



# **+ME PROJECT**

ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021

# ABOUT US

Stories heal.  
Stories inspire.  
Stories bring us together.

Everyone has a story that matters.

We all have that inner voice,  
aching to be heard.  
The voice of the soul.  
But many young people  
doubt they have a story to tell  
or simply have not found a way  
to unearth it.

Our mission is to change that.





# MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

*As a first-generation college student growing up in an underserved part of Los Angeles, I lacked many resources in high school compared to the majority of my college classmates. The two that most affected me were an absence of relatable role models and an inability to articulate who I was to the world. This greatly affected my confidence throughout my teenage years and into adulthood. While my resilience helped me earn a master's degree, the vast majority of students who find themselves in community college after high school do not earn a single degree. In 2013, I launched PLUS ME to ensure more students had access to the resources I lacked.*

*Over the years, I noticed a trend in the sector: the majority of youth-serving organizations in Los Angeles operate off a cohort model where selected students go to the organization's space and participate in long-term programming that cover a variety of topics. While there are tremendous benefits for the students in this model, I envisioned building a different structure that would narrow focus, shorten programming, and ultimately impact more students.*

*Throughout 2020 – 2021, it was evident that more partners understood the value to our model. As experts in the personal storytelling space, PLUS ME supported by providing social-emotional workshops for their students. We helped create safe spaces virtually that allowed youth to reflect on their experiences and share their stories with each other. This helped them understand they were not alone throughout the pandemic, providing an outlet for youth to connect and empathize with one another. This transition also allowed us the opportunity to bring our services to youth outside of Southern California for the first time, reaching students in Northern California, Georgia, Kentucky, and New York.*

*Over this past year, PLUS ME grew our staff, updated our mission, lowered overhead costs, and drafted a new strategic plan — all in service of sharing our vitally important mission with the world. Our team also offered over 1,000 hours of storytelling workshops, nearly double the number we conducted the previous year. PLUS ME believes everyone has a story that matters and remains incredibly grateful for the opportunity to continue this transformative work that we have built from the ground up. Thank you for helping us create a world filled with people that are heard, valued, and celebrated.*

*With appreciation,*



Richard Reyes





## OUR MISSION

PLUS ME Project activates the art of personal storytelling to increase confidence in youth as they pursue college, career, and life goals.

## OUR VISION

Where all communities are filled with courageous voices whose stories are heard, valued, and celebrated.

## OUR VALUES

Authenticity - remaining true to our identities and journeys.

Inclusivity - supporting and accepting everyone without judgments.

Community - creating lasting relationships through meaningful interactions.





# APPROACH

The personal narrative is at the heart of our work, which employs the art of storytelling as the key delivery method in all of our programming. With guidance from relatable role models, our objectives are to help students develop:



## CONFIDENCE IN CHARACTER

The capacity to find empowerment in their identity



## COURAGE TO COMMUNICATE

The strength to voice their experiences



## CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY

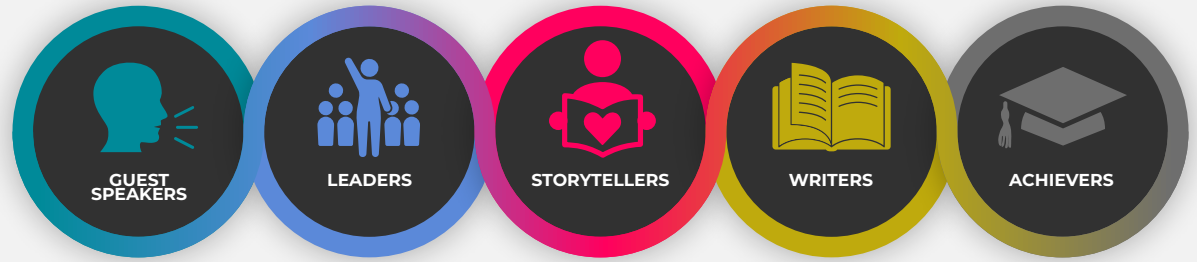
The skills to empathize with others



## COMMITMENT TO COLLEGE & CAREER

The motivation to achieve their dreams

# PROGRAM MODEL



Starting with Guest Speakers and ending with Achievers, our progressive programming model guides students through the process of identifying their specific gifts in service of encouraging them to own who they are. We want students to be confident as they pursue their college, career, and life goals after high school.

As a community partner, we bring our trained team of relatable role models to schools and organizations to conduct our presentations and workshops both in and out of school. We also provide support to educators and parents around how to build a storytelling culture within their schools or homes.





***“PLUS ME gave me the confidence that I was missing...  
to understand that my story is enough and that I  
deserve to pursue my dreams.”***

– Joanna C., PLUS ME student

**+ME**

# AT A GLANCE

**10,000+**  
students

**1,016**  
hours of programming

**620**  
donors

**134**  
volunteers

**56**  
schools





# HIGHLIGHTS

## Celebrating 100K

Throughout the month of August, we celebrated reaching 100,000 students – a milestone for PLUS ME!

Donors helped us raise over \$12,000 for this celebration and we had 65 guests join us for our virtual thank you event.

## 100 Volunteers: VIP Experience

Following recruitment and training, on Giving Tuesday we had a diverse group of 116 VIPs (Volunteers Inspiring Purpose) give back by virtually sharing their stories in 83 classrooms, reaching over 2,000 middle and high school students in LA.

## Motivational March

During Motivational March, we facilitated 182 workshops at 32 schools, reaching over 3,500 students in the process.

We also hosted a workshop for parents to learn the art of storytelling to better connect with their children, and a workshop for educators to improve their classroom culture through storytelling.

## Superbowl LVI Legacy Champion Organization

PLUS ME was selected for the Superbowl LVI Legacy Program “Champions Live Here” as an Unsung Hero in Youth Development for making a transformative impact in underserved communities across the Los Angeles region.

We were celebrated as one of 56 local nonprofit organizations at SoFi Stadium, and were featured in a promo video highlighting our innovative workshop process.



# VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

*I may not look like it, but I was your age once and I can remember what it was like being in middle school. Back in my day, it was called junior high school.*

*I took math and science classes, and I did well because my mom was a math major. But, I wanted so much to be in creative classes. I was lucky to have teachers call on me for special projects that required writing and speaking.*

*On my walks to school, I would make up stories about the families living in the houses that I passed by. I imagined I was best friends with one of the girls inside. I pretended they would invite me over for dinner and their dog, 'Fluffy,' would run to me when I came up the walkway.*

*But, it was all in my mind. Those stories would help me forget that my family, just a few doors away, was not as fun as my pretend family. Not even close.*

*I had imaginary friends in my diary. This was the place I could tell the truth and not be afraid of getting a whoopin'. I became really good at writing and public speaking. My English essays got top grades. Preparing for my graduation speech, the drama teacher asked me, "Where have you been for three years? We could have used you in our theater productions!"*

*Around that time, I knew my voice had to be heard. I confronted my abuser and told him to never touch me again.*

*I went on to high school and was accepted at University of California, Los Angeles, graduating with a degree in economics. Later, I earned a master's degree in communications from University of Southern California.*

*Looking back, I wish I believed I had someone to talk to. A real person. I know now there is always a safe person to talk to. I just needed to trust my voice. If anything does not feel right ... anything at all, speak up! You will be heard. My life has not been a fairytale, but it has been my life and I'm doing well. And you will too.*

- Cheryl Farrell





***“I enjoyed getting to write about myself because  
I barely get the opportunity to do that.”***

– Mark B., PLUS ME student

# LISTEN 2021

This year, we proudly announced our second annual My Story Matters Scholarship. Five high school students from SoCal were selected and given the opportunity to share their stories live at our LISTEN 2021 event.

It was a special virtual evening where the community gathered to listen to the powerful voices of the five 'My Story Matters' scholarship recipients as they courageously told their stories.



*"I can't wait to keep growing and spreading my wings to help and uplift others' voices to also share their stories..."*

- Airin Valdez  
Alliance Tajima High School



*"Knowing this has made me realize that I have to seek success on my own, of course with assistance but with no distractions."*

- Ignacio Perez  
South Gate High School



*"I realize that obstacles are not meant to bring you down, they make you stronger and help you evolve into a better version of yourself."*

- Iliana Caballero  
Huntington Park Institute of Applied Medicine



*"I want to show people despite everything that goes on you can still be something so much bigger."*

- Yasly Calvario-Ruiz  
Northview High School



# STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

*The timer goes off. 10 seconds to prepare for an hour of bliss. I tie my beat up Nike shoes and head outdoors. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, clench my hands into fists, and my feet hit the pavement. With each step, the pressure of AP classes, rent, and bills fades away. As I run, my mind travels through the world I've created. A world where I live in a middle class neighborhood, a world where my parents live without fear of deportation....*

*My parents migrated from Mexico with hopes of achieving the American Dream. A dream that they saw in me. The pressure of succeeding in college, granting them citizenship, and dealing with their traditional values became a burden. Running was an escape from the machismo and homophobia that my family valued for generations. An escape from the studio apartment, a place where the only privacy came from the restroom. I needed to run to be happy.*

*However, the more I ran the more angry I felt. I hated the soreness in my legs and I hated that no matter how much I ran I would never reach the world I had created. No one in my family was aware that I'd cry during my runs. Everyone else was too busy running from their own fears to care for mine. My cousins ran from the homophobia and my parents ran from the trauma they faced growing up. But you can't run from fear....*

*I realized that I needed to take a break from running and began to create change within myself. I started using my voice to begin advocating for myself and my community. In my household, I began having conversations with my parents. These conversations were difficult but I knew that I could not run away from my parents. These conversations were mainly filled with me telling my parents to begin changing their traditional values. After I told them this, there was silence. This silence was painful but I knew that it was making a difference. As time went by, I realized that they began changing. They were more supportive of people's values and they were willing to help educate others in my family. Their painful silence grew into hope for the future.*

*I no longer ran. Instead, I would use my voice. I was not only able to create change within my home but I was also able to help support my community. I began speaking out on racial injustices. Through Students Deserve, I began advocating for educational*



*equity. I protested alongside students and teachers from LAUSD and demanded the defunding of LA School Police. I was also one of two students chosen from all LAUSD to be in the community schools steering community. I am there helping create a new educational school system in which students are no longer limited to what they can explore. Being one of the students in this committee makes me a voice for all students, which is why I am making sure that all of our educational and emotional needs are met.*

*I am glad I realized that I needed to stop running from my community. This not only helped me create change in my family and community, it also set a foundation for what I want to do in the future. In college, I want to organize with other students to create a safe space in which families and students can come to for emotional and financial support. I want to do this because I know what it is like to have no support so I want others to have access to it so they no longer have to run from their own fears like I did.*

- Nyslai Bolaños  
UCLA Community School

***“I enjoyed the collaboration with others,  
and how I didn’t feel alone.”***

– Amy R., PLUS ME student



# ADOPT A CLASSROOM

*“Our students are in much need of finding the roar, the kindness and healing that comes with writing.”*

- Qui Diaz, Educator  
Sotomayor

+ME adopted the classrooms of 10 educators in fall 2021, bringing our relatable role models and My Story Matters Journals to all of their students!

Thanks to the support of over 130 donors in our community, we raised funds to adopt 50 classrooms and 2,000 students at no cost to schools or teachers.



# OUR ADOPT A CLASSROOM EDUCATORS



Justin Hogate  
Stephens Middle School

*“What I love most about my students is their excitement to learn...and the unique experiences they bring to the school site and classroom.”*



Jessica Hernandez  
Equitas Academy #2

*“The main reason I decided to become a teacher was to build connections with students and long-lasting relationships.”*



Guadalupe Cardona  
Roybal Learning Center

*“It is very important for me to model a classroom that is healthy and supportive of all students’ needs...”*



Graciela Perez  
Miguel Contreras  
Learning Complex

*“Allowing students to share their stories provides them with the opportunity to deal with emotional trauma...”*



Ryan Ballard  
Charles R. Drew Middle School

*“Too often students with special needs are muted among their peers. They too have a voice, but need extra support to have their voices heard.”*



Nataly Casillas  
Gage Middle School

*“In my classroom, our voices, our dreams, our past and our future are elements we tap into in order to reflect, grow and aim to become the best versions of ourselves.”*



Cynthia Gotler  
Dr. Julian Nava Learning Academy

*“Students bring value to any classroom community when they can feel proud of their unique stories and backgrounds...”*



Carlos Sanchez  
Bethune Middle School

*“I believe that my students’ stories can be a powerful and transformational tool to help them through past trauma.”*



# EDUCATOR SPOTLIGHT

*As a first-generation college graduate and first year teacher, it has been a blessing to work with PLUS ME. The PLUS ME project modeled to me ways in which I can teach students to see each other as people with lives outside of school. Often, students are taught to listen and learn from the teacher, but rarely are students given the opportunity to be vulnerable and learn from each other in a safe and supportive environment. The PLUS ME project has taught me that I must be vulnerable with my students before I can ask them to be vulnerable with each other. This project has shown me the ways in which students can develop strong relationships with each other by relating to one another on similar lived experiences.*

*Looking back at my high school experience, I wish I had the opportunity to think about who I am rather than focusing on learning content. I do not take the role as teacher lightly. I strive to provide my students with a quality education, and I know the PLUS ME project will have a long lasting, positive impact on many students across the country.*

- Diego Morales  
Obama Prep Academy



***“I enjoyed writing, which is something I don’t enjoy.  
It was a life changing opportunity.”***

– Pablo C., PLUS ME student



# LOOKING AHEAD + STRATEGIC PLAN

*Our team developed a strategic plan for 2021 - 2024 that will focus on program expansion, fundraising, data collection, and building infrastructure capacity.*

## **EXPANSION**

We will expand our reach by identifying ways we can strategically bring our programs to more schools, districts, and organizations in Southern California and beyond.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

We will continue to find ways to measure our impact and demonstrate to stakeholders the positive change we are having on youth who participate in our programs.

## **FUNDRAISING**

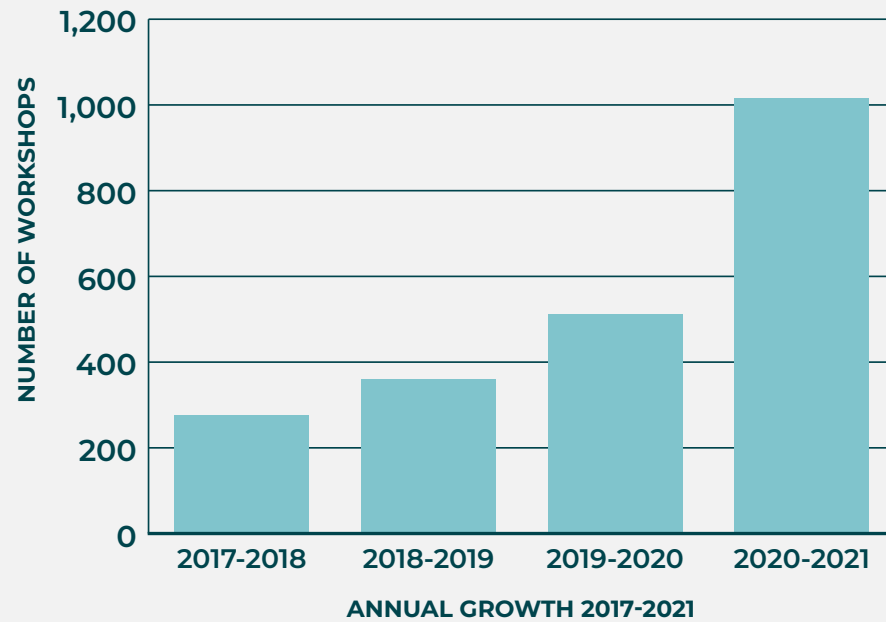
We will increase and diversify our fundraising revenue to achieve a \$1M operating budget so we may hire more staff, train more volunteers, and ultimately reach more students.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE**

We will develop stronger systems that will allow our team to work more efficiently as we scale our growth. We will also invest in technology and provide structured coaching for our workshop facilitators.

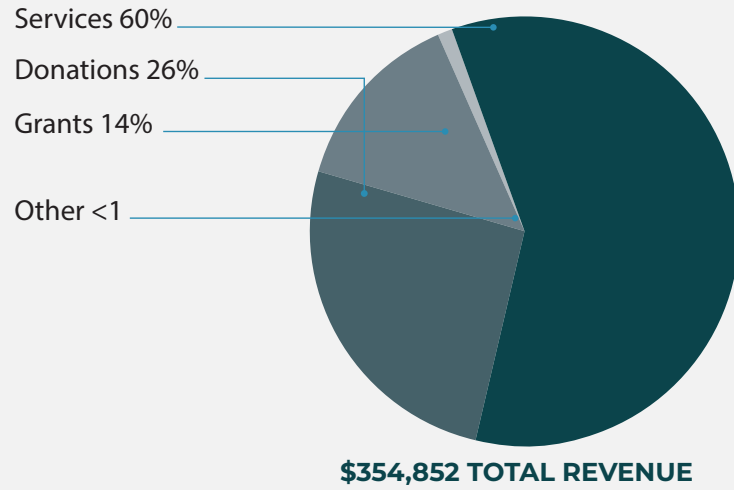
# FINANCIALS

*Thanks to the generous support of so many, 2020-2021 was our most impactful year to date.*



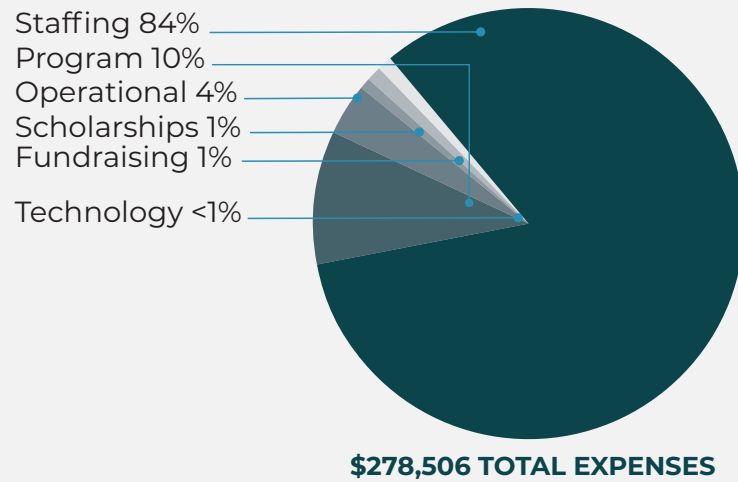


# FINANCIALS



## REVENUE

20/21 - **\$354,852**  
19/20 - **\$280,125**  
18/19 - **\$164,901**  
17/18 - **\$105,807**  
16/17 - **\$54,882**



## EXPENSES

20/21 - **\$278,506**  
19/20 - **\$182,549**  
18/19 - **\$122,924**  
17/18 - **\$78,786**  
16/17 - **\$41,913**



# SUPPORTERS

## CORPORATE & FOUNDATION

California Community Foundation  
 Capacity  
 Cobalt & Clay  
 The dFm  
 Dwight Stuart Youth Foundation  
 Joseph Drown Foundation  
 Kindest  
 McGown Gin Rosica Family Foundation  
 Sheila, Dave, & Sherry Gold Foundation  
 Smart & Final

## INDIVIDUALS

### *COLLABORATORS*

**\$5,000+**  
 Paco & Alma Medina

### *ROLE MODELS*

**\$2,500 - \$4,999**  
 Jen Lauck

### *MENTORS*

**\$1,000 - \$2,499**  
 Beth Bythrow  
 Christian & Steven Entezari  
 Rachel Guo  
 Michael & Caleigh Hu  
 Ana Kono  
 Walter Marlowe  
 Rosita Medina  
 Jeremy Presser  
 Sheldon Presser  
 Frances Vasquez

### *MOTIVATORS*

**\$500 - \$999**  
 Shelton Banks  
 Anais Campa  
 Cyndi Douglass  
 Rusty Helton  
 Claire Kwon  
 Cynthia Lundy  
 Michael Marshall  
 Evey & Ron Miller  
 IR & Kumud Patel  
 Tina Patel  
 Silvia Perez  
 Angelina Smith  
 Evan Smith  
 Jeffrey Wallace

### *ADVOCATES AND FRIENDS*

**\$1 - \$499**  
 View on our website [here](#).





***“What I enjoy about this program is everything,  
because it made me brave.”***

– Robin L., PLUS ME student

# TEAM

## BOARD

Henry Brandt  
 Beth Bythrow  
 Rosa Castro  
 Christian Entezari  
 Caleigh Hu  
 Walter Marlowe  
 Rosita Medina

Tina Patel  
 Jeremy Presser  
 Adhithya Ravi  
 Evan Smith  
 Nolan Smith  
 Frances Vasquez  
 Jawaan Wallace

## ASSOCIATE BOARD

Allyson Frammolino  
 Rachel Guo  
 Erin Harless  
 Jordee Kopanski  
 Shankar Krishnan  
 Jen Lauck  
 Kevin Nham

Michael Sanchez  
 Linda Su  
 Ulysses Urquizo  
 Chris Wen  
 Sarah Jane Williams  
 Joni Thissen Zamarripa

## STAFF

Bethanee Bryant  
 Morgan Chitty  
 Andrew Choe  
 Christina Dunbar  
 Alexandra Gomez

Deshe Gully  
 Sean Leston  
 Richard Reyes  
 Valeria Sanchez  
 Priya Sodha





# CONNECT WITH US

[www.theplusmeproject.org](http://www.theplusmeproject.org)

[Learn](#) | [Volunteer](#) | [Donate](#)

**+ME**