

ENGAGING YOUR ALUMNI

Engaging alumni—as mentors, donors, ambassadors, board members, etc., takes work but can yield significant benefits for your organization. To learn about how to effectively involve alumni, we asked Guild members who have developed alumni engagement programs to share their experiences and advice.

This article highlights the experiences of five member organizations:

CALARTS COMMUNITY ARTS PARTNERSHIP (CAP),

VALENCIA, CA: CAP is a program of the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) that links the Institute and diverse communities throughout Los Angeles County through free, after-school, and school-based arts programs for youth. Any college student that has taught in a CAP program and any youth that has participated in a CAP class are considered alumni.

CASITA MARIA CENTER FOR ARTS & EDUCATION,

BRONX, NY: Offers programs and services starting at the age of six until young people graduate from college while providing family learning through the arts. Prior to 2000, alumni included anyone who came to Casita Maria, either to play, receive homework help, or attend its dance parties. Since 2000, Casita changed its definition of alumni to only those who participate in its after-school program.

MOSAIC YOUTH THEATRE OF DETROIT, DETROIT, MI:

A youth development program that concentrates on helping young artists excel on stage and in life through professional performing arts training and the creation of first-rate theatrical and musical art. Mosaic alumni are young artists who have completed at least a year in Mosaic's core training program (Main Stage/Second Stage).

THIRD STREET MUSIC SCHOOL SETTLEMENT, NEW YORK,

NY: The oldest community school of music in the nation, Third Street currently provides music, dance, and visual arts instruction at its main school and through 25 school and community center partnerships. Third Street counts among its alumni anyone who has enrolled in any program for any length of time.

SAY SÍ, SAN ANTONIO, TX: A year round, long-term, multidisciplinary arts program that provides students opportunities to develop artistic and social skills in preparation for higher educational advancement and professional careers. SAY Sí alumni are former students who completed their time at SAY Sí after their senior year of high school and meet all the requirements of SAY Sí graduates, including portfolio creation and development, participation in at least two college visits and a financial aid workshop, application to at least three post-secondary institutions, completion of senior thesis exhibit and presentation, and other criteria.

WHY DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION/PROGRAM ENGAGE ALUMNI?

THIRD STREET: For Third Street, there are at least two very compelling reasons for engaging alumni:

- Assessing the long-term effect of arts learning: Connecting with alumni helps our organization know more about the life-long effect that arts learning may have on students' lives. Tracking this data over the long-term is useful for building our case for support.

- Expanding pool of key stakeholders: Alumni's first-hand knowledge of and commitment to the organization and its mission makes them excellent prospects for volunteering, including board membership; connecting the organization to others in the community, including student recruitment; acting as ambassadors; and becoming donors through annual giving and estate planning. One of the Third Street's most engaged board members and generous donors attended early childhood classes at Third Street for a relatively short time in the 1960's; her experience had a profound effect on her life. She is now committed to making sure that others have the same opportunities.

MOSAIC: Mosaic Youth Theatre helps to build social and professional networks and a college-going culture by connecting our current young artists with alumni achieving success in work and higher education. Alumni who are working professionals in the performing arts are often brought in as teaching artists, guest artists, choreographers, etc.

CAP: Many of CAP's youth participants end up attending college at CalArts and CAP provides them with scholarship funds that we raise to enable them to enroll. Former CAP youth participants make up 4% of the entire CalArts student population. The majority of them end up teaching in CAP, some in the same programs in which they participated as young people. We also have two former CAP youth participants who have been hired as CalArts faculty.

SAY SÍ: Engaging alumni furthers many of our core values such as "Contributing to a Community of Reciprocal Learning" and "Providing a Culture of Support, Creativity and Purpose." Alumni engagement enriches our community of support because they are our biggest advocates. They know first-hand the level of commitment our program demands and encourage their younger relatives, students, and friends' children to participate. Staying connected with alumni also enables us to continue our support by notifying them of relevant education and work opportunities and offering them general encouragement.

CASITA MARIA: Many of our alumni over our eight decade history are now pioneers in their fields and have made important contributions to the South Bronx, New York, the nation, and the world. From Hip Hop pioneers such as Grandmaster Melle Mel and Grandmaster Flash, to legends such as Rita Moreno and Tito Puente, to local community leaders, such as Robert Sancho and Marta Rivera, our alumni have been exemplary figures in a community that is in desperate need of role models. Casita Maria reaches out to alumni to secure their financial support and pro bono services, but also to connect them with younger generations who can learn and gain inspiration from them.

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FORUM

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WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SPECIFIC WAYS YOU ENGAGE ALUMNI?

Formally Welcome Students to Your Alumni Association When They Graduate

THIRD STREET: Third Street hosts an annual “Senior Night” in which soon-to-graduate high school seniors are invited to perform, have photos taken with their family and teachers; and receive some type of logo gift (tee shirt, baseball cap, tote bag) and a certificate of accomplishment welcoming them into the “Third Street Alumni Association.”

SAY SÍ: After high school graduation we hold our own SAY SÍ graduation called “HelloGoodbye.” Graduating seniors are recognized with a slide show of their time at SAY SÍ, presented with certificates of completion and awarded senior gifts such as a hard-drive to use as they start their new career. They’re then welcomed as alumni and added to our alumni email list, etc.

Highlight Alumni in Printed Materials and Online (Website, Facebook, etc.)

THIRD STREET: An alumni spotlight in our regular newsletter reinforces the importance of alumni to the school and introduces role models for the younger members of our community. Featuring alumni who have chosen careers outside of music and dance emphasizes that the arts are essential to each individual’s development, regardless of career choice. Recently, Third Street also has begun to note alumni in all of the school’s printed materials. Alumni, who appear on faculty lists, donor rolls, board rosters, etc., are marked in some way that denotes them as alumni. This practice reinforces the importance of alumni to the school and encourages others to engage as alumni when they leave the institution.

SAY SÍ: In addition to featuring recent and pertinent news and invitations to our events, our Alumni Newsletter shares relevant opportunities like job/intern openings, calls for artwork in the community, and opportunities to exhibit and volunteer at our organization.

CASITA MARIA: We publish alumni testimonials on Facebook, as well as in our other communications.

Invite Alumni Back to Mentor/Teach/Perform/Exhibit

MOSAIC: Each year Mosaic has a workshop called “Life After Mosaic” which brings alumni back to talk to students about their personal experience in college or in the professional world. This is a highly anticipated annual event that enables alumni to share practical information, such as audition or interview techniques, but also personal stories about what they have learned, discovered, or wished they had done differently.

SAY SÍ: SAY SÍ’s community program, *Artists Building Communities (ABC)*, is an alumni-run program that gives qualified alumni paid opportunities to work as art instructors in community-based partnerships. ABC instructors are often our most dedicated volunteers, mentors, and guest artists. ABC instructors complete a training course and are mentored by

veteran alumni instructors. Alumni who aren’t ABC instructors also have opportunities to mentor and teach both formally and informally. When alumni come back to SAY SÍ to teach or to speak to current students, it reinforces our overall expectation of success and connects alumni to our community.

CASITA MARIA: We invite our alumni to attend our series of visual and performing arts public programs and—if they are artists—perform in our concerts, present their work in our exhibitions, and speak or perform at our fundraising events (often pro bono).

Host an Alumni Reunion or Dinner

MOSAIC: Mosaic has held alumni reunion picnics, concerts, receptions, and other casual and formal events. Because these young artists originally came together with a mutual love for the performing arts, Mosaic alumni events generally offer some type of opportunity to perform together. In December of 2012, Mosaic held a 20th Anniversary Alumni Reunion. The event was held in conjunction with Mosaic’s holiday performance, “Only the Best: 20 Years of Mosaic Memories,” a retrospective compilation of scenes and songs from past productions. Prior to the performance, alumni were asked, via social media, to send in photos from their time at Mosaic to be used within the production on large projection screens; to share stories of their Mosaic experience, which were incorporated into the production script; and to perform onstage during the show’s finale. Alumni were directed to YouTube videos for instructions on song lyrics, harmonies, choreography, etc. A casual alumni reunion party was also held at Mosaic’s rehearsal space. Photos from past rehearsals and productions were mounted on the walls, and alumni were encouraged to write notes and share memories about the photos. Because this took place during the December break, many alumni were able to attend who are normally in school or working out of town.

THIRD STREET: We find that connecting an alumni event to something already happening helps its success. End-of-the-year holiday parties can be effective since a lot of alumni come home to visit. Scheduling an alumni event to coincide with a big city-wide event (marathon, music festival, etc.) might also help attract alumni.

Engage Alumni as Donors and Ambassadors

MOSAIC: In 2010, Mosaic participated in an online fundraising competition. Through social media, and by creating short original videos, alumni encouraged their friends and family to vote for Mosaic to win a cash award. One of our alumni who was in active service military at the time, created and submitted a video from Afghanistan talking about Mosaic’s impact on his life, and encouraging people to vote in the campaign. Mosaic won \$25,000 in the competition to support Mosaic’s annual College Tour, and an additional award of \$37,000 in support of general operations.

Through their own love of the organization, Mosaic alumni open doors for the organization and help us to develop relationships with corporations, churches, universities, community groups, and associates to promote Mosaic programs and fundraising initiatives.

CASITA MARIA: We present an annual “friendraising” event to celebrate our alumni and have established an annual alumni award. In 2011, we received two legacy gifts from alumni which contributed over \$150,000 to the organization. Since then we haven’t received any major gifts in cash but we are working on starting a planned giving program.

SAY SI: For the first time this year, we’ve had the privilege to have an alumnus sit on our board of directors.

Continue to Support Alumni after They Graduate

SAY SÍ: SAY SÍ is often contacted with requests for work, assistance, and/or projects that don’t fit into our tight programming schedule but match perfectly with our alumni’s qualifications, specialties, or needs. Giving a SAY SÍ-trained artist the opportunity work on a promotional video, mural or other commissioned project is a great way for us to continue to support them and keep them engaged.

CAP: In addition to providing scholarships for CAP youth participants to attend CalArts, we also provide one-on-one career counseling.

WHO COORDINATES ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT AT YOUR ORGANIZATION?

THIRD STREET: Our development, programs, and executive offices are responsible for alumni engagement. No staff member is completely dedicated to this activity however. Currently, the school engages alumni as they graduate from high school. Ideally, the school would begin to engage alumni whenever it is clear their studies have ended. For young children, though, this would have to happen through their parents.

MOSAIC: Mosaic has a manager of engagement, who works with community organizations and Mosaic parents and volunteers, and coordinates formal alumni engagement efforts.

CAP: CalArts has a director of alumni relations who coordinates the CalArts alumni and just hired someone in its Advancement Office to build relationships with alumni and, through that effort, build donors for CAP. But engaging CAP alumni is primarily the responsibility of CAP’s artistic director.

SAY SÍ: Our community and program coordinator actively works to improve our alumni engagement efforts but is supported by our entire faculty and staff. We work as a team, continuously thinking of ways to keep alumni engaged and to stay current with our alumni’s contact information.

CASITA MARIA: Our director of marketing and individual giving, primarily.

WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME OF YOUR CHALLENGES AND WHAT ADVICE CAN YOU SHARE FOR OVERCOMING THESE CHALLENGES?

Locating & Keeping Track of Alumni

THIRD STREET: To start getting in touch with past students, launch an alumni campaign. Send a postcard to everyone who has attended your organization and ask them to register on the alumni page of your organization’s website (see example:

www.thirdstreetmusicschool.org/alumni). If your records are in paper form, create a volunteer brigade of parents or older students to enter the names and addresses into a database. Even if you believe the return rate might be low, the effort could yield worthwhile results. You should also build on your faculty and staff’s connections with past students to reconnect with alumni.

MOSAIC: We have found it helpful to ask for multiple points of contact at the start of the program and then update contact information at the end of training. We also ask for updated contact information at all of our alumni events and in our alumni communications, and make sure that our alumni understand that any information that they provide is confidential. Mosaic does not share alumni contact information or individual data (we do report aggregate data). Also explain to your alumni why you want to keep in touch and what the benefit is to them; it may make them more willing to share their information.

SAY SÍ: Alumni are often busy with college and/or new careers so it can be difficult to get them to respond to emails or messages. We understand that their time and energy is limited, especially if they are in school, entry-level jobs, or arts careers in general. We’ve found that frequently sending communications via multiple platforms helps (Facebook works best right now). We also just received a grant that will allow us to track our alumni’s college completion via the National Student Clearinghouse—this will help us better understand the long-term impact of our program. We ask all students when they graduate for permission to track their postsecondary education data.

Lack of Staff Time

CAP: CAP has a small but mighty staff, but no one person can dedicate much time to engaging with alumni. The ideal is to have a full-time or at least a part-time staff member dedicated to engaging alumni.

MOSIAC: Alumni engagement, and data management in particular, is time consuming and difficult to maintain without somebody in-house to manage the process. A major priority for Mosaic this year is working with a consultant to streamline the organization’s mailing lists and databases to make the system more functional and intuitive. But Mosaic has also made establishing alumni engagement protocols an organizational priority in the coming year. In a recent all-staff planning session meant to operationalize Mosaic’s 5-year artistic plan, we discussed the following initiatives as high priorities for our team: define roles for Mosaic alumni; increase communication/outreach with alumni; establish annual alumni events/performances; institutionalize the alumni advisory committee; and engage alumni as professional mentors and volunteers.

THIRD STREET: Give your organization the time to build an effective alumni engagement program. A strong alumni program will develop over time if an appropriate amount of time and energy is put into it. And start NOW! Avoid lamenting over what you could have or should have done in the past. Even if it’s the most recent class of students who graduated from high school, start engaging them now.