Highlander Center

Dear Friends,

We are excited to share our 2024–25 Impact Report with you as an important partner in this work and in our movement family.

By the Numbers

- 2024–25 +6,000 people and 90 organizations engaged annually 195 acres of movement home on 2 campuses
- 14 fiscal sponsorees $100M redistributed via the Southern Power Fund
- $185K granted to grassroots groups and youth fellows
- 30 groups and 625 individuals hosted on the Hill in 2025

The past year brought intensified threats against our communities — and underscored the power created when we come together to take collective action. Highlander's education work is directly supporting networks of grassroots organizers, cultural workers, and participatory action practitioners who are defending democratic practices and building people power across our region.

We are thrilled to welcome our new Co-Executive Directors Vonda McDaniel and Garrett Stark - an established leadership team with more than 50 years of combined experience in grassroots organizing, leadership development, and movement building in the South. They bring a strategic vision grounded in Highlander's legacy while strengthening our work to skill up and scale up movement building in our region.

They join Highlander on a strong foundation built by the powerful leadership of Allyn Maxfield-Steele, Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson, and Salimah Muhammad. We are fortified for the fights ahead, knowing that our work building multi-racial, cross-class movements for justice and sustainability is essential for democracy. We are grateful to be in community and in solidarity with you.

For 94 years, Highlander has served as a catalyst for grassroots organizing and transformative justice in the U.S. South and Appalachia a movement school rooted in popular education, supporting those who work together to take collective action, bring their radical visions to life, and dismantle oppressive systems.

Land, Legacy & Place

Historic Highlander Folk School Library and Land Return to Our Stewardship

In 1961, after a coordinated effort by segregationists and business tycoons, the state of Tennessee seized Highlander's original land in Grundy County, confiscated the organization's assets, and sold 200 acres at auction displacing a movement home that had been central to Labor, Civil Rights, and Black Freedom organizing across the South. In late 2024, after 65 years of displacement, Highlander successfully reacquired nine acres of our original land including our historic Library, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Our vision is to return it to community and movement use: a vibrant organizing, community, and cultural center where people come together to build strong ties, learn new skills, and strategize for survival and system-wide transformation.

In 2025, our newly created Highlander Folk School Legacy Project began coordinating a multi-year participatory design process for land stewardship. Our Community Organizer/Public Memory Specialist team initiated their work of building power with directly impacted residents in the area, and gathering our social movement descendants' leadership and stories from Highlander's 93-year organizing history to inform the site's vision. At the same time, Highlander's 186-acre campus overlooking the Smoky Mountains in rural East Tennessee is a vital movement home — where organizing groups gather for strategy retreats, trainings, relationship-building, rest, and respite. In 2025, Highlander's radical hospitality team hosted 625 individuals and 30 groups on campus. On the Hill, Highlander honors right relationship with the land — preserving traditional Appalachian foodways, practicing sustainability, nourishing guests with food from the garden and chicken coop, and being in community with local farmers and producers.

Education for Action / Education for Liberation

Participatory Action Research Institute

The PAR Institute completed its final cohort in 2025 after three years supporting 49 BIPOC artists and cultural workers across the Mid-South. The Institute fortified community research, rural leadership development, restorative justice initiatives, youth storytelling and theater, and creative base-building through open mics and public school engagement.

Seeds of Fire

The Seeds of Fire program holds space for intergenerational learning, healing justice, and strategy building. Program Managers worked with an Advisory Committee of five youth (ages 15–26) who helped lead the program. In 2024–25, youth fellows developed Participatory Action Research processes focused on communal care as an alternative to carceral systems, created a podcast lifting up youth organizing, and facilitated intergenerational workshops across Highlander programs.

Highlander's educational programming, mass trainings and workshops, and customized curricula directly engages more than 6,000 people and at least 90 organizations annually in protecting democratic practices, building solidarity across global struggles, equipping grassroots organizers with new tools, and deepening community relationships through free, localized programming.

Septima Clark Learning Center & Southern Memory Workers Collaborative

Our Archival and Librarian team connects Southern community leaders, organizers, and educators to a comprehensive hub of Southern liberation movement memory. In a political environment where our stories are being hidden and public memory is being whitewashed, the SCLC builds information literacy, preserves the truth of our radical histories, and develops active southern memory infrastructure rooted in Southern organizing communities.

The SCLC also hosted research groups on site including Pellissippi State, Emory and Duke Graduate Student Unions, Hamilton, Pitzer, Macalester, Clark, Cal State Fullerton, the National Council of Elders, SEIU, the Solidarity History Initiative, and Invisible Histories supporting their research and memory work and deepening Highlander's relationships with institutions committed to Southern liberation history.

The Southern Memory Workers Collaborative is a network of activists, organizers, and cultural workers dedicated to documenting, preserving, and stewarding stories, traditions, and liberatory practices in the U.S. South. In 2024–25, the collaborative journeyed by bus from Shreveport, LA to New Market, TN conducting site visits with memory workers, community memory holders, and folk schools along the way, tracing the living geography of southern memory work across the region.

Protecting and Defending Democratic Practices

People Practicing Power

Highlander's Economics, Governance, and Electoral Justice programming helped support organizing that produced the nation's first Office of Youth Safety, kept a rural mutual aid organization open, and grounded organizers in civics education connecting pressing issues to policy and power. The program convened 77 grassroots organizers in five People Practicing Power online workshops during the 2024 election cycle, grounding participants in democratic processes, policy campaign organizing, and solidarity economy fundamentals. Our organizer Denzel also served as Electoral Justice Table Lead with the Movement for Black Lives.

Fire on the Mountain

A collaborative program between Highlander's Economics/Governance and Community Safety Teams, Fire on the Mountain builds long-term movement infrastructure designed to weather authoritarian and climate change threats. The first project launched a radio communications school serving a cohort spanning the South and Caribbean — including Boriken (Puerto Rico), Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia. 16 students received ham radio licenses and long-range radio rigs, building autonomous communications infrastructure for disaster response.

Cultural Organizing

Highlander's cultural organizing programming strengthens local grassroots campaigns and supports power-building increasing participation of Southern and Appalachian, rural, working class, queer, undocumented, and disabled people in community decision-making. Through the Train-the-Trainer curriculum, more than 300 cultural workers completed Cultural Organizing 101 in 2024–25, taking skills into workers' unions, incarcerated settings, hip hop cyphers, college campuses, and immigrant detention advocacy. In 2026, Cultural Organizing 201 launches. "It was life changing to be in the [Highlander] space... We've started a corrido: storytelling through song. To face immigration issues right now. That is because of the work we experienced on the Hill." - Armando Silva, Cultural Organizing participant

Faith-Based Organizing

Faith-Based education at Highlander worked to connect academic institutions, faith communities, and movement organizations, centering the struggle for a free Palestine and building out the Christian Left. In 2025, collaboration with Christians for a Free Palestine reached approximately 250 participants through 45 Lenten Solidarity Circles nationwide. We also engaged with 300 people at the 2025 Socialism Conference and our researcher Adam published a chapter in Theology After Gaza: A Global Anthology (2025).

Lyceums & Off the Hill Gatherings

Highlander's Communications team curates regular free community gatherings across the U.S. South as part of quarterly Lyceums in partnership with local organizing groups; Read-ins; Lumbung-style library spaces; and a monthly Off the Hill film series in Knoxville, TN in partnership with Central Cinema. Lyceums have been held in Austin TX, New Orleans, and Miami, each celebrating local artists, musicians, and food, and ensuring attendees leave with action steps grounded in the day's conversations.

Powering the Movement

Highlander increases capacity and strengthens infrastructure for social movements incubating emerging work through fiscal sponsorship and technical assistance, resourcing grassroots organizing with mini-grants, and supporting regional, national, and global networks that build collective power for transformative justice.

Fiscal Sponsorships

As part of our movement school mission, Highlander provides technical assistance and administrative support to allow emerging organizations to seed their missions, scale their impact, and sustain their work in the face of systemic barriers. Our fiscal sponsorship program served 14 organizations in 2024-25, with four additional graduates that have evolved into independent organizations or social enterprises.

Southern Power Fund & Movement Accompaniment

Highlander is one of four anchor organizations of the Southern Power Fund, redistributing $100 million to a range of Southern frontline organizations and formations. Highlander also granted $185,000 to support 2024 youth fellows and community-based projects through Movement Support and Accompaniment funds.

Community Safety

As a movement school, Highlander is committed to a strategic realignment of our Community Safety team as a resource for movement accompaniment in the South. This included offering a wide range of community safety assessments and trainings in communities across the South and Appalachia to build a culture of safety for threat mitigation within movement. In 2025, our community safety team trained 800 movement leaders on community safety protocols and how we keep us safe in the South while offering safety consultation, risk assessments, planning, and recommendations to movement organizations.

2025 Annual Homecoming

Highlander's 93rd Homecoming Fired Up, Roots Down was held Oct. 3–4, 2025 on the Hill in New Market, TN. Hundreds gathered to learn, share, sing, and strategize. Programming examined Reconstruction in South Carolina, critical civics, the legacy of John Brown, tech oligarchies, immigration, math as a liberation tool, grief, and healing practices through movement. Recordings available on Highlander's Vimeo page.

The Highlander community has moved mountains over our 94 years. We are so grateful for the transformative ways we continue to work together across generations to make our radical visions a reality.

Thank you to all of our program participants, partners, fiscal sponsorees, supporters, donors, guests, and partners in this work who are bringing our collective future stories to life with your brilliance and investment in Southern-led fights for freedom.