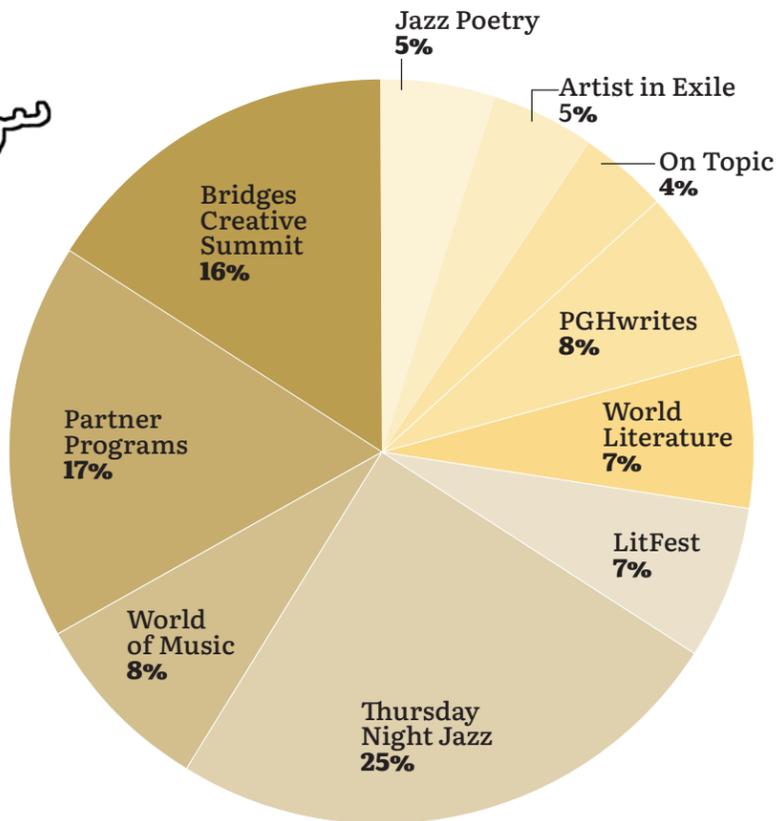
Thank you for spending time with us in our “living room” in 2025, and I hope to see you again next year to discover—together—new books, sounds, friends, and ideas.



Darin Lee
Director of Public Programming



134 Free Public Programs



519 Artists Presented

45 Countries of Origin

18 Languages on Stage



“The intimacy of the space combined with the global diversity of artists made it feel like a truly personal yet worldly experience. Like stepping into a living room where the whole world had gathered to speak in poetry and sound. Unforgettable and leaving with a host of new friends and a long reading and listening list.”

AUDIENCE IN 2025

17,784

In person

4,926

Online

Bridges Creative Summit

The Bridges Creative Summit brought together members of the International Cities of Refuge Network for the first official ICORN gathering outside of Europe. Across 23 programs held in 3 days, artists, writers, and cultural leaders explored shared strategies for protecting freedom of creative expression and strengthening international collaboration.



The summit’s name and themes were inspired by Pittsburgh’s iconic Three Sisters Bridges, named for Andy Warhol, Rachel Carson, and Roberto Clemente. Programs addressed topics including the role of art in democracy and human rights, the preservation of culture and language, and the formation and power of community.

The Bridges Creative Summit reached 987 attendees.

PROGRAMS

Artist in Exile: spotlights the stories and work of artists in exile, including City of Asylum’s writers-in-residence

Jazz Poetry Month: brings together musicians and poets in a celebration of experimentation and collaboration

Literary Programs

World Literature: brings the world to Pittsburgh via novels, poetry collections, and memoirs

PGHwrites: showcases the vibrant local literary scene by presenting writers of all genres based in (or with strong connections with) Pittsburgh

On Topic: discusses, through literature, topical as well as evergreen ideas and issues



Concerts

World of Music: brings the world to Pittsburgh via rhythms, lyrics, and instruments from around the world

Thursday Night Jazz: honors Pittsburgh’s jazz legacy—as well as the experimental and collaborative spirit of jazz—by presenting album launches, commissions, and conceptual concerts

Partner Programs

Partner Presents: features collaborations with mission-aligned partner organizations.

2025 saw readings with Cave Canem, Center for African American Poetry & Poetics, Drue Heinz Prize, Eulalia Books, and International Poetry Forum; story slams with Story Club PGH; concerts with Kente Arts Alliance; and film screenings with Reel Q



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

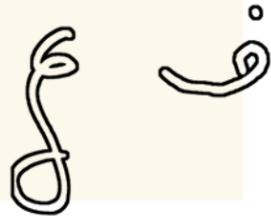
City of Asylum's community engagement work connects Pittsburgh residents, schools, and organizations with the writers and ideas at the heart of our work. Through partnerships, school visits, and community programs, we help introduce new audiences to City of Asylum and connect Pittsburgh residents with the writers and ideas that help shape a more open and empathetic community.

In 2025, I had the pleasure of sharing City of Asylum's mission with the Allegheny County DHS Racial Equity team, Pittsburgh Public Schools World Language and ELL teachers, dozens of visiting artists, and many more schools and organizations.

Community engagement also includes bringing City of Asylum's writers and programs directly into the community. For the second year, we connected the Youth Poet Laureate program with fifth graders at Carnegie Elementary. For the first time, all five Youth Poets were featured poets at the Greater Pittsburgh Festival of Books, a partnership that will continue in 2026.



Alexis Jabour
Community Engagement Manager



WRITERS IN SCHOOLS

As part of City of Asylum's mission to build a more just community through the protection and celebration of creative expression, writers-in-residence visit schools throughout Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. Through readings and conversation, they share their experiences of writing in their home countries, the journey that brought them to the United States, and why the freedom to speak and create matters around the world.

20

Participating schools and universities in the Pittsburgh area

1,158

Students attended presentations



Time spent with the writers in discussion about belonging, home, national identity, migration, oppression, and more are incredibly impactful on my students. Affected by the writers' personal stories, students routinely reflect on the universal human response to strive for a dignified life. Many of my students are imaginative, creative types and visits to COA have inspired AP art projects, school newspaper articles, and regionally celebrated poetry."

-Julianne Slogick, Mt. Lebanon High School

VOLUNTEERS

1,746 100

Total hours Volunteers



View our full list of volunteers

YOUTH POET LAUREATE

Now in its sixth year, the Allegheny County Youth Poet Laureate Program, an initiative of the National Youth Poet Laureate Program, recognizes and celebrates our nation's top youth poets committed to artistic excellence, civic engagement, and social impact.

43

 Applications from 19 schools


BOOKSTORE

The right to read has been unprecedentedly challenged in recent years, yet City of Asylum has remained a haven for writers and readers.

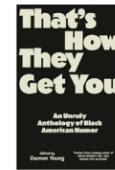
The support of our community is deeply meaningful. From neighbors who stop in just to chat, to customers leaving with an armful of books by writers from around the world, every visit affirms why this space matters. I am deeply grateful to the booksellers who carry this store through both its busiest and quietest days. Their contributions and ideas shape the experience our readers return for again and again.



Phoenix Tefel
Bookstore Manager



OVERALL BESTSELLERS



That's How They Get You: An Unruly Anthology of Black American Humor
Damon Young



Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World
Robin Wall Kimmerer



Wrong Norma
Anne Carson



The Gulf Tower Forecasts Rain: Pittsburgh Poems An Anthology
Edited by Doralee Brooks



There is No Life on Other Planets
Conflict Kitchen

TRANSLATED BESTSELLERS



Something Evergreen Called Life
Rania Mamoun



Orpheus and Eurydice in New York
Olena Boryshpolets



FAQ Ukraine: In English and Ukrainian
Oleksandr Frazé-Frazénko



Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love
Volodymyr Rafeyenko



Human Acts
Han Kang



12,603

Books Sold

5,655

Translated Titles Sold

100+

Books Donated to the Pittsburgh Prison Book Project

35

Bookstore Events/Popups



City of Asylum Bookstore is one of my favorite bookstores in the country"



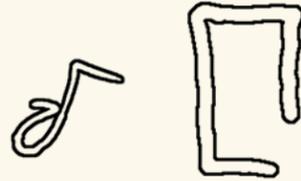
THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS

I want to thank all of our supporters, donors, partners, community members, volunteers, writers, and staff for making 2025 such a meaningful year at City of Asylum. Nothing here would be possible without the many people who form this complex web of support for free expression.

Your support means a great deal to us, and we look forward to continuing this work together in the coming year. Thank you for standing with us and helping ensure that writers and their ideas continue to have a place in our community.



Dylan Falk
Development &
Database Manager



View our full list of supporters



View our full list of partners



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Acting Executive Director

Darin Lee
Director of Public
Programming

Catherine Skolnicki
Residency Manager

Alexis Jabour
Community Engagement
Manager

Phoenix Tefel
Bookstore Manager

Dylan Falk
Development and
Database Manager

Caeley McCagh
Special Projects Manager

Taneesha Temple
Operations Manager

Tuhin Das
Accountant

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Content Marketing
Coordinator

Jenna Peng
Program Coordinator

Rania Mamoun
Residency Assistant



Looking ahead to new leadership at City of Asylum. Read the press release announcing our next Executive Director.

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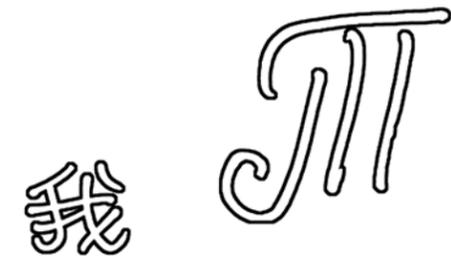
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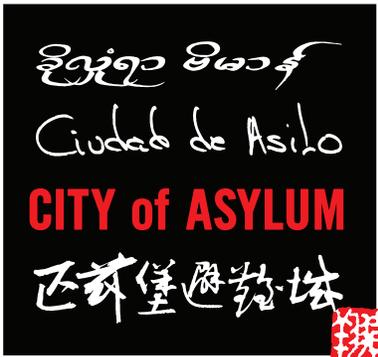
Wole Soyinka

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City of Asylum builds a just community
by protecting and celebrating freedom
of creative expression.

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