



Nature Sacred

# GRATITUDE REPORT

2023 ANNUAL REPORT

Sacred Place at Georgetown Waterfront Park, Washington, DC

# CEO LETTER

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*Hello, friend.*

Thanks for taking the time to open the report and read this letter. You likely already noticed that we changed the title; somehow, the simple tweak felt like just the right message to encapsulate a bittersweet year. As you know, in October Nature Sacred lost its Co-Founder and in the very same moment, I lost my mentor, my business partner, and my father. While 2023 proved to be a year unlike any other, I am experiencing a profound sense of gratitude daily.

- **Gratitude** for the outpouring of love and support from our community.
- **Gratitude** to celebrate the Co-Founders' **why**.
- **Gratitude** to witness the ripples of impact when we intentionally connect people with nature through Sacred Place creation and programming of these sanctuaries.
- **Gratitude** for the compelling stories we've captured for over 25 years in our signature yellow journals and the chance to share them at *BenchTalk* events.
- **Gratitude** for the generosity of our extraordinary donors who champion our mission where it is most needed.

The healing power of nature is captured in the pages of this report and even more so, in our Sacred Places across the nation—including the 76 new projects in our pipeline since 2020—and in the Firesouls—216 incredible humans uplifting their communities and anchor institutions and connecting with each other through our national Network.

The 2023 Gratitude Report tells the story of our intentional pursuit, as part of a five-year strategic plan, to advance wellbeing in communities, institutions, and people. I believe in what we do and just as powerfully in how we do it. I hope these pages instill the same confidence and inspiration as you flip through them.

It is with that alignment that we move into 2024 with a desire to renew our commitment to this work, to center wellbeing, and to amplify the momentum that YOUR generosity has created. **I invite you to recommit alongside us and think about how you integrate nature + wellbeing into your daily life.** You can expect us to reissue this invitation, in deeper and more meaningful ways, throughout the year.

Thank you for showing up for us in 2023 and for putting your trust in Nature Sacred and our shared belief that we can truly transform places and people with access to contemplative nature through intentional community-engaged design.



*Alden E Stoner*

**ALDEN E. STONER**  
CEO, Nature Sacred

**HEAR THE CO-FOUNDERS' WHY  
AND HOPES FOR THE NEXT 25 YEARS  
(IN LESS THAN 2 MIN)**



A close-up photograph of several apples on a tree branch. The apples are in various stages of ripeness, with some being bright green and others showing a mix of red and green. The leaves are vibrant green and have a serrated edge. The background is softly blurred, showing more of the tree and a wooden structure, possibly a planter box.

# MISSION

To provide the opportunity for a deeper human experience by inspiring and supporting the creation of public green spaces that offer a temporary place of sanctuary, encourage reflection, provide solace, and engender peace and well-being.

# VISION

We envision a time when every urban community in the U.S. will provide people with opportunities for intimate, intentional daily doses of nearby urban nature through the creation of a system of nature spaces.

# Inspiration from our Mission

## Garden of Peace and Remembrance | Falls Church, VA

Nestled in one of our early Sacred Places, St. Anthony's of Padua, there is a fountain with a design and presence that embody our mission and impact. Atop the stone base sits a glass plate, engraved with the word "peace" in 80 languages, each representing a culture within the greater community. During the design process, translations were inscribed on pieces of paper and released into the wind, a deliberate act to ensure equitable representation. The final layout of the design was determined by where these papers landed.

**Just like this fountain, where the stream of water sends ripples spreading across the surface, our mission emanates from the generosity of our donors, creating far-reaching ripples of impact.**

*"We chose water to represent peace. Flowing water, like hunger for peace, is constant. No matter how many times we are knocked down in our quest for peace, it is important that we get up and keep on trying, just as rivers keep flowing. Our fountain is a representation of this concept. It is made of rough-cut fieldstone, representing the earth, hardship, and the rough edges of humanity."*

— **Mario Pareja**, Architect of Garden of Peace and Remembrance



## Nature Sacred Staff



**Erin Robertson**  
Chief Programs  
Officer, Nature  
Sacred

"At Nature Sacred, a part of what we do is help turn dreams into vision and vision into reality by working alongside dedicated Firesouls, meticulous Design Advisors, engaged community members, and impassioned donors. And, of course, one of the most rewarding parts of this job is that the partnership continues. Through our National Network, the relationships we've cultivated continue. The intent: sustainable, meaningful stewardship. In my nine years with the organization, I have been honored and humbled by every site visit, conversation with a Firesoul, charrette, Network gathering, and connection to donors."





**Pastor Michael Martin**  
Senior Pastor, Stillmeadow  
Community Fellowship Church  
Firesoul of Stillmeadow PeacePark

“This is my first experience with one of these meetings. I am so emotional right now, because this feels like when you don’t know that your tribe is just over the hill. We have a lot of collaboration at Stillmeadow but nothing like this. Whether it’s a desire for a labyrinth or an herb garden it seems like this Network is the place to go to get started. To realize that there are resources and thought leaders at our fingertips and even close by—this is so incredible to me.”

## Firesouls

## Community Members

### Community Member

Journal entry from  
Naval Cemetery Landscape  
Brooklyn, NY



# DONORS

THE RIPPLES OF  
IMPACT START WITH  
YOU

## Board Members

## Design Advisors



**Zolna Russell**  
Director of Sustainability,  
Floura Teeter  
Design Advisor

“As a designer it’s so heartbreaking to hear people say, well I didn’t think that place was for me even when it’s right across the street. We have been working with Nature Sacred for 20+ years and we see their community engagement process as not just a nice addition but really essential to the success of projects like this. They do an amazing job of making people feel welcome and included while focusing the priorities and capacity concerns of the Firesoul.”



**Fred Smith**  
VP of of Community Partnerships,  
Community Foundation of Northeast  
Alabama  
Firesoul & Board Member

“In a world of constant change and the need to build bridges among humanity, the healing power of nature and Nature Sacred is uplifting communities and restoring hope. I am thrilled to know and love this organization as a Board member, Firesoul, and community partner. The good that comes from this mission is captured in the beauty of the Sacred Places across the nation and the unlikely but wonderful relationships that are established through interaction in these spaces. It is evident that the hearts of people who share in these spaces are changed by their time spent in them.”



## A NATURE SACRED GLOSSARY

### SACRED PLACE

Sacred Places are green spaces designed using a process and model honed over 25 years; spaces created with a specific purpose: to provide mindful reflection and solace to intentionally improve health & wellbeing.

### THE FIRESOUL

Firesouls are volunteer community leaders — catalysts for change who recognize the need and vital role a green space can offer within their community. They serve as community liaisons, ensuring that each Sacred Place is designed with the community’s needs at the forefront.

### BENCH & JOURNAL

In each Sacred Place, you will find a Nature Sacred bench, inviting visitors to take a moment of respite and enjoy the nature around them. Tucked under each bench is a little yellow journal, a place for visitors to connect and reflect.

# What is Nature Sacred?



## SERVICE PROVIDER AND PARTNER

We help enable the creation of Sacred Places where they are needed most.



## NETWORK BUILDER

Our Nature Sacred Network now comprises more than 100 Sacred Places and Firesouls.



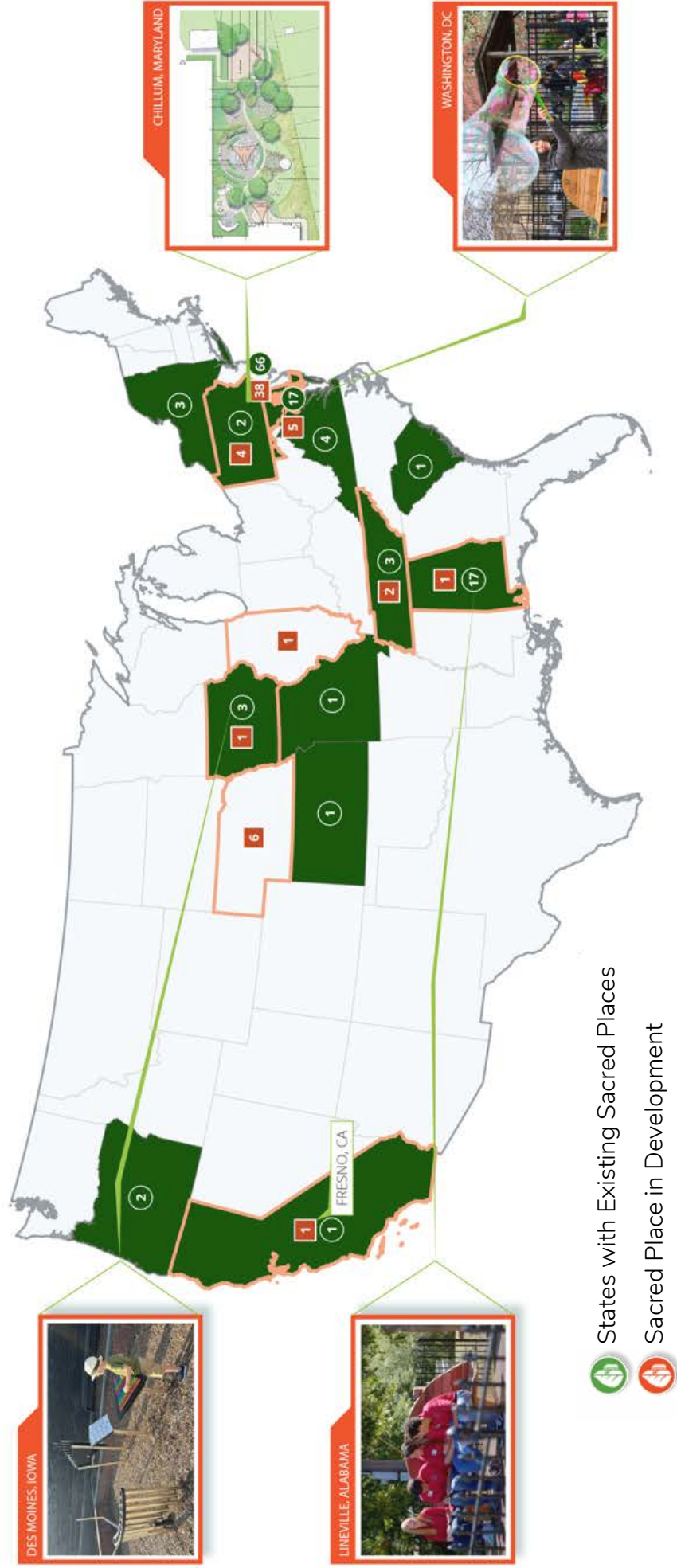
## RESEARCH AGGREGATOR

We bridge academia and the green space movement.



Through over 100 Sacred Places across 40+ municipalities in 14 states and Washington, DC, Nature Sacred brings the healing power of nature to over 60 million community residents and visitors annually.

# Where are Sacred Places Sprouting?



Learn more about these Sacred Places at [naturesacred.org/map](https://naturesacred.org/map)



# NATURE SACRED, Service Provider and Partner.

We support the design and creation of Sacred Places that can be found everywhere—from once-neglected urban lots to hospitals to school campuses. We help guide communities and organizations through the process of bringing their nature spaces to life.



Grand opening of the Sacred Place at Unity Park in Baltimore, MD



**28**  
PLANNING



**24**  
COMPLETED  
DESIGN



**6**  
UNDER  
CONSTRUCTION



**18**  
SACRED PLACES  
OPENED

Since 2020, we have 76 Sacred Places in our pipeline toward our goal of 100 by 2025.

**124** Sacred Places  
opened since 1996

Service Provider and Partner >

## Community Healing Spotlight Filbert Street Garden | Baltimore, MD

Filbert Street Garden exists in a food desert (40-minute walk to the grocery store from the garden) while only one-third of residents own a car.

This soon to be Sacred Place initially started out as a simple place where people could have a garden plot and mitigate the food desert challenges but became so much more through our multi-phase, community-led design process. The vision that emerged includes a system of pathways that provide better access to the areas within, common areas with lighting and shade, and a meditative space for visitors, including our signature bench.

Filbert Street Garden is one of 18 Community Farming sites across the United States in our Sacred Place network.



Animal Husbandry Coordinator,  
Filbert Street Garden



Garden Coordinator,  
Filbert Street Garden



Internal Relations Coordinator,  
Filbert Street Garden



Site plan draft of the future Filbert Street Garden Sacred Place by Design Advisors at Floura Teeter



Community members preparing for pestomaking activity during the second Design Charrette meeting in August 2023

Service Provider and Partner >

## Nature for Wellness Spotlight

### Garden of Gratitude at MedStar Health | Baltimore, MD

MedStar’s Franklin Square campus is home to a decades-seasoned Sacred Place—the Garden of Little Angels, a memorial loss garden located in the Women’s Pavilion. MedStar has chosen to invest in the mental health of their associates with a second Sacred Place, which will be private to staff and intended for restorative, more private moments in nature.

In a first-ever for Nature Sacred and at the recommendation of the Firesouls, the Design Charrettes started at the wee hours of the morning to accommodate the staffing shift change and rhythm of the hospital. Over two days, more than 300 employees shared their vision for the space. The design process and the outcome are meaningful investments in the people at the heart of the organization.

“Just 10-15 minutes away from the front lines can significantly mitigate the negative effects of trauma. Providing a brief respite in a safe space is crucial for preventing longer-term stress injuries, including PTSD. This isn’t just a warm and fuzzy gift to staff - it’s a means to keep them healthy.” — Firesoul Rev. Cherie Smith



Multi-Site Supervisor,  
MedStar Franklin Square



Director Pastoral Care,  
MedStar Franklin Square



Assistant Vice President  
of Philanthropy,  
MedStar Franklin Square



*Nurses, doctors, and MedStar Health employees choosing their favorite design elements for their new Sacred Place during the first Design Charrette meeting*

# NATURE SACRED, **Network Builder.**

We bring together community leaders to spearhead the unique design, programming and events of each space, tending to them physically and spiritually through the Nature Sacred Firesoul Network, our long-term site stewardship program.



*Firesouls gathered from the Baltimore to DC area for the 2023 Firesoul Network Community Farming Tour where they shared best practices and inspired each other.*

**46** Enhancement & Enrichment Grants awarded

Enrichment Grants aid Firesouls in providing activities for their communities while Enhancement Grants help defray upkeep and special maintenance costs, as well as support the addition of enhancing features in Sacred Places.

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**45**  
New Firesouls

**211** Firesouls - total - in our Network

**12** Leadership Development Program offerings

Network Builder >

## Enrichment Grant Recipient Spotlight University of Maryland's Garden of Reflection and Remembrance | College Park, MD

The University of Maryland's Garden of Reflection and Remembrance supported two events where students participated in a five-senses meditation, walked the labyrinth together, and enjoyed lunch and conversation.

University of Maryland is part of our strategic site partner program. An initial TKF grantee, they are expanding with support from Nature Sacred because of their demonstrated activation of their Sacred Place for the wellbeing of their campus community.

As the need to prioritize student mental health escalates in a post-pandemic world, Nature Sacred is growing the number of educational institutions within the network.



Student Affairs Professional  
University of Maryland



Project Collaborator  
University of Maryland



University Administrator  
University of Maryland

*“This time of year is so challenging for students, with classes finishing and projects mounting, that students take heart in a short break from the study grind. As I set up the lunch after the meditation experience, it was gratifying to listen to students as they shared encouraging words among each other about coursework and exams. A number commented to me about the peace and calmness they found in taking a labyrinth walk.”*

DENISE MCHUGH



Network Builder >

## Enrichment Grant Recipient Spotlight Naval Cemetery Landscape | Brooklyn, NY

An enrichment grant for the Naval Cemetery Landscape supported three artist residencies in the spring. One visual and two musical artists were chosen to explore the healing power of nature, contemplation and memorial, and the dynamic history of the Sacred Place. The Firesouls reported that this program enriched their popular free community programming with two artist-led workshops (drawing and painting) and four free public music performances. The first event featured local musician, Paco Naveira, who showcased instrumental and vocal motifs on nylon string guitar. Paco performed compositions throughout the site with a small, portable amplifier attached to his body, sharing spontaneous musical and meditative moments with visitors on-site.

This dynamic program was one of the 46 Enrichment and Enhancement Grants that Nature Sacred funded in 2023.



Executive Director,  
Brooklyn Greenway Initiative



Director of Horticulture and  
Greenway Stewardship,  
Brooklyn Greenway Initiative

JUNE 14, 2023

*“The rain has stopped and sun is out. I remember visiting this park a few years ago with my wife. Biking by today, I decided to stop in. I love sharing this place and seeing others’ thoughts here. The smell of leaves after rain and old book pages remind me of early summers past. The end of school, long sunny hours, it feels like perhaps the start of something new.”*

JOURNAL ENTRY  
FROM NAVAL  
CEMETERY  
LANDSCAPE



# NATURE SACRED, Research Aggregator.

We have long believed that the strongest evidence of the impact of Sacred Places lies within the journal entries we've gathered since the opening of the first Sacred Place. In 2023, we brought this conviction to life by publishing a paperback version of *BenchTalk: Wisdoms Inspired in Nature*, which showcases a carefully selected collection of these journal entries. Our national tour to promote the book and raise awareness about Sacred Places, along with the continued interest in our healthcare calculator—a collaboration with Sean Murphy, a Health Economist at Weill Cornell Medicine—has significantly broadened the recognition and appreciation of our work, further amplifying the message of the importance and transformative power of Sacred Places.

## Nature Sacred in the News

Nature Sacred, our mission, and our story were featured both nationally and locally in 13+ major news publications, including the Washington Post, Newsweek, and Forbes.

### Nature Sacred hospital green space calculator garners coverage in Forbes

Former Senator Bill Frist featured our health care savings calculator in his Forbes column, emphasizing hospital savings from accessible green spaces.



### Paperback launch of *BenchTalk* wins critical praise

In addition to Kirkus Reviews and BookLife by Publishers Weekly, *BenchTalk* also received a glowing review from long-time Washington Post book critic, Ron Charles.



## The Greatest Evidence of All Entries left in our little yellow journals as exemplified in *BenchTalk*



4/23/22

舊地重遊

這次我不是學生，我是學生的媽媽

I sat on this bench as a  
postdoc 06-08  
resident 14-18

daydreamed

cried

divorced twice in between

Always a sacred place for me

今天我又在這裏

A few decisions to be made

人生充滿了驚奇與驚喜

以前的我

現在的我

未來的我

都在這裏，祝福和守護現在的我

我的父母和我的孩子

帶着祝福，繼續前行

naturesacred.org

### Translation:

Here I am again

I am not a student this time, but a  
student's mother

I sat on this bench as a  
postdoc 06-08  
resident 14-18  
daydreamed  
cried

divorced twice in between  
Always a sacred place for me

Today I am here again

A few decisions to be made  
Life is brimming with wonders and  
surprises

The previous

The Present

The future

All in one here together, blessing and  
guarding the one I am now

My parents and kids

With benediction, I'll keep going once  
again

### Journal Entry and Photo:

Sacred Place at UPenn Museum of Archaeology  
& Anthropology | Stoner Courtyard  
Philadelphia, PA



## BenchTalk Across the Nation in 2023

For 25 years, stirred by nature, people from all walks of life, young and old, have been jotting down their wishes and worries, their grief and gratitude in our little yellow journals. We traveled across the US last year to gather friends, new and old, to share and celebrate *BenchTalk: Wisdoms Inspired in Nature*, a special collection of the most memorable entries.



### SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA



BenchTalk Book Editor, Salma Hassan Ali at the book party, co-hosted by Mauree Jane Perry, Julie Parish, and Michelle Shiro.

### WASHINGTON, DC



Nature Sacred's CEO, Alden E. Stoner, pictured with co-hosts Patrice Brickman (left), Ami Aronson (2nd from right), and Michelle Freeman (far right).

### NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK



Co-hosted by friends at Brunello Cucinelli.

### DES MOINES, IOWA



Co-hosted by Mary Riche (far right) and coincided with the opening of the C3 Campus Contemplative Garden at the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines.

# Life in Sacred Places

Nature Sacred is on a mission to not only support the creation of contemplative, nearby nature spaces but also remains committed to supporting the Firesouls for the activation of these spaces for the benefit of our partner institutions and their communities. Here's a glimpse at our Sacred Places in action throughout 2023, alive with happenings from seasonal celebrations and labyrinth walks to yoga sessions and pesto-making.



## Sacred Places through the Seasons



### Spring

Wangari Gardens, a Sacred Place in DC, hosted a Spring Fest where community members could enjoy music, planting, ice cream, and spending time reading journal entries on the Nature Sacred bench.



### Summer

In the final days of summer 2023, the C3 Campus Contemplative Garden Sacred Place in Des Moines, Iowa, opened to the public, marking a joyous occasion for the community. Hundreds of people joined in on the festivities that featured a celebratory performance by a marching band.



### Fall

Fall foliage envelops visitors and the Nature Sacred bench at Crispus Attucks Park in DC. This Sacred Place was the host site for our 2023 Firesoul Picnic in the Park and yoga event.



### Winter

Snow blankets art pieces and the Nature Sacred bench at the American Visionary Art Museum (AVAM) Sculpture Garden in Baltimore, MD. AVAM hosted Network Firesouls for a tour and luncheon in 2023.



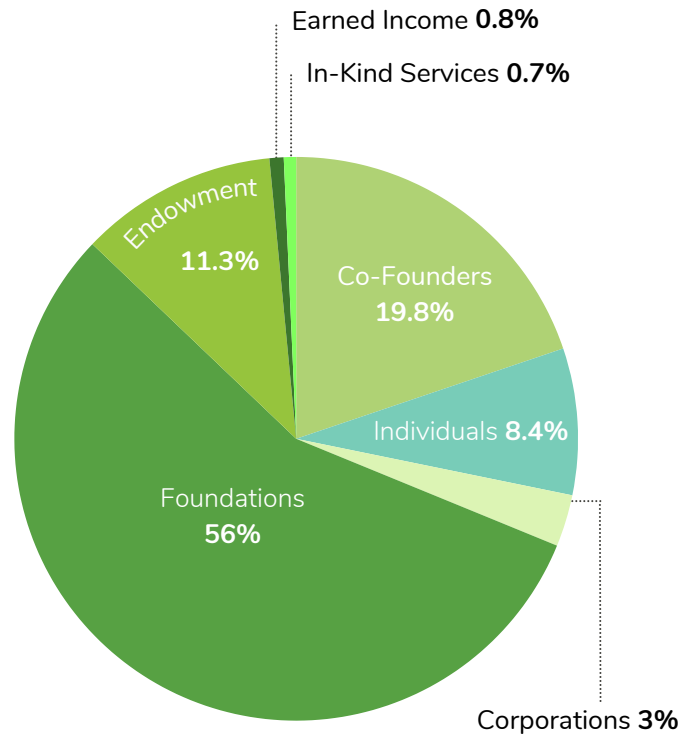
# 2023 Financials

All figures are based on unaudited financials.

## Statement of Activities January 1, 2023 - December 31, 2023

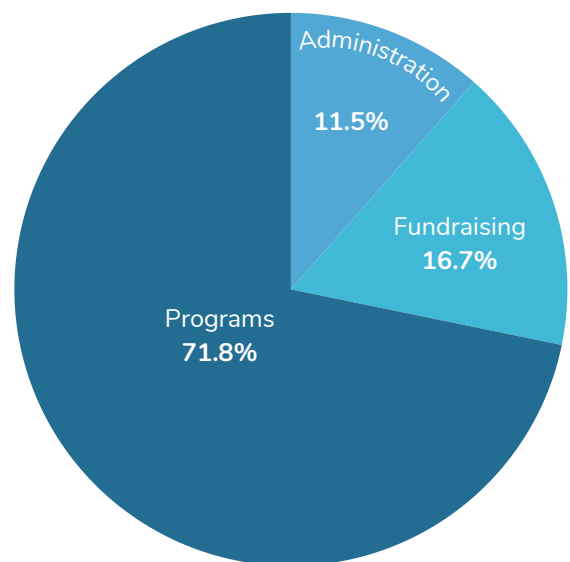
### SUPPORT & REVENUE

Individuals	\$190,968
Foundations	\$1,270,951
Corporations	\$67,603
Book Sales	\$18,489
Co-Founders' Capacity Grant	\$450,000
Endowment [5% distribution]	\$257,747
In-Kind Services	\$16,050
<b>Total Support &amp; Revenue</b>	<b>\$2,271,808</b>



### EXPENSES

Administration	\$240,786
Fundraising	\$349,166
Programs & Outreach	\$1,500,294
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$2,090,246</b>



# 2023 Financials

All figures are based on unaudited financials.

## Statement of Financial Position December 31, 2023

### ASSETS

Cash	\$433,970
Investments	\$9,350,249
Other Assets	\$49,576
<b>Total Assets</b>	<b>\$9,833,795</b>

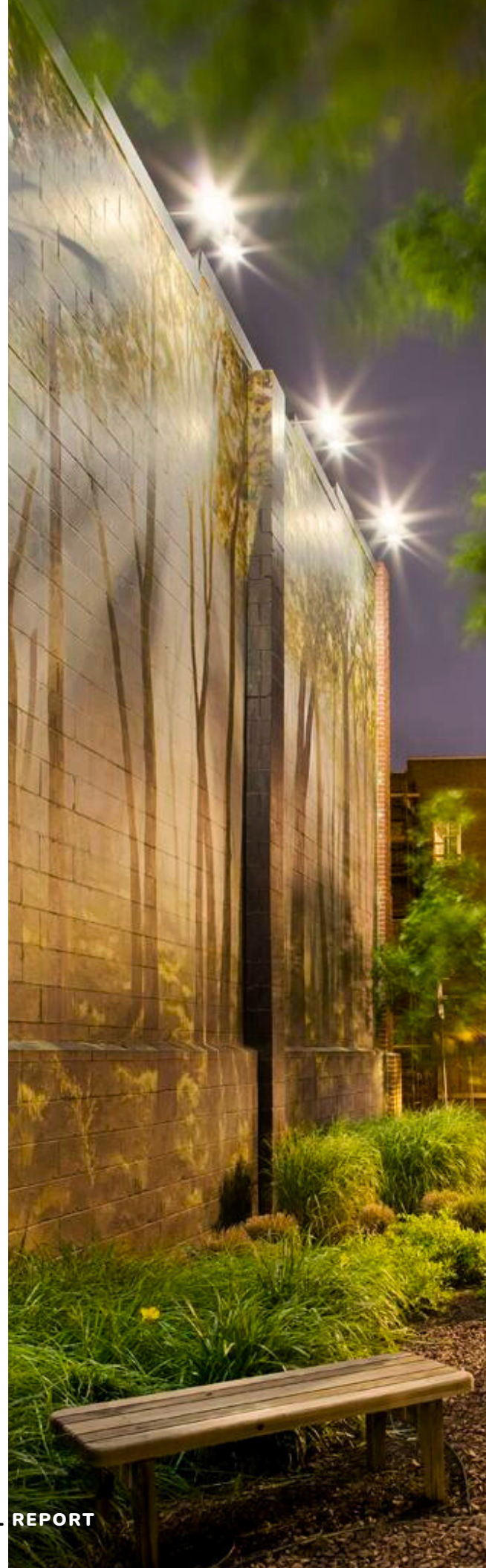
### LIABILITIES & NET ASSETS

Current Liabilities	\$117,047
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#### Net Assets

Donor Restricted	\$1,727,898
Board Restricted (Endowment)	\$5,699,345
Unrestricted	\$2,289,505

<b>Total Liabilities &amp; Net Assets</b>	<b>\$9,833,795</b>
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WANGADI GARDENS  
EST. 2012

PLANTING

GROWING

& THRIVING



thanks to

**HUNDREDS OF**  
DONORS IN 37 STATES,  
FOUNDATIONS AND  
CORPORATE PARTNERS,  
100% OF OUR BOARD,  
AND YOU!

IN MEMORIAM  
**TOM STONER**

CO-FOUNDER, NATURE SACRED

JAN 10, 1935 - OCT 19, 2023

Sacred Place at Inspiration Point, Annapolis, MD

“Quietly, beneath the drumbeat of global dysfunction and discouragement, there is an *emerging shift in imagination*. It is a growing phenomenon. This shift demonstrates a burgeoning realization that a place intentionally connected to nature can be a gift that *calms* the soul, *replenishes* the spirit, and *rekindles* a sense of community. The seed for this shift comes from our ability to tap into an **inner Sacred Place** and to have an **open heart**.”

— **Tom Stoner**, in memoriam | As quoted in *Open Spaces, Sacred Places*



In a world fraught with isolation, distress, and haste, Tom Stoner, Co-Founder of Nature Sacred, sought to foster moments of beauty, peace, and tranquility of true human connection, **for all**.

Nearly three decades ago, in a London city park, Tom and Kitty, his wife of 50 years, experienced a shared transformative moment in nature. It was in that serene space, enveloped by a sudden profound sense of calm and healing—that the germ of an idea was formed.

Upon their return to the US, they set about founding the TKF Foundation, which has since evolved into Nature Sacred, as the call for the mission and outreach capacity continues to be strengthened by like-minded supporters. Through this work, he helped bridge gaps, brought solace, and instilled hope.

It was this work that Tom would ultimately consider his most important, that would become his greatest passion and legacy, profoundly impacting people and communities in urban green spaces—from New York to Baltimore; Washington, D.C., to northeast Alabama; and Iowa to Oregon.

**The seeds Tom planted, in partnership with and alongside countless others, continue to grow. He continues to inspire us to nurture the connection between nature and humanity, and to create spaces where healing and unity happen. Together, we can continue to find a better way through nature.**

**On behalf of the Nature Sacred team and the Stoner family, thank you for the outpouring of love, generous memorial gifts, and heartfelt tribute messages.**

**One of the many tribute messages:**

“Tom was a creative spark. Moved by curiosity and the willingness to explore new possibilities, he animated those he invited to participate in his and Kitty’s great endeavor to offer Sacred Places to communities that would benefit from their healing influence.”

# 2023 Leadership

## Board of Directors

Pascal Mittermaier, Chair  
Kitty Stoner, Vice Chair  
Dick Blackburn, Treasurer  
Fred Smith, Secretary  
Nichole Battle  
Scott Brickman

Edward Dunn  
Michael Hankin  
Elizabeth Kinney  
Lauren Marshall  
Emily Moore  
Glen Stewart

Tom Stoner, Co-Founder, in memoriam  
Jack Bloodgood, Founding Director, in memoriam  
Chuck Foster, Founding Director  
Chelle Stoner, Founding Director

*Sacred Place at University of Maryland Baltimore County | Joseph Beuys Sculpture Park*





Journal entry and photo from the Sacred Place at  
**Mount Washington Arboretum**  
Baltimore, MD

*Walk gently on this earth; don't harm even  
a leaf or blade of grass without  
thought.*

*Drive gently on our roads. Your car and  
your path are filled with beloved  
people and creatures.*

*Speak gently, each word can build a dream  
or break a heart.*

*Look gently on the whole creation, believing  
it is filled with the Divine, sometimes  
latent, sometimes in full glory, and  
all of it was created for your pleasure  
and benefit.*

*Enjoy life—to be happy at all times is a  
tremendous accomplishment,  
bringing you close to all mankind  
and creator, and your true self.*

*Live gently, cradling your own life, nurturing  
your own dreams, kissing your own  
sorrows, whispering soothing words to  
yourself.*

*Love gently, being sensitive to all you  
encounter, knowing all is connected.*

*Rest gently...*

*Sweet life, sweet dreams.*

Sacred Place at Talladega College | Honoring our Ancestors, Enacting our Dreams, in partnership with CFNEA

Nature Sacred's Chief Programs Officer, Erin Robertson, with Firesoul, Rachele Williams, from Talladega as Board Member and Firesoul, Nichole Battle, bears witness to the connection and gratitude abounding.



**Nature Sacred**  
[www.naturesacred.org](http://www.naturesacred.org)

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