

¡ÓYEME! GRANT PROPOSAL 2017

Written by Kristen Nassar on behalf of Imagination Stage.

Sensitive information and foundation details redacted.

ORGANIZATION MISSION AND HISTORY

Founded in 1979 with a handful of children in a single room, Imagination Stage has become a nationally recognized theatre arts center respected for its high quality, innovative programming and for providing a safe place for children to embrace and explore their creativity. We reach 100,000 children and their families each year through professional theatre productions and performing arts-based classes. The mission of Imagination Stage is to empower young people of all backgrounds and abilities to discover their voice and identity through performing arts education and professional theatre. Our goal is to move toward a future where theatre experiences are a fundamental aspect of children's lives, nourishing their creative spirit, inspiring them to embrace the complexity and diversity of their world, and helping them overcome challenges with hope, courage and, above all, creativity.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

According to a study performed by the Migration Policy Institute in 2015, Montgomery County has one of the highest concentrations of unaccompanied child migrants in the country; 1,571 were released here between October 2013 and August 2015 alone. In the 2014-2015 academic year, registration of Central American students in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) increased by 44.7%. The 2016-2017 school year saw another surge in referrals of unaccompanied child migrants to the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, resulting in numbers that may be even higher than the initial surge in 2014. The school system's capacity for counseling and mental-health therapy is strained under the sudden increase of students with critical needs. Local agencies are working hard to provide education, health, legal and other services, but set-backs in these students' socio-emotional development are more difficult to address.

Most of these children speak little to no English and have undergone trauma as a result of abuse by gangs or smugglers. Many girls and young women have been victims of gender-based violence and have only narrowly escaped gender-motivated killings, which the Women's Refugee Commission cites as the leading cause of death for women of reproductive age in Honduras. Grief over separation from family and friends back home, depression, and feelings of

displacement are common among children who have recently arrived. Peers who don't understand the difficulties these children have gone through can be unwelcoming, forcing young refugees into isolation and making them vulnerable to targeting by gangs. Even reuniting with parents or other family members who have been living in the United States can present challenges since, in many cases, they have not seen each other for many years. In fall of 2014, Imagination Stage successfully piloted an out-of-school time program to fill this pertinent need for healing and connection amongst these children. That program has grown and developed to become *¡Óyeme!*, meaning, "Hear Me!" in Spanish.

Now in 2017, *¡Óyeme!* consists of:

- Educational workshops for middle and high school students year-round;
- *Óyeme, the Beautiful* – The *¡Óyeme!* Play;
- Post-Performance Workshops led by a teaching artist; and
- Professional Development for teachers in Montgomery County and Washington, DC.

EDUCATIONAL WORKSHOPS: *¡Óyeme!* works with Central American refugee youth as they overcome trauma, adjust to a life far from family, learn a new language, and try to fit in with other students. We utilize the arts to address the complex social issues they confront upon arrival in the U.S. 2 Theatre activities provide an effective outlet for them to share their stories, facilitate emotional recovery, and aid in adjustment. Most sessions involve group work that encourages the students to collaborate, which fosters a community and mutual support system that they can depend on even after the workshops end. Through artistic development, students simultaneously enhance their English speaking and writing skills in an enjoyable and meaningful way. These three intimate workshop groups of 15-24 youth and three to five adults create the opportunity for personal attention and mentorship, motivating these students to stay in school and allowing teaching artists to identify children with critical unmet needs and direct them to the appropriate resources.

THE *¡ÓYEME!* PLAY: In addition to forging relationships and providing direct assistance to refugee youth, *¡Óyeme!* seeks to assist schools affected by the influx of newcomers to make the classroom a more welcoming space for these students. Most Montgomery County and DC teachers have little to no experience working with students who speak limited English or

struggle with trauma on a daily basis. *Óyeme, the Beautiful*, a play written by Miriam Gonzales based on the students in the first ¡*Óyeme!* sessions, toured nine locations, including Montgomery County schools, DC Public and Public Charter Schools, and community centers in Spring of 2017, reaching 1,800 audience members. The tour concluded with a four-day run at Gala Hispanic Theatre in DC, where nearly 600 DC students were able to attend and were provided with free transportation. Every class attending the performance at each location also received a Learning Guide in advance, which provides historical and dramaturgical context for the play in addition to activities designed to help students examine their similarities and differences from refugee students.

POST-SHOW WORKSHOPS: Each performance of *Óyeme, the Beautiful* is followed by a 30-minute workshop that includes the actors in the cast and is led by a trained facilitator. Audience members are guided through a series of writing, drawing, and discussion-based activities to help them explore and understand the issues and ideas uncovered in the play. During the workshop, the audience is encouraged to ask questions of the actors while they are “in character.” They also choose one of the characters and write a postcard from his or her perspective to friends or loved ones in their home country about life in America. Other activities include asking the students to imagine a wish or “American dream” for one of the play’s characters, and to envision their own “American dreams” for themselves. The goal of these workshops is to encourage discussion and personal connection to the topics of the play.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: To further empower Montgomery County and DC teachers with the tools necessary to address the challenges and needs that refugee students present in the classroom – which are often not covered in conventional teacher preparation programs – Imagination Stage crafted a professional development training entitled “Providing Voice for Students Who Are Often Unheard.” During these 90-minute sessions, educators learn to use theatre as a vehicle for creating a safe space in the classroom, promoting language development, and allowing students to connect with their peers. The training session also explores the ¡*Óyeme!* play and provides hands-on activities for teachers and school leaders to bring back to their students. Imagination Stage held the first “Providing Voice” professional development workshop on March 20, 2017 at Sacred Heart School in DC. With 23 teachers in attendance, it was filled to capacity. In 2017-2018, we will offer three of these opportunities.

Over the past three years, *¡Óyeme!* has developed from a small program to a robust community initiative, building on experience and the expertise of our staff and key stakeholders to create an established and effective framework for achieving social change in Montgomery County and DC. The growing base of *¡Óyeme!* supporters allows us to widen our reach each year. The support of [REDACTED] at \$10,000 would be gratefully directed towards the out-of-school time workshops, which provide social and emotional support to middle school-aged Central American refugees through 40 hours of programming time. [REDACTED]'s contribution would also help sustain *¡Óyeme!*'s in-school program at Gaithersburg High School, which serves in an English Language Learning (ELL) class once a week for 20 hours of total programming.

GRANT USAGE

¡Óyeme!'s programs are funded entirely by the generosity of donors in order to keep the workshops, performances, and professional development trainings free for the students, teachers, and schools, who already experience financial pressure. With the addition of [REDACTED] as a major *¡Óyeme!* contributor, Imagination Stage would be able to meet its goal of adding a third educational workshop in partnership with Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), which provides pro bono legal aid to unaccompanied child migrants as well as public education and outreach, increasing the number of students served from 40 to 60.

Support for the educational *¡Óyeme!* workshops helps maintain the high-quality programming that we offer these at-risk students. Lesson plans are carefully curated by trained Imagination Stage faculty and staff with input from the *¡Óyeme!* Advisory Council, including Antonio Tijerino, President & CEO of the Hispanic Heritage Foundation; Gabriel Albornoz, Director of the Montgomery County Department of Recreation; Dr. Maria Navarro, Chief Academic Officer of Montgomery County Public Schools; Nancy Navarro, Montgomery County Councilmember; and Dr. Susan J. Terrio, professor of Anthropology at Georgetown University and author of *Whose Child Am I?: Unaccompanied, Undocumented Children in U.S. Immigration Custody*.

Our teaching team also works closely with the Street Outreach Network, a gang prevention program in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) of Montgomery County, MD. Two social workers from this organization attend each out-of-school time session with the

students and communicate weekly with our teaching artists about the students' current circumstances and needs. A key partner in working with the students is Luis Cardona, Youth Violence Prevention Coordinator of the DHHS. He is extremely knowledgeable regarding the immigrant population living throughout the entire region and helps us to engage the target audience.

¡Óyeme! also provides a meal for the out-of-school time students every week, art supplies for hands-on activities, a performing arts-based field trip, and an excellent teaching staff of local artists involved in the Latin American community, a project director, a project coordinator, and a translator. At the end of the school year, students in the out-of-school time session stage a performance at the Silver Spring Civic Center for family, friends, teachers, and civic leaders, sharing the art they have created together throughout the year.

Through *¡Óyeme!*, Imagination Stage achieves its mission of making theatre arts accessible in the Washington Metropolitan area and using creativity and imagination to empower young people to overcome the unique challenges they face. Our funders allow our dedicated and skilled education and teaching staff to guide Central American refugee youth in Montgomery County and DC through the process of achieving openness and healing, improving mental health and social competence, enhancing grades and English language skills, and creating a lasting student and mentor network. In addition to the community support and awareness and increased empathy within schools that the *¡Óyeme!* play, post-show workshop series, and "Providing Voice" teacher training help build in our area, the initiative provides at-risk students the opportunity and tools to be active participants in the community and give back through their creativity, innovation, and art.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Due to its multifaceted nature, the *¡Óyeme!* initiative targets four related audiences.

The in-school and out-of-school time workshops focus on meeting the needs of unaccompanied child migrants from Central America. These young people are also a key audience for the play *Óyeme, the Beautiful*, as it presents a chance for them to see stories similar to their own

represented on stage. This production and related educational resources are geared towards local middle, elementary, and high school students of all ethnicities and backgrounds as well, providing a social and cultural learning opportunity. The professional development training is designed for middle and high school teachers who have a significant immigrant population in their schools. The final target audience is civic leaders and other stakeholders in the community.

The geographic areas served by this initiative include the Metropolitan Washington area at large, particularly Montgomery County, MD and the District of Columbia.

During the 2016-2017 academic year, *¡Óyeme!* successfully reached all segments of its target audience.

The educational workshops served approximately 40 Central American migrant students in Montgomery County throughout the year.

Óyeme, the Beautiful premiered at the Silver Spring Civic Center in October of 2016 to an audience of local and national influencers, such as staff from the offices of Senator Chris Van Hollen and Representative Don Beyer, as well as leaders from the MCPS and DCPS administrations, the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County (AHCMC), the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities (DCCAH), the Montgomery County Council, América Solidaria, the Capital Area Immigrants' Rights (CAIR) Coalition, Crittenton Services, and the Annapolis Police Department.

In March-April of 2017, *Óyeme, the Beautiful* was presented to a cumulative audience of 1,800 community members, primarily public school students. Each attendee also participated in the post-show workshop.

Twenty-three teachers from MCPS, DCPS, and DC Public Charter Schools participated in the professional development training held on March 20 at Sacred Heart School in DC, which was filled to capacity.

In the coming year, we plan to significantly expand our reach to each of the project's target audiences. An additional educational workshop will increase the number of refugee students

served to 60. The tour of *Óyeme, the Beautiful* will perform at an added six locations, and its run at Gala Hispanic Theatre will lengthen by two days, increasing its cumulative audience to 2,250. We will also triple the number of teacher trainings offered, allowing us to serve as many as 60 educators. Furthermore, we are working with our partners to create another opportunity for more civic leaders to attend *Óyeme, the Beautiful* on Capitol Hill.

STAFF RESOURCES

Our team includes the ¡*Óyeme!* Advisory Council, whose distinguished members are detailed above, as well as several Imagination Stage staff members, including:

- Director of Education Joanne Seelig;
- Arts Integration Associate Emily Veno; and
- A translator trained in Montgomery County School Standards, Latin American culture, and theatre arts.

This talented team works with the Advisory Council, Luis Cardona, the Street Outreach Network, and KIND to engage the target population. They also provide curriculum support to the teaching artists and aid with classroom management. Teaching artists include:

- Miriam Gonzales, a playwright who worked with the students to develop *Óyeme, the Beautiful* and continues to teach them how to express themselves through poetry and dramatic writing. Gonzales' other credits include: The South Overlook Oaks (Aurand Harris Memorial Playwriting Award), The Smartest Girl in the World (Write Now Award), Sunny and Licorice, and Bertie, Maggie and the Magic Zero; and
- Elena Velasco, a director and choreographer, who both teaches the students and directs *Óyeme, the Beautiful*. Velasco has worked for over 20 years as a theatre professional, focused on performance, education, and humanitarian justice. Directing credits include: Convergence Theatre, Capital Fringe, Synetic Theatre, Source Theatre, and Catholic University

TIMETABLE

Director of Education Joanne Seelig is working this summer with the global research, technology, and consulting firm, the Advisory Board Company, to build a more inclusive framework for evaluating the development of arts skills in all three educational workshops and the socio-emotional growth of students in the out-of-school time sessions.

In September of 2017, the *¡Óyeme!* team will update last year's lesson plans to further refine the educational workshops. Our partners at KIND and the Street Outreach Network will concurrently identify young Central American immigrants in need of socio-emotional support and write reports on each child's needs and background for the *¡Óyeme!* teaching staff. Sessions will begin in October and run on a weekly basis through May of 2018, when the out-of-school time students will perform at the Silver Spring Civic Center and have their arts-based field trip, which this past school year consisted of attending a production of *In the Heights* at Gala Hispanic Theatre.

The three teacher trainings will take place throughout the school year in November, February, and March. Imagination Stage staff is currently working to provide appropriate venues that are accessible to the majority of Montgomery County and DC teachers.

In April, we will remount the production of *Óyeme, the Beautiful* for another, expanded tour. We are also working with KIND and the Hispanic Heritage Foundation to present a performance for policy-makers on Capitol Hill.

MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES

EDUCATIONAL WORKSHOPS: The objectives of both the in-school and out-of-school time workshops for the middle and high-school aged Central American refugee youth we serve are: (1) socio-emotional growth, (2) development of artistic voice, and (3) improved attendance and performance in school.

As *¡Óyeme!* has expanded, Imagination Stage has been working to develop a framework for evaluating these objectives in our educational workshops. At this point, information on our students' schoolwork and attendance over time is gathered informally through relationships with their teachers and in-school visits.

Previously, student feedback at the end of the school year has served as our primary evaluation for socioemotional growth and development of artistic voice; however The Advisory Board and Joanne Seelig have broken down these goals into measurable outcomes which the teaching team will now evaluate for each student on a regular basis.

In both the in-school and out-of-school time sessions, students work on three major artistic projects at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. Starting this October, the *¡Óyeme!* teaching team will assess each of these projects to track development of artistic voice. Criteria will include:

- Oral Communication Skills
- Physical Communication Skills
- Creative Problem Solving Abilities
- Initiative, Motivation, and Commitment
- Working Cooperatively
- Ability to Take Direction
 - Adaptability
 - Flexibility
 - Accepting Criticism
- Leadership Skills

While socio-emotional growth is a key component in all of the educational workshops, teaching artists in the out-of-school time session have more flexibility and time to track improvement after each meeting. Therefore, they will complete a "Socio-Emotional Growth Tracker" for each student every week. Criteria will include:

- Self-awareness: The ability to know one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, drives, values, and goals and to recognize their impact on others.

- Self-regulation: Controlling or redirecting one's disruptive emotions and impulses and adapting to changing circumstances.
- Social skill: Managing relationships by communicating effectively.
- Empathy: Considering other people's feelings, especially when making decisions.
- Motivation: Being driven to achieve for the sake of achievement.

THE ¡ÓYEME! PLAY AND POST-SHOW WORKSHOPS: The regional tour of *Óyeme, the Beautiful* aims to educate students in Montgomery County and DC on the conflict in Central America and the circumstances of unaccompanied child migrants, thus building empathy in school and in the community. An additional purpose of the play is to directly aid in refugee students' healing by showing them a representation of their stories and experiences on stage.

Qualitative feedback is gathered through the post-show workshops, where the students perform writing exercises based on what they learned from the play and their personal connection to the characters. This is supplemented by teacher surveys conducted through the independent DC Arts & Humanities Education Collaborative. All of respondents this year reported that the performance and post-show workshop experience met or exceeded expectations, described the event as "high quality," and found ways to incorporate the lessons from *Óyeme, the Beautiful* into their classrooms with the help of the Learning Guide.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: The goal of the "Providing Voice" professional development trainings for Montgomery County and DC teachers is to empower local educators to promote language development in their immigrant students, as well as to build a safe classroom space where at-risk students can participate freely and share their stories.

The trainings are evaluated through surveys administered at the end of each session. Last year's training reflected positively in the evaluation, with high ratings for the classroom techniques presented and comments noting a deeper understanding of their students who've fled violence in their home countries to make new lives for themselves in our schools and communities.