Dear Friends,

Thank you for such an amazing year!

When I walk into work at the Center for Creative Action each morning, I am reminded of a moment at a diner in Brooklyn. I was still in graduate school and a friend and I were talking about our life goals. On a coffee-stained placemat, I drew an odd triangular building nestled between some trees. In this space I imagined youth arts programs, camps, after school classes, and even a community garden. Looking back, I could not have conceived that I would one day walk into this beautiful community arts center built by the generous people in my hometown.

This past year, we expanded our reach simply by having a new home. From camps, classes, and programs for infants, teens, and seniors to lively, free community events, the Center for Creative Action has become a hub for artistic expression. Color Squad, our visual arts program for teens, researched, designed and helped construct a meaningful mural about the history of the Chestnut neighborhood. We also started a new Teen Program, Youth Cinema Collective. This group of students, ages 14-19, produce original films and learn film history and theory with help from a partnership with Alamo Drafthouse.

Many of you know that Creative Action serves students across many school districts in the Austin area. One of the districts we have historically served is Del Valle Independent School District. Last year, the district lost funding for their after school programs. In an effort to continue these programs in a much needed area, Creative Action spearheaded the acquisition of a $840,000 three-year grant with the City of Austin. By securing this grant, we are continuing programming for thousands of students in every school each day across the entire district.

Our success through the year continued with our program at Campbell Elementary. This AISD school is located near the Center for Creative Action and we knew we wanted to be a vital part of the neighborhood. Campbell has struggled with low enrollment and test scores, but has an extremely dedicated group of teachers and administrators. With their support, we created an intensive program of our In the Classroom performances, Artists in Residency for additional at-school instruction, and After School enrichment. We plan to expand our involvement with Campbell by offering thousands of programming hours each year.

We know that through creative youth development, our students develop the essential skills for academic, social and professional success. I encourage you to take a look at our program assessments from last year. None of this success would be possible without your continued support!

With love and gratitude,
Karen LaShelle, Executive Director
Mark initially signed up for Creative Action's “Lights, Camera, Action!” After School program on little more than impulse. A musician, three-sport athlete, and big brother to three siblings, Mark was more comfortable in athletic shoes than a director's chair. “I didn't know that you didn't have to pick more than one afterschool class, so I tried to do everything. On Wednesdays I went to ‘Lights, Camera, Action!’ which was a whole new experience for me.” Two years later, Mark is now 13 and nearing the end of 8th grade as the de facto leader of Creative Action’s Del Valle Middle School film cohort. He leads by example—not only with versatile technical skills, but with an openness to help his peers and make connections outside of their collective comfort zone.

In 2015, the Del Valle LCA! team attended the Youth Arts Festival to premiere a film they’d labored on all year. “My first year I went, I didn’t really talk to anybody except the people I knew,” Mark recalls. “And this year… I’m a different person now. I’m just trying to get everybody pumped up. And I knew that West Ridge [Middle School, Eanes Independent School District] was way different from Del Valle. A whole different type of place. And so I decided, ‘I’m going to try to make friends with these people.’”

Bringing youth together from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds is at the heart of all of Creative Action's programs. Youth Arts Festival culminates the year and gives teens from all of our middle school and high school programs a chance to meet and discuss their work.

Mark sought out the West Ridge filmmakers and introduced himself to a girl named Isabelle. From then on, an unbreakable bond formed and spread. “I brought in my whole group of Del Valle students, and Isabelle had her whole group of West Ridge kids, and we all just combined and made one huge filmmaking group, and we all got along really well. And I thought, ‘Man, I just introduced a whole bunch of people to a whole new variety of people.’ And before we left we decided, ‘Now we’re ‘West Valle!’”

This moment didn’t surprise Mark’s instructor, Marcelo Téson. “He has the confidence and self-image that lets him be who he is instead of who others want him to be. He was the first person off the bus looking to make friends with the West Ridge students, and these are two groups who would otherwise have nothing to do with each other. Mark made that happen.”

Now on the cusp of moving on to high school, Mark reflects on how he’s grown up in a short time alongside Creative Action. “If it wasn’t for Creative Action, I definitely wouldn’t be here. I wouldn’t be the same person I am today. I’m more social than I was back in 6th grade; I think I’ve turned into a completely different person.”

Aashaa entered kindergarten and her mother, Deborah, was worried for her. Of course, any parent worries before their child embarks on the journey through K-12 and beyond, but this was different. When she was two years old, doctors diagnosed Aashaa with a life-threatening illness as a condition of treatment. She had to be isolated for 18 months.

As she learned all about the 4C’s and engaged in everything from dance to visual art, Aashaa began to blossom. Her mother was floored: “By mid year, she was a different child. When I came to pick her up each day she’d proudly show me her new sculpture or the puppet she made. I can’t really express the joy it brought me.”

“I learned how to not be shy when new people come in,” Aashaa says, reflecting on her time with Creative Action After School. “I would tell people coming to after school to not be afraid to meet new friends. My favorite thing was when we made fruit out of paper mâché and then painted it after we read a story about Cesar Chavez.”

After both Aashaa and her sister attended the program, Deborah expressed, “I love how Creative Action’s After School program exposes my kids to a broad range of artistic outlets from theater to African drumming and dance. I love the fact that my kids are taught by working artists. But the emphasis on emotional development and community is what makes this program so special.”
At Creative Action, we work diligently to make certain your donation goes far to ensure all children have access to creative youth development in our community. In addition to a strong base of support, our programs operate on a highly sustainable funding model that utilizes earned revenue from school district contracts and a small number of fee-based programs to provide no-cost programming to youth in low-income communities throughout Central Texas. For example, 80% of our After School students attend for free or at a reduced cost.

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The mission of Creative Action is to spark and support the academic, social and emotional development of young people.

Through interactive classroom performances, after school arts residencies and community-based programs, Creative Action’s team of professional Teaching Artists inspire youth to be Creative Artists, Courageous Allies, Critical Thinkers, and Confident Leaders in their community.

By discovering their own voice, gaining confidence in sharing their perspective, wrestling with big ideas, and deeply engaging in the world around them, youth become better prepared to work through social, emotional and academic challenges to become the next great thinkers, doers and makers.

We envision a more just, caring, joyful and compassionate world. When youth build meaningful connections with peers and positive adult role models and holistically develop their creativity, compassion, confidence and critical thinking skills, they are better equipped for success as adults who contribute to making the world a better place.