





Through its Seeds of Stewardship program, Arizona Trail Association connects young people to nature through outdoor adventures close to home.



From our Chair, Board of Trustees

What a remarkable year it has been to be part of the National Recreation Foundation family. In 2025, we celebrated NRF's 60th year as a grantmaker—six decades dedicated to ensuring that young people have the opportunity to experience the outdoors, connect with the natural world, and discover their own potential. Reaching this milestone filled us with both pride in all that has been accomplished and renewed energy for the important work that lies ahead.

To mark this special anniversary, our Board gathered for a retreat in northern New Mexico. Surrounded by the region's striking landscapes and abundant wildlife, we were reminded in the most tangible way of why this work matters. Time together in such a setting offered space for reflection, conversation, and shared purpose. We returned home feeling inspired, grounded, and enthusiastic about the future of NRF.

This year also marked another milestone: the five-year anniversary of our partnership with the Turner Foundation. Together, we have invested in outdoor recreation programs for young people in Florida, Georgia, Montana, New Mexico, and South Dakota. Over these five years, our collaboration has generated more than \$2.5 million in matched grants—support that is opening doors for young people to explore, learn, and thrive in the outdoors. We are deeply grateful for the Turner Foundation's partnership and enduring commitment to this shared mission.

As we celebrate these achievements, we are equally focused on the future. At the end of 2024, NRF adopted a new strategic plan, and throughout 2025 we began the meaningful work of putting it into action. At its core, the plan calls on us to

Based in Connecticut, Common Ground is a center for learning and leadership, inviting people across ages and identities to connect to their urban environment, build community, grow into their full potential and contribute to a just and sustainable world.

focus our resources where they can have the greatest impact. While NRF will continue supporting programs across the country, we are placing particular emphasis on initiatives serving Indigenous youth and young people living along the Gulf Coast—communities that historically have received far too little philanthropic attention. We believe this focus will allow us to make a deeper and more lasting difference.

As part of this evolution, NRF is also moving away from its long-standing Trustee Grant model. This represents an important transition, one we approached thoughtfully and with care. The Trustee Grant model served the Foundation well for many years, and we are grateful for the generosity and engagement it fostered. At the same time, we believe this new direction will allow NRF to deepen relationships with the communities we serve and strengthen the impact of our work for years to come.

It is a privilege to serve as Chair of the NRF Board of Trustees. I am continually reminded of how fortunate we are to work alongside dedicated trustees, inspiring partners, and extraordinary grantees who bring our mission to life every day. Most of all, we are grateful to the young people whose curiosity, energy, and love of the outdoors remind us why this work matters.

Thank you for being part of this journey with us.

With gratitude and optimism,

Peggy Burnet

Chair, Board of Trustees





Earthseed Farm's Back to Our Roots program engages youth (ages 6-21) in immersive learning experiences centered on Afro-Indigenous ecological practices, permaculture, and cultural arts.



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From our President and CEO

The National Recreation Foundation proudly celebrated 60 years of impact this year. Over six remarkable decades, NRF distributed more than \$57 million to organizations across the country that open doors for young people and families to experience the outdoors in ways that are joyful, active, and deeply formative. This milestone is a testament to the enduring power of our mission and the extraordinary community of partners who carry it forward every day. Yet, this celebration must be held alongside an honest acknowledgment of the very real challenges facing the nonprofit sector in this moment.

2025 was a difficult year for nonprofits throughout the United States. Widespread government funding disruptions placed enormous strain on organizations already working at the margins. Compounding these pressures were rising demand for services, workforce challenges, the ongoing impacts of inflation, and heightened anxiety in communities navigating immigration enforcement. NRF recognizes the weight of these circumstances and the resilience it has taken for organizations to keep showing up for young people.

In response, NRF made it a priority to listen—carefully and intentionally—to our grantee partners. We wanted to hear directly from those doing the work to better understand how NRF could best provide support. This included one-on-one check-in conversations, a formal survey of grantees, and invitations for organizational leaders to share their experiences directly with NRF’s Board of Trustees. What we heard shaped how we showed up in 2025—and continues to inform how we will support our partners in the years ahead.

We are grateful for the collaborative learning community NRF has fostered over the past 10

years. With this strong foundation in place, we were able to respond thoughtfully and effectively to our grantee partners’ needs. In direct response, NRF expanded its learning opportunities in 2025 to include a legal primer, self-care programming, and “jam sessions”—gatherings where grantees come together around a shared topic, such as fundraising or storytelling, to exchange ideas and learn from one another’s experiences. This peer-driven approach reflects our belief that the most valuable knowledge emerges from those doing the work every day, and our grantee partners bring that wisdom in abundance.

Recognizing that many organizations needed to change course in response to this year’s challenges, NRF continued to support peer leadership circles while also launching new cohorts focused on strategic planning in partnership with PlanPerfect, and program evaluation in collaboration with NC State. We believe that investing in organizational capacity—especially during moments of disruption—is one of the most enduring contributions we can make.

As a private foundation, NRF is required by law to distribute five percent of its assets each year. In 2025, consistent with our commitment to direct resources where they matter most, NRF distributed nearly seven percent of its assets—going beyond the minimum—to provide meaningful support to organizations doing the vital work of connecting young people with the natural world. This was a deliberate and strategic decision, one we were both prepared and able to make.

I want to express my deep and heartfelt appreciation for NRF’s staff and Board of Trustees. It is a genuine joy to work alongside people profoundly committed to this mission and to building a brighter future for young people. Their dedication, thoughtfulness, and care inspire me every day.

With hope and resolve,

Sophie Twichell

President and CEO

2025 Grants Overview

\$2,419,500

Trustee Grants \$570,000

A Warm Current
Adventure Crew
Arizona Trail Association
Bronx Children’s Museum
Camp Phoenix
Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute
Common Ground
Cultivate Collective
Dakota Wicohan
Earthseed Farm (a fiscally sponsored project of Community Movement Builders)
Excite All Stars
Friends of Nature Parks
Friends of the DPS Hub Farm
Girls Incorporated of St. Louis
Heritage Conservancy
Lookout Mountain Conservancy
LOOP NOLA
Naples Botanical Garden

Power Play NYC
See You At The Top
Semilla Project, The
Sitka Trail Works
StreetWaves
Urban Adventure Squad
Vamos Outdoor Project
Vibe Tribe Adventures
Wenatchee River Institute
West Point Association of Graduates
Wilderness Inquiry
Wilderness Youth Project

Outdoor Grants \$405,000

Black Kids Adventures
Bridger Ski Foundation
Brothers on the Rise
Brown Girls Climb
Center for Research, Education, Arts,
Technology & Enterprise

Diné WE CAN
Gallatin Gateway Youth Group
Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratories
Laru Beya Collective
Localogy
Lower Brule Sioux Tribe
Museum of the Rockies
Oaye Luta Okolakiciye
Outdoor Inclusion Coalition
Purgatoire Watershed Partnership
Sacred Storm Buffalo
SheJumps
Soul Trak Outdoors
Thunder Valley CDC
West Atlanta Watershed Alliance
Wozu
YouthSeen

Special Grants \$936,000

Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions
Catalina Island Conservancy
Cheyenne River Youth Project
Chicago Training Center
Chicago Voyagers
Friends of Momentum Bike Clubs
Gardeneers
Grand Canyon Youth
Ironwood Tree Experience
Muddy Sneakers
SailMaine

Field-Building Grants \$225,000

Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions
Brushwood Center
YMCA of Greater Seattle

Impact Grants \$187,500

Beyond the Ball
Refugee Education & Adventure Challenge
Working Bikes

Other Giving \$96,000

Backyard Basecamp
Blue Sky Funders Forum
Families in Nature
Field Institute of Taos
Forefront
Watersmith Guild
Zuni Youth Enrichment Project



Presented to
HEATHER KUHLEN
October 25, 2025
*In recognition of her
dedication to connecting Texas
youth and families to nature.*

The Robert W. Crawford Prize

The purpose of the Prize is to recognize a living person who is dedicated to enhancing recreation opportunities for youth, making it possible for more young Americans to live healthy, participatory lives, thus reinforcing the work of the Foundation.

Each year the Prize is awarded to that person, whether professional or volunteer, who has made an extraordinary contribution in advancing outdoor recreation programs for youth from disadvantaged circumstances.

The prize consists of a \$50,000 cash award to support the charitable outdoor recreation-related project of the recipient's choice and is presented at the Annual Meeting of the Board of Trustees.

For 60 years Crawford established a national model for local government's provision of recreational services for all citizens. His creativity and innovative ideas won him international recognition. He also played an important role in the development and growth of the National Recreation Foundation. Crawford personified those qualities of leadership and commitment that the Foundation seeks to foster, which is why this achievement prize is named in his honor.



Heather Kuhlken

The Robert W. Crawford Prize 2025 Recipient



When Heather Kuhlken moved into a new house in Austin, Texas, with her young family in 2008, a neighbor came over and asked, “I heard you used to teach science outside. Can you take our family and friends camping and teach us some science?” Kuhlken pointed to her three- and six-year-old children and responded, “I don’t think so, that sounds too hard to do with two little kids.” As she reflected on the conversation, her love for teaching natural sciences to young people and her passion for spending time outdoors tugged at her heart. Within a few hours, Kuhlken changed her mind.

“I went inside and thought about how I would do it. I knew that I wanted to take all ages outside together. I wanted siblings and families to have shared memories in the outdoors,” said Kuhlken. “And, I wanted to teach natural sciences, but in a way that people wouldn’t realize they were learning. Basically, I planned three years of outings and then went back outside and said yes.” Families in Nature (FIN) was born.

Eight families signed up within 24 hours. By the end of the year, their nature community was going outside together every other week with 35 families (about 120 people), and they had to start a waiting list.

“What’s unique about our family-centric approach is that the kids are learning, the adults are learning, and they’re teaching each other,” said Kuhlken. “We’re reinforcing that sense of community that’s crucial to having positive, joyful, and transformative experiences in nature.”



Image this page: Families in Nature teaches children and their parents about ecology and conservation through hands-on experiences in nature, while they spend quality family time together.

Photo page 15: L to R: Sophie Twichell (President and CEO), Heather Kuhlken (2025 Crawford Prize recipient), Peggy Burnet (Chair, Board of Trustees), Lee Storey (Chair, Crawford Prize Committee).

FIN’s mission is to connect children and their families to nature, and to each other, through outdoor learning, playing, and volunteering. The learning comes in the form of “sneaky science,” as dubbed by Kuhlken. “Sneaky science is my phrase for what happens when you take people outside and their curiosity drives them to look deeper into nature. Then, a mentor adds a sentence or two of scientific knowledge that enhances the activity and drives their curiosity even further.”

Kuhlken’s nocturnal creatures lesson is a good example. She distributes headlamps to kids during a nighttime adventure. When they shine the light onto a field, it looks like it’s sparkling with glitter. Kuhlken provides some “sneaky science” when she explains that those sparkles are actually reflections from spider eyes. This two-minute science lesson teaches how nocturnal creatures, such as spiders, have a membrane in the back of their eyes that reflects light and allows them to gather twice as much light while seeing in the dark. “Then the kids excitedly run around looking for spiders and connecting with nature for the next hour,” says Kuhlken.

Since its backyard beginnings, FIN has grown into an international environmental education and conservation organization that has served more than 32,000 people, delivered 370,000+ hours of outdoor programming, and certified more than 250 nature guides. Its scalable model pairs hands-on, place-based learning with inclusive, nature-based leadership practices, helping young people translate curiosity into knowledge, and understanding into stewardship. Its Ecologist School curriculum, Nature Guide training, Junior Ecologist Certifications, Gear Library, and school and community partnerships deliver equitable, research-informed outdoor learning that builds scientific literacy, leadership, a deep love for nature, and a lifelong commitment to conservation.

In addition to leading and growing FIN, Kuhlken has presented on environmental education, equitable access, community resilience, and youth leadership at local, national, and international convenings, including most recently at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature World Conservation Congress. Kuhlken also authored a soon-to-be released book, *Adventures in Ecology: A Guidebook to Inspire Environmental Literacy, Outdoor Exploration, and Nature Connection for All* (Texas A&M University Press, 2026), that shares more than 1,100 hands-on science-based lessons for all ages that can be done anywhere with minimal materials.

NRF specifically recognized Kuhlken for incorporating and celebrating families in her community-rooted programs that transform young people’s relationship with nature. “When we first learned about Heather’s work with Families in Nature, we were impressed by her creativity and focus on families,” said NRF President and CEO Sophie Twichell.



“It is an honor to receive the Crawford Prize and be recognized and supported by the National Recreation Foundation,” said Kuhlken. “Families in Nature has national and international partners, and the Crawford Prize will help us meaningfully activate those partnerships and launch nature communities in new locations throughout the United States and beyond.”

To learn more about Families in Nature, visit familiesinnature.org

A photograph of two people standing in a field of tall, thin grasses under a clear blue sky. The person on the left is wearing a light-colored jacket and pants, and the person on the right is wearing a brown jacket and blue jeans. The foreground is filled with out-of-focus grasses and small flowers.

More Than the Sum of Our Parts —

How a Partnership with the Turner
Foundation is Transforming NRF's
Grantmaking

Troy Ettel, CEO, Turner Foundation, Inc. —

“Our directors note the value of partnerships and see how we have been able to achieve the most important goal of all — impacting the lives of even more young people — through our collaboration with NRF.”

For most of its six-decade history, National Recreation Foundation's (NRF) grantmaking followed a familiar pattern: identify strong programs, make thoughtful investments, and measure impact one grant at a time. It was good work. But five years ago, a new relationship reshaped how NRF thinks about what's possible and where.

That relationship is with the Turner Foundation, Inc. (TFI). What began as a conversation between two foundations with complementary missions has grown into a model for collaborative philanthropy—one that has unlocked new geographies, amplified impact, and brought critical support to communities that have long been underserved.

A Natural Fit, An Unlikely Match

On the surface, NRF and TFI might seem like an unlikely pair. NRF, which has been in the grantmaking business since 1965, has historically focused on urban youth development programs. TFI, established in 1990 by media mogul and philanthropist Ted Turner, was built around a different set of priorities: land conservation, biodiversity, renewable energy, and water resources. Having granted over \$400 million since its founding, TFI directs its family's philanthropy toward the communities near Turner's extensive land holdings in Georgia, Florida, New Mexico, Montana, South Dakota, Kansas, and Nebraska—predominantly rural landscapes far from NRF's traditional grantmaking footprint.

But look closer, and the alignment becomes clear. NRF's core mission centers on connecting young people with the outdoors and nature. TFI's conservation work depends on communities that

are rooted in and steward those same landscapes. When both foundations began exploring what they could do together, the result was less overlap than it was a perfect dovetail of strengths.

“As NRF is focused on youth development through outdoor recreation and a connection to nature, linking the grantmaking of these two funders has proven powerful,” noted NRF Board Chair Peggy Burnet. “We each bring strengths to the work that enhance the whole.”

Reaching Communities Left Behind

The most consequential outcome of the NRF/TFI partnership has been its reach. Together, the two foundations have directed resources to Indigenous-led organizations, Gulf Coast communities, and rural youth-serving programs, places that philanthropy too often overlooks.

TFI brought something invaluable to this work: established trust. Its decades of presence in rural and Indigenous communities meant that potential grantees weren't starting a relationship from scratch. NRF, in turn, brought its deep expertise in youth development grantmaking, its robust leadership training and capacity-building offerings, and a fresh set of relationships in the outdoor recreation world. Together, they could open doors that neither could as easily open alone.

How It Works: A Better Model for Grantees

The mechanics of the partnership are as thoughtful as its intent. NRF and TFI operate a matching grant model: each foundation's commitment to an approved project is essentially matched by the other, effectively doubling the investment and increasing return on every philanthropic dollar.

But the benefits for grantees extend beyond funding. Because NRF and TFI share the due diligence process—meetings, site visits, and applications often happen once, not twice—organizations spend less time managing funders and more time doing their work. That reduction in administrative burden is itself a form of investment, one that allows under-resourced organizations to direct their energy where it matters most.

Grantees also gain access to NRF's suite of leadership development and capacity-building programs, offering organizational support that extends well beyond any single grant cycle.

Five Years, Real Numbers

To date, NRF has supported 34 grantees through 70 grants, totaling over \$1.2 million. When TFI's matched contributions are included, cumulative dollars across the partnership exceed \$2.5 million—a figure that continues to grow as new partners join the table.

New Partners at the Table

One of the most encouraging signs of the partnership's effectiveness is the attention it has attracted from other funders. The NRF/TFI model has become a proof of concept—demonstrating that collaborative, trust-based grantmaking in underserved communities produces results that draw additional investment.

In 2025 alone, several new partners stepped forward:

- ▶ Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's Outdoor Fund awarded NRF/TFI grantee Wozu, based on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation straddling North and South Dakota, a \$5,000 gear grant for its youth fishing program.

70
NRF
GRANTS
Awarded

34
NRF
GRANTEES
Supported

\$2.5 Million
Cumulative
Matched
Dollars

- ▶ SITKA Gear provided outdoor clothing and gear valued at over \$32,000 to grantee partners in Arkansas, the Dakotas, and New Mexico in support of youth hunting programs.
- ▶ Riverside Church's Densford Fund joined the collaboration, offering grants of \$5,000 to \$10,000 for educational programs serving Indigenous youth.

These additions don't just bring more dollars—they signal a growing ecosystem of support



Story Riders empowers youth in New Mexico to reconnect with their natural and cultural heritage while providing practical training in bicycle safety, maintenance, and guided cycling experiences.

around organizations and communities that have historically struggled to attract philanthropic attention.

Building a Broader Field

The partnership's ripple effects extend into the funders consortium, bringing together a dozen small and medium-sized foundations giving in Georgia and Florida. The group meets regularly to exchange knowledge, explore ideas, and identify opportunities for co-funding partnerships—expanding the network of funders who might be brought into this kind of collaborative model.

NRF trustees have also played an active leadership role, participating in multi-state familiarization visits with current and prospective grantees in Indigenous and rural outdoor recreation programs. These visits have deepened NRF's understanding of the communities it serves and strengthened the relationships that make trust-based grantmaking possible.

Looking Ahead

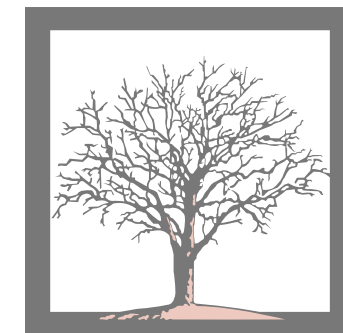
The partnership with Turner Foundation represents more than a successful five-year collaboration. It is a proof of what NRF can become: a foundation that combines its deep youth development grantmaking expertise with a genuine presence in the communities—rural, Indigenous, underserved—that need it most.

NRF's partnership grants with the Turner Foundation give us the ability to at least double our impact in one of NRF's new strategic areas of focus. The alignment between the partnership and NRF's broader strategic priorities—growing the field, enhancing giving capacity, serving those communities with the greatest need—is not a coincidence. It is the result of intentional

relationship-building and a willingness to ask what more becomes possible when we stop working alone.

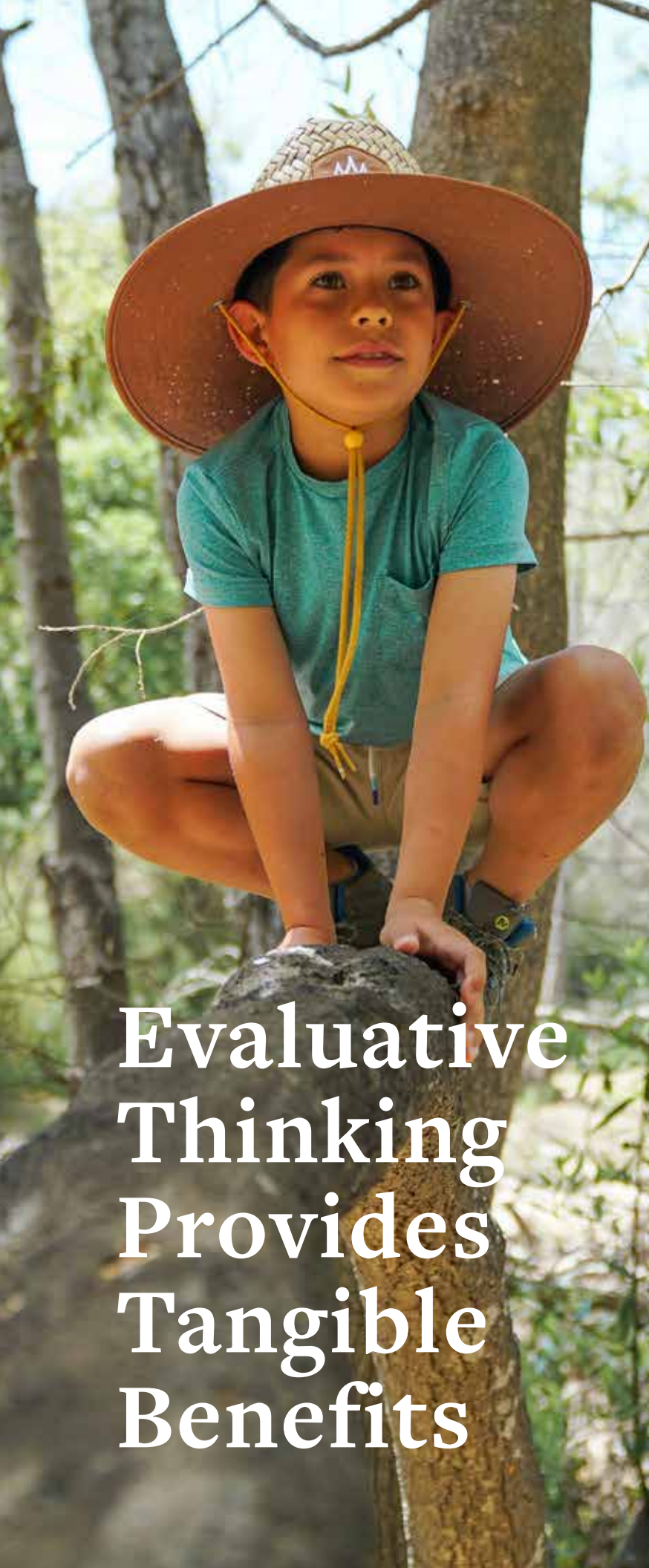
We are excited to expand this partnership and to explore others. The Turner family's energy, resources, and shared commitment to a healthier, more connected world make them ideal partners for this journey.

TURNER
FOUNDATION
INC.



Chip Davison, Trustee, National Recreation Foundation —

“The Turner Foundation doesn't just align with our mission — they amplify it. Their partnership grants are doubling our reach into Indigenous and rural communities, a cornerstone of our new strategic direction.”



Evaluative Thinking Provides Tangible Benefits

Grantee Partner —

“We deeply appreciated the opportunity to consult one-on-one with the team at NC State. They counseled us on questions we had around our theory of change, the areas of impact that we measure, and how we present our findings. This sort of individual consult is incredibly valuable. We would typically only have access to this kind of expertise if we paid steep costs for consultants. We’re very thankful for this support.”

Evaluation is a critical tool for organizations to improve programs, measure success, and communicate impact. Good evaluation offers insight to help programs understand what’s working and what isn’t. For learning organizations that are committed to improving practices over time, evaluation may be the single most important tool to identify where to focus more attention and which changes may be the most effective. Despite its importance, evaluation often falls down the priority list for small organizations struggling to keep up with the demands of direct programming. Evaluation can feel like it has a high bar to entry because it requires data collection and analysis. Because of this, NRF offers evaluation support to grantees through a partnership with researchers at North Carolina State University.

NRF’s collaboration with NC State began in 2021 to support the evaluation needs of Outdoor Grantees. Since then, it has expanded, as NRF learned more about the critical role evaluation can play for small community-based organizations. In 2025, NRF launched a new program in partnership with NC State to offer a webinar series focused on the different applications and benefits of evaluation. The series kicked off with a session focused on using evaluation to strengthen grant proposals. In an increasingly competitive funding environment, most small organizations are spending more and more time applying for grants. Focusing on evaluation can help improve the return on investment of that time and effort. Evaluative thinking can strengthen a grant proposal by allowing organizations to better articulate their theory of change, more clearly

define their outcomes and how they will achieve them, and integrate data to more powerfully tell their story. In addition to grant writing, evaluation also offers valuable data for recruiting new families to join a program and communicating value to potential community partners.

The benefits of evaluation go beyond external communication. Regularly checking in on how things are going also helps the people already in a program feel heard and valued. This includes staff, parents or guardians, and youth themselves. Deliberately asking youth participants what they think can have a ripple effect. Including youth voice in evaluation is beneficial for program providers and for youth development outcomes. Youth who feel they are heard when sharing their opinions perceive more benefits from program participation and also carry their sense of efficacy forward to other experiences. When young people have formative experiences that reinforce the value of their ideas, they are more likely to continue to share their voices.

Even beyond asking kids to fill out a survey at the end of a program, youth can be valuable collaborators when it comes to evaluation. Research shows us that including young people in decision-making processes can lead to innovative solutions and more compassionate responses. Their proximity to the challenges and opportunities within a program allows them to approach problem solving with creativity, clarity, and a deep understanding of what meaningful change can look like.



Youth can be involved in evaluation in a variety of ways. While surveys and interviews are worthwhile evaluation techniques, kids can also offer feedback through art, storytelling, and community projects. Any time program participants are creating something, whether it's a photograph, a drawing, a short film, a presentation to parents or community members, or a piece of writing, they're telling us something valuable about their perspective and what they've learned. That is precious data that can be examined to better understand the impact of a program and used to help communicate that impact. As Dr. Lincoln Larson, one of our evaluation partners, noted, "This collaboration has helped organizations see that evaluation doesn't have to be a scary, time-consuming burden. With a little creative thinking, evaluation can fit nicely within existing program structure, helping to demonstrate value and improve delivery without a lot of extra work."

While evaluation can be intimidating at first, it is clear that the benefits are worthwhile. To help grantees access these benefits, NRF looks forward to continued partnership with our evaluation experts at NC State and ongoing conversations with the organizations we serve to better understand their needs and challenges.



Based in Washington state, the Vamos Outdoors Project builds community through outdoor and recreational activities that empower participants, build confidence, and foster connection to the land.

Recreation is an essential component of a fulfilling life for people of all ages. It is especially essential for young people, because it provides opportunities for them to grow into the best possible versions of themselves. In outdoor recreation, adventure-based activities often look like the most exciting part. When done right, however, the recreation activity is a medium through which participants achieve something far more important than completing a new hike or mastering a complicated paddling maneuver. When young people have the opportunity to learn new skills, work together, and take appropriate risks, they build resilience, become leaders, and form lasting relationships. The recreation activity is just a way to get there.

Additionally, recreation supports children's development by encouraging safe movement, healthy risk-taking, and time outdoors, while also fostering teamwork and providing meaningful opportunities for mentorship. It emphasizes developmental areas that aren't always covered in school settings. For example, recreation activities that encourage creativity and cooperation can help kids develop a sense of autonomy. Opportunities to participate in group decision-making and work through different ways to solve a problem help youth develop confidence and a stronger sense of self. These are essential ingredients for a healthy transition into adulthood.

A perfect example of an NRF grantee using recreation to do deep youth development work is the Refugee Education and Adventure Challenge (REACH). REACH serves refugee youth and their families in the Chicago area. While outdoor recreation is the hook that brings families and kids into REACH's programs, the most important learning is happening below the surface.

Outdoor Recreation Goes Beyond Fun & Games

Participants travel to new parts of the country, allowing them to see their new home from a fresh perspective and better understand the history and systems that define the U.S. Fostering a connection to the land and becoming more familiar with seasonal rhythms can help create a sense of place. This eases the adjustment to a new place and ultimately can allow kids to feel at home in a place that previously felt unfamiliar. College and career preparation are also embedded in all of REACH's programs and camps, and trainings are intentionally designed to help youth see beyond the immediate, discover a world of possibility, and start thinking about what's next for them. Perhaps Narges, an 18-year-old peer mentor originally from Afghanistan, says it best when reflecting on the impact of her time with REACH: "REACH is where I learned to leave my comfort zone, uncover hidden parts of myself, and build the leadership I was missing. Without it, I would have lived an ordinary life."

Recreation is also a powerful mental health intervention. Young people need spaces where they can be themselves, build community, and play freely. At a time when youth mental health is in desperate need of increased attention, the importance of helping kids feel connected and learn how to form healthy relationships while also having fun cannot be overstated. An NRF grantee that centers holistic youth wellness as part of their outdoor recreation model is the Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (ZYEP). ZYEP was founded with the goal of helping Zuni youth have access to safe spaces to practice wellness and build cultural connection. The kids at ZYEP get to have fun painting, playing sports, making pottery, gardening, and hiking, but there's something deeper at work as well. All of ZYEP's programs are centered on an assets-based approach to youth

development that fosters a new generation of Zuni leaders who feel valued, respected, and grounded in their identities. The ZYEP model focuses on intentional mentorship that helps kids form relationships with people of all ages in their community and build networks of support to make sure young people don't fall through the cracks.

Every grantee focuses on outcomes based on the needs and context of their community, whether it's helping refugee youth acclimate to their new home in Chicago or building systems of care and support for youth living in the Zuni Pueblo. Ultimately, NRF is committed to making the benefits of outdoor recreation accessible to the kids who need it most.



Six Decades of Sharpening Focus

For millions of young people in America, access to enriching outdoor recreation is not a given — it's a privilege. The National Recreation Foundation has spent 60 years working to change that, with a mission that has evolved alongside America's changing understanding of health, equity, and opportunity. In the 1960s, NRF emphasized broad public benefit, supporting recreation and healthy lifestyles for all Americans through strong civic institutions; *"to further the cause of recreation,*

leisure and safe play and healthy lifestyles for all Americans." By the 2000s, that commitment sharpened into a more strategic focus on youth, investing in recreation as a life-enhancing force for those with limited resources and access; *"dedicated to enhancing the role of recreation as a positive force in improving the quality of life of youth."* Today, NRF's mission reflects a contemporary understanding of youth development and well-being — rooted in the

belief that meaningful outdoor experiences are not extracurricular, but essential in shaping how young people grow, connect, and thrive:

"The National Recreation Foundation expands access for young people to play, explore, learn, and grow in the outdoors."



Chicago Training Center (CTC) is dedicated to empowering the youth of Chicago through the sport of competitive rowing. CTC provides opportunities that inspire young individuals to push their limits and excel both athletically and academically.

Chicago Training Center believes that through teamwork and a supportive environment, its students can develop essential life skills that will serve them well beyond the water.

Empowering Grantee Partners: Support That Goes Beyond Funding

Because grantee partners know best what they need, NRF begins each year surveying its grantee partners regarding which shared learning and professional development topics would be most relevant to and valued by their organizations and staff. In 2025, the top requested areas for support were soliciting major gifts, cultivating individual donors, board and leadership development, organizational health, program evaluation, and storytelling. In response, NRF offered a year-long learning agenda that included:

- NRF Peer Leadership Circles, facilitated by executive coach Dawn Hicks, created space for grantee organizations' top leaders to pause, reflect, and be supported by their peers. Within each circle, the leaders draw on collective wisdom to think through real-time challenges, while building supportive and lasting relationships. The learning is practical, the conversations are meaningful, and the impact carries beyond the circle. Dawn also hosted **Nurturing Your Soul: Sustainable Self-Care for Everyday Life** for a larger group of NRF grantees. This workshop was designed to help participants discover realistic and practical approaches to managing their physical and emotional well-being during ever-changing and complex times.
- Jodi Patt, Principal with C3 Legal, provided NRF grantees a refresher on key 501(c)(3) legal compliance basics during **Nonprofit Legal Basics: Navigate Compliance with Confidence**, which covered topics such as annual filings required to maintain tax-exempt status and the fiduciary duties of board members.
- Co-founder of Boyz N The Wood, CJ Goulding, hosted two jam sessions designed to build a supportive community of practice

among peer organizations. During **Dollars and Goodsense: A Nonprofit Fundraising Jam Session**, leaders explored successful development strategies, broke down common fundraising challenges, and shared new donor engagement techniques. The second session, **LEGOS :: The Building Blocks of Storytelling and Narrative**, provided space for grantees to play around with the building blocks of narrative and storytelling.

- Grant Writing for Dummies author Beverly Browning hosted **Elevate Your Fundraising and Grantseeking Capacity in the Current Political Environment**, which helped organizations strengthen their financial capacity-building strategies, including: fundraising by board members and the financial investment responsibility of the board; adopting diverse fundraising strategies that build long-term sustainability in the current political climate; planning for an endowment fund; identifying funding resources; building relationships with new potential funders; building collaborative partnerships; researching best practices; and writing award-winning grant requests.
- **Planning to Action: Six Phases for Strategic Plans That Stick**, led by Sophia Shaw and Adam Wolford of PlanPerfect, walked grantees through six practical, proven phases of strategic planning that help organizations move from good intentions to meaningful outcomes around their strategic plans. A small cohort then embarked on a year-long strategic planning journey using PlanPerfect's AI-based software and shared execution support and training.
- NRF has partnered with researchers Kathryn Stevenson and Lincoln Larson from NC State's Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism Management since 2021. In 2025, NRF engaged them to share their evaluation expertise with NRF

grantee partners by kicking off a three-part series of evaluation workshops. During **Making Your Grant Proposals Stand Out with Evaluative Thinking and Data**, Larson and Stevenson shared tips that included: how to frame the problem needing to be addressed; best practices for articulating a theory of change; recommendations for clearly defining outcomes and how they will be achieved; and how to integrate existing evaluation data to help tell stories.

- In partnership with other funders, NRF convened New Mexico grantees in Albuquerque, New Mexico in September for an in-person training and capacity-building day. Hosted at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, sessions focused on leadership development and succession planning.

All workshops, trainings and coachings are offered to grantees, past and present, at no cost. NRF invests in these shared learning and professional and organizational development opportunities to help support and equip grantees with tool, skills, strategies and connections to maximize impact and long-term success.



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