

# FIREFLY GATHERING

## **ANNUAL COMMUNITY REPORT 2022**

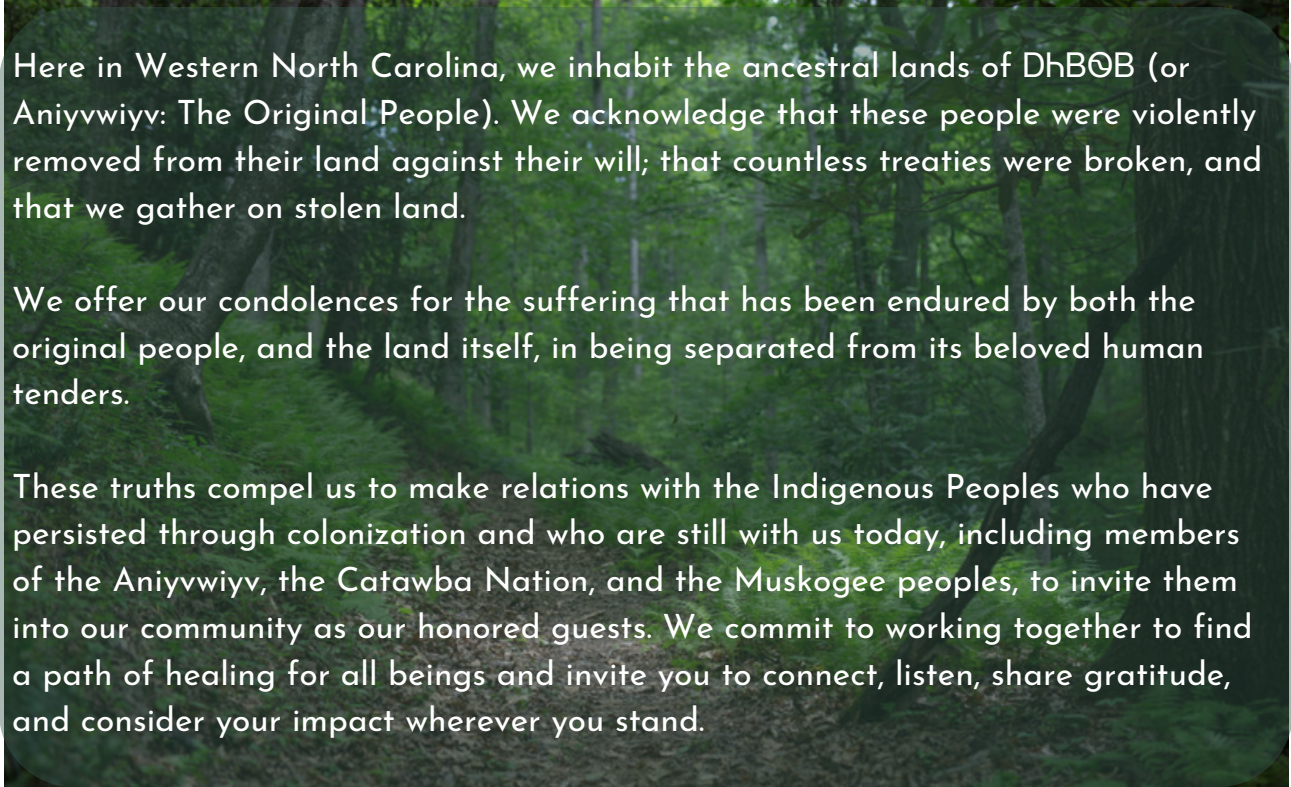


## MISSION

By offering a cyclical sharing of traditional craft and wisdom in community, we reconnect people in the Southeast with the teachings of the past to engage with the rapidly changing present to co-create a sustainable future.

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## SACRED LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT



Here in Western North Carolina, we inhabit the ancestral lands of DhBQB (or Aniyvwiyv: The Original People). We acknowledge that these people were violently removed from their land against their will; that countless treaties were broken, and that we gather on stolen land.

We offer our condolences for the suffering that has been endured by both the original people, and the land itself, in being separated from its beloved human tenders.

These truths compel us to make relations with the Indigenous Peoples who have persisted through colonization and who are still with us today, including members of the Aniyvwiyv, the Catawba Nation, and the Muskogee peoples, to invite them into our community as our honored guests. We commit to working together to find a path of healing for all beings and invite you to connect, listen, share gratitude, and consider your impact wherever you stand.

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## ORIGINS TO THE PRESENT

The Firefly Gathering has been women-led and going strong since 2007. The first event had just a few hundred people who shared a burning desire to live more connected and sustainable lives. Since then, we have steadily grown, becoming the largest earthskills gathering in the nation, transitioning into a nonprofit in 2019. Then, 2020 brought times of social distancing, shutdowns and shortages, highlighting the fundamental importance of skills for building sustainability, resiliency, equity and community in our personal and collective lives.



# PROGRAMS AND OFFERINGS

Annual Gathering - blooming  
Perennial Workshops - budding  
Annual Fall Gala & Fundraiser - budding  
Equity Committee & Fund - budding  
Community Connections - seeding

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## OUR GOALS

### Social/Cultural

- We are co-creating an alternative to the status-quo: weaving in the traditional wisdom and skills from the past with modern appropriate technology and thinking, to reconnect people with the natural world, themselves and each other. We believe it is from this place that love can flourish and deep change can be realized.

### Financial (see more in "What it takes to make it happen!")

- We are diversifying and expanding our income sources, including fundraising strategies.
- We are working towards a living wage for Firefly Staff and to increase Instructor compensation

### Equity

- Over time, our goal is to build deep relations with many more people of the global majority to transform The Firefly Gathering into a community-based force of change that is as diverse as the world we walk in. Through our growing efforts with the Equity Committee, Equity Fund and intentional relationship building, we continue to deepen our commitment as we witness the beauty of its unfolding.

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"Firefly is a dynamic and ever evolving organization that not only holds fast to our mission, but also is able to adapt and move with the changing times. We have seen how earthskills in general has historically been dominated by middle class, heteronormative mostly male white folks. Here at Firefly, we feel that all humans share a birthright of connection to land and community; that it is the lack of these basic fundamental human rights that are at the heart of so much dysfunction in our world today. To help address this situation, we are doing everything we can to make Firefly more accessible and welcoming to people from the global majority, trans/queer people, women, children and all others who have been marginalized and separated from the deep healing that comes through connection. To that end, we dream of Firefly being predominantly run by folks from these population segments. Currently, we are cleaning up systems and getting things running as smoothly and efficiently as they can, so we can then pass off a well tuned organization into the hands and hearts of the people whom we hope to serve."



- Marissa Percoco, Executive Director, Firefly Gathering

## ELDERS' COUNCIL

The Elders' Council serves as an advisory committee to programming decisions, content, and culture of The Firefly Gathering organization. Our community is blessed to have numerous respected and wise elders that we look to for guidance. We invite any of our elders to participate in the council as they are available and we also seek out their perspectives.

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"Firefly community has always embraced the practice of honoring elders. Leaders have listened to the council of those older than them for advice. Firefly honors men and women of wisdom who they see as supporting them through many years of contributing to intentional family friendly events. We are supported with special privileges: honorariums for our time, first in line for meals, housing or closer camping, golf cart rides to classes, heeding corrections, with explanations of why we should discontinue some ways that no longer serve the greater good.

Elders come with certain cultural perspectives. Traditional ways are many times discussed with other elders and consensus opinions offered.

Leadership learns from mistakes and grows because of what they might not have considered before. We engage in a good way, with disputes or hard actions that maybe participants respond better to, as opposed to their peers.

Respect for age and experience is not an exclusive Native American cultural component. Many indigenous people support wisdom from those who have lived through many ways of working with people, in face to face relationships.

It is rare and beautiful to be a part of true inter generational events like Firefly. Supporting their efforts continues traditional learning. When we elders share with future generations, our skills and legacies live on in those we have chosen to love."

- Nancy Basket, Elder and long time Instructor at Firefly Gathering



# RACIAL EQUITY

Historically, earthskills gatherings and programs nationwide benefitted from the teachings of global majority communities, while neglecting to offer acknowledgement, classes, programs, and support to those communities in return. Firefly is committed to interrupting this extractive point of view. In the inspiring words of Angela Davis, "In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist. We must be anti-racist."

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## EQUITY LEADERSHIP AND COMMITTEE



The Equity Committee Leader and Board of Directors member, Jae Ortiz, addressing the circle at Firefly Gathering with Executive Director, Marissa Percoco. Photo Credit Sarah Tew Photography

In an intentional step towards supporting ALL people in having access to nature and earthskills, this year we have expanded Firefly Gathering's Equity Committee. Composed of folks predominantly from the global majority, the Equity Committee serves to advise the Board and Executive Director of The Firefly Gathering in developing systems and strategies to realize our goals as an organization with equity at the center. As a part of this, the Equity Committee is steering our Annual Gathering and year-round work toward more inclusivity and responsiveness to the needs and experiences of everyone who participates.

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## EQUITY FUND

To make our annual Firefly Gathering more accessible to everyone, we are cultivating our Equity Fund. This Fund is available to welcome and support the experience of Indigenous or Native American, Black, Latinx, and other peoples of the global majority at the Annual Firefly Gathering. We offer this support with the hopes to nurture a powerful diverse community of earth-centered people steeped in the knowledge and skills that Firefly has to offer. We also welcome the wisdom that flows into our gathering from these participants.

In 2022, 24 attendees received Equity Fund Scholarships to attend the Annual Gathering.

In 2023, we are working to expand the Equity Fund to assist more people, as well as compensating folks for the hard work they are doing to help us grow in this direction. We are currently working to raise funds, increase sponsorship and explore grants to help support the amazing growth that we are experiencing in this arena.

## DONATE TO THE EQUITY FUND

- Help nurture a powerful intercultural community of earth-centered people by making an Equity Fund donation. Firefly is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, and all donations to the Equity Fund go directly towards welcoming and supporting people of the global majority to help cover the costs of their attendance to the Annual Firefly Gathering.

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## SUPPORT FIREFLY GATHERING'S MISSION

- Participate! Join us at the Annual Gathering in the summer, for Perennial Workshops year around and/or at the Full Moon Gala in the fall.
- Volunteer! Apply to do Work Trade at the Annual Gathering and/or inquire about joining our Board of Directors.
- Donate! Make a one time, tax-deductible donation and/or consider becoming a Fire Tender by contributing a monthly or annual donation!

## COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

"Firefly has been a force of change, autonomy, empowerment, enlightenment, knowledge and community in my life. I had to come back for more!"

~Repeat Gathering Participant

"You are all doing so well. I am in awe of the magic. I trust the people holding this so much and every year the world needs it more. Thank you."

~Repeat Gathering Participant

"First time at Firefly. So pleased with how peaceful, happy, clean and harmonious the entire scene was. My wife is Russian and she recognized that she was seeing "real Americans" for the first time and was very moved."

~2019 Annual Gathering Participant

"I felt Incredibly safe! As someone who was 100% new to the Earth Skills community and a 'solo' attendee, I was blown away by the love and welcoming humans and space!"

~2019 Annual Gathering Participant



"Firefly feels like summer camp for the whole family. Beyond the fun of learning new skills and making new friends, it helps our family sink into deep connection with one another that sets the tone for the entire summer."

~2019 Annual Gathering Participant



# ANNUAL GATHERING



This year's gathering is June 20-25, 2023 at Deerfields in Mills River, NC

Near the summer solstice each year, over 900 people convene from around the world for The Firefly Gathering. Here, folks come together to connect and share skills with the common goal of expanding our capacity to live well with one another and our beloved Earth.

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## OUR STORY

The Annual Firefly Gathering was first organized by Natalie Bogwalker and Kaleb Wallace in 2007. Natalie continued as the primary organizer and with the support of an incredibly dedicated community grew the event year after year until handing it off to by Chloe Chisholm with the vision to transition it to a nonprofit entity. In 2019 Firefly Gathering successfully transitioned to a 501c3 nonprofit with ample support from the community and much work from the outgoing director Chloe Chisholm. Just as Firefly was going into its first year with its official 501c3 nonprofit designation, the COVID-19 Pandemic began and the gathering was cancelled for two years, 2022 being the first gathering back since 2019! Over those years, the community holding of Firefly gathering has only matured and Firefly now has an active board and continues to have a broadly engaged community of instructors, other contributors and volunteers.

The 2022 Gathering had over 950 attendees, and over 25% of those attendees had some hand in putting the gathering together through some form of volunteering, teaching, work trade, or staff participation. How's that for community participation? These community members are the mycelia of the community, who are working in the background to help the gathering fruit!

In 2022 there were 157 work-traders who contribute their time in exchange for attendance to the gathering and help make this blossoming possible. The work-trade model integrates many community members into the fabric of the gathering and makes the gathering more accessible to many attendees who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford attending. Work traders contribute over 2445 hours over the course of the gathering.

Though not the largest number, the gathering is of course organized entirely around the amazing instructors and culture holders who share their passions and lifestyles at the gathering. There were over 60 instructors traveling to the gathering and offering their time for minimal compensation at the gathering. Indeed, this gathering comes to life for and because of the amazing regional earthskills community who offer countless hours to hone and develop the skills they are sharing, and then travel and commit their time to teaching many classes over the course of the week.

Then there are of course the small team of just 19 core staff and annual gathering staff who are dedicated enough to make Firefly Gathering a significant portion of their income of seasonal or annual work to help make the gathering a reality.

# INSTRUCTORS AND CLASSES

Knowing reconnection to be a powerful force for change, Firefly Instructors offer classes that feature opportunities to touch, taste, see, smell, hear and fall in love with the living world. Many of our topics reach deep into our ancestral lineages for guidance on how to form meaningful connections to self, community, and place in the modern world.

With acknowledgement and deep gratitude for Firefly Gathering's Instructors and the many generations of people who keep these skills alive, classes at Firefly such as fire craft, herbal medicine, storytelling, foraging, basketry, hide tanning, and bow making offer ancient and unifying pathways to help us co-create a sustainable future.



## Q&A WITH AN INSTRUCTOR

In this excerpt from an interview with Makeda Ruth Meeks, Makeda shares her background in this work, and how skills in social justice and communication are a vital component of earthskills as a whole and the Firefly Gathering. Read the full interview with Makeda online at [fireflygathering.org](https://fireflygathering.org).

**Q. WHAT DRAWS YOU TO TEACH CLASSES THAT INCORPORATE CRITICAL RACE THEORY, DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION AT EARTHSKILLS GATHERINGS SPECIFICALLY?**

I have always been fascinated by the edge. The point at which change is not only compelling but necessary, and the communities that reside there. I believe that these communities have the power to change the world, and who wouldn't want to be a part of that?

[Social justice] has been my calling all of my life and my course of study throughout my bachelor's and master's degrees. Difficult conversations have always been a part of my life and growth, but these are services that I began to offer at gatherings as I saw more and more People of Color leaving gatherings early and never coming back. As long as white supremacy goes unchecked in our cultural communication and educational systems, the dream of community will evade us.



**Q. WAS THERE AN "AH-HA" MOMENT FOR YOU ON THIS PATH?**

My Ah-ha moment was at another Earthskills Gathering in 2016, when a young family of color had their toddler threatened with a historically racialized punishment used in slavery. The family of color left to protect their child and the gathering moved forward with lots of sympathy and "oh that was so mean." The offending individual left and there was no structural investment, change or education put in place to keep this from happening again.

I loved my earthskills community, so I volunteered to offer educational spaces for that gathering. As this work is largely undervalued and unpaid, despite the great emotional, mental and physical burden I knew that my contribution to this community could be to carry this family's story forward and work for equity in a community that I so greatly value.

Meet Makeda Ruth Meeks, an Annual Firefly Gathering instructor based in Florida who will be joining us for her 8th year this summer. As a mother, educator, business owner and consultant at MRM Diversity Consulting, author, and lover of humanity and all that connects living things, Makeda offers classes at the Gathering grounded in Critical Race Theory, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

**Q.WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE TO ENGAGE WITH COMMUNICATION AS A SKILL?**

People come to earthskills gatherings to learn primitive silks. However, the ancient skill of communication often is overlooked or under-prioritized.

Using the skills of non-violent communication, we can enter into diverse spaces and learn the skills of those who came before us, without appropriating cultures, recreating stereotypes and furthering the violence of white supremacy.

**Q. WHAT DOES THE FIREFLY GATHERING IN PARTICULAR MEAN TO YOU?**

Firefly Gathering is my favorite gathering! It is my favorite because it is a space that works to create safety, education and community in a fun and inclusive way. This is different from other earthskills gatherings in that this is the only gathering that has demonstrated its structural investment in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

We are delighted to have Makeda back at the Gathering, and for the skills she brings to our community as we grow in our approaches and offerings for equity and inclusion year-round.



# PERENNIAL WORKSHOPS

Perennial Workshops aim to make the blossoming of the annual gathering a year around affair and support instructors in offering workshops throughout the year to bring skills for living with the earth to people who can't pack up and head to the woods every summer!



2022 was the first full year of Perennial Workshops and over the course of the year, 158 people attended a total of 21 workshops, seven of which completely sold out!

Over the course of the year we learned a lot, including more about what the community is looking for and are excited about the 2023 Perennial Workshops, which have already begun!

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# FULL MOON GALA

The Fall Full Moon Gala + Fundraiser happens annually and is an intimate evening of live ceremony, music, art & dancing set in a beautiful location in Asheville, North Carolina.

**Frost Moon Gala 2022 Report**  
The Frost Moon Gala was a Sparkling Success!! Thanks to over 500 volunteer hours from community, artists and even staff, we raised over \$15k for Firefly's non-profit work to make skill sharing more abundant and accessible in the Southeast - and had one of the most UNFORGETTABLE evenings of our many Firefly years!



Frost Moon Gala 2022 held at the Masonic Temple, Asheville NC in November Photo Credit Sarah Tew Photography



# WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE IT HAPPEN!

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As with any community organization, Firefly is a (now perennial) blooming of the community, and serves and is supported by its community. The Annual Gathering wouldn't exist without the community making it a priority for their summer, and the same is true for perennial classes, where we aim to support teachers and the community alike year round in deepening and sharing their practices of living with the earth.

Despite needing to cancel the 2020 and 2021 Gatherings, Firefly has managed to establish a strong operational foundation with an incredible team and is in good financial standing, with ample room for improvement.

Specifically, Firefly's goals for financial sustainability include:

- Paying year around staff a living wage within 3-5 years
- Diversifying our income sources, including fundraising
- Establishing savings equal to 3 months of operating expenses plus maintaining a pool of \$25,000 in Annual Gathering Seed Funds after each gathering to carry into the next gathering.

In 2022, we did not manage to put money away into savings. Firefly Gathering's Gross Revenue was \$182,878 and Gross expenses were \$188,175, with a net loss of -\$5,297 in 2022. For the most part loss can be attributed to unexpected Annual Gathering expenses and the additional work of re-starting an annual gathering with many new team members after a two year hiatus, as well striving to provide liveable wages for staff.

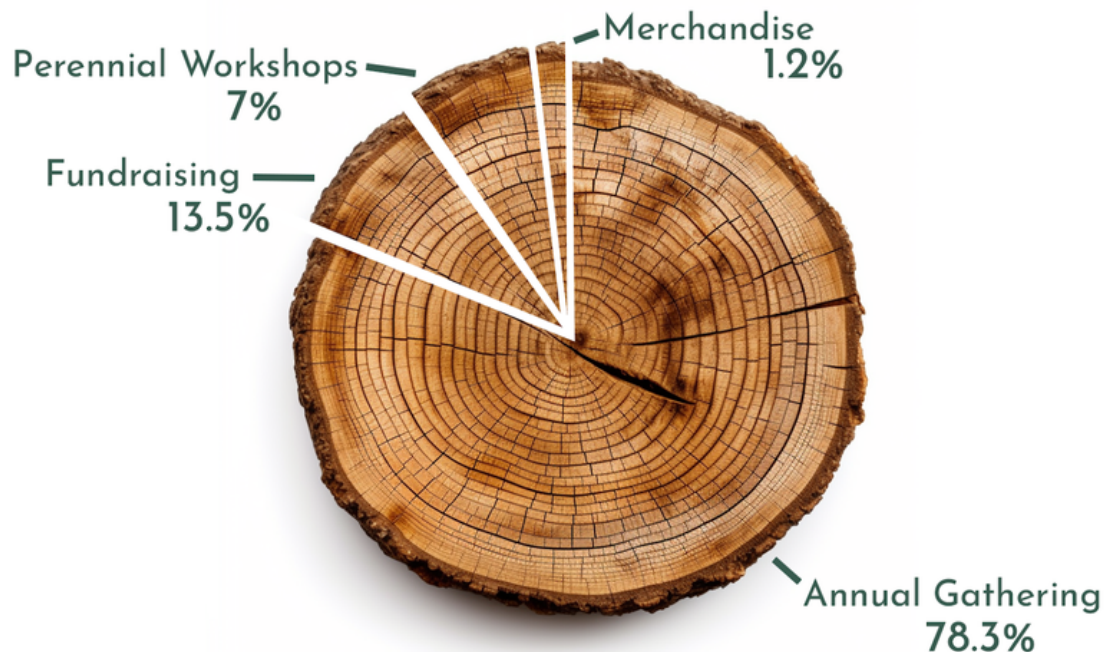
While we didn't put savings in the bank, in light of recent inflation, we did manage to increase staff pay going into 2023. In 2022 Firefly Gathering paid an average of \$13.63 per hour reported to year round staff with a pay range of \$12.50 to as high as \$14.25 for Firefly's longest working staff. For comparison, Just Ekonomiks of WNC put the Living Wage Rate as \$17.70/hr, a difference of \$4.07 compared to the 2022 average. We've obviously got a long way to go in making things sustainable for the annual staff. Luckily, in 2023, we've managed to give all staff a raise with the new Perrenial Staff pay scale resulting in a range from \$14.50 for newer employees to \$16.50 for long time Firefly employees.



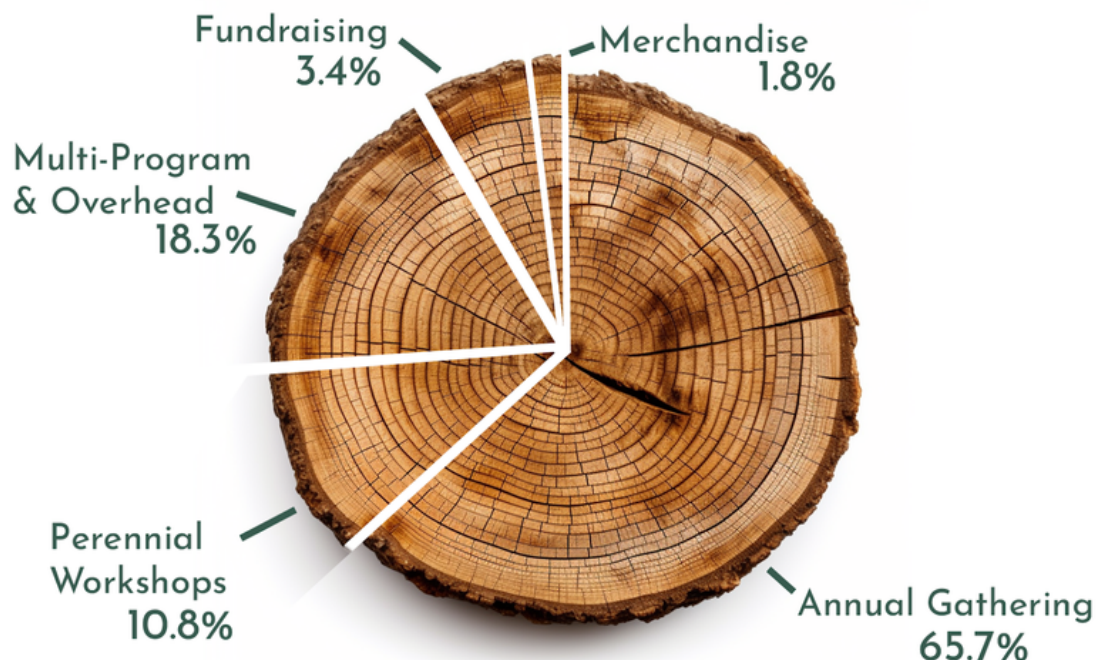
# OVERALL INCOME AND EXPENSES

The Overall income and expense breakdowns in the charts below shed light on our income sources. In 2022, 78% of our income came from the Annual Gathering, vs 65% of expenses. From that we can see how the annual gathering income is currently supporting Perennial Workshops (7% of income and 11% of expenses) as well as a portion of cross program expenses. Fundraising has grown from nothing in 2019, to an average of \$34,000/yr over the last two years! This still only constitutes less than 15% of our total income/expenses and needs to grow in order to support our Perennial program and goals for financial sustainability.

## Overall Income



## Overall Expenses



# ANNUAL GATHERING EXPENSES

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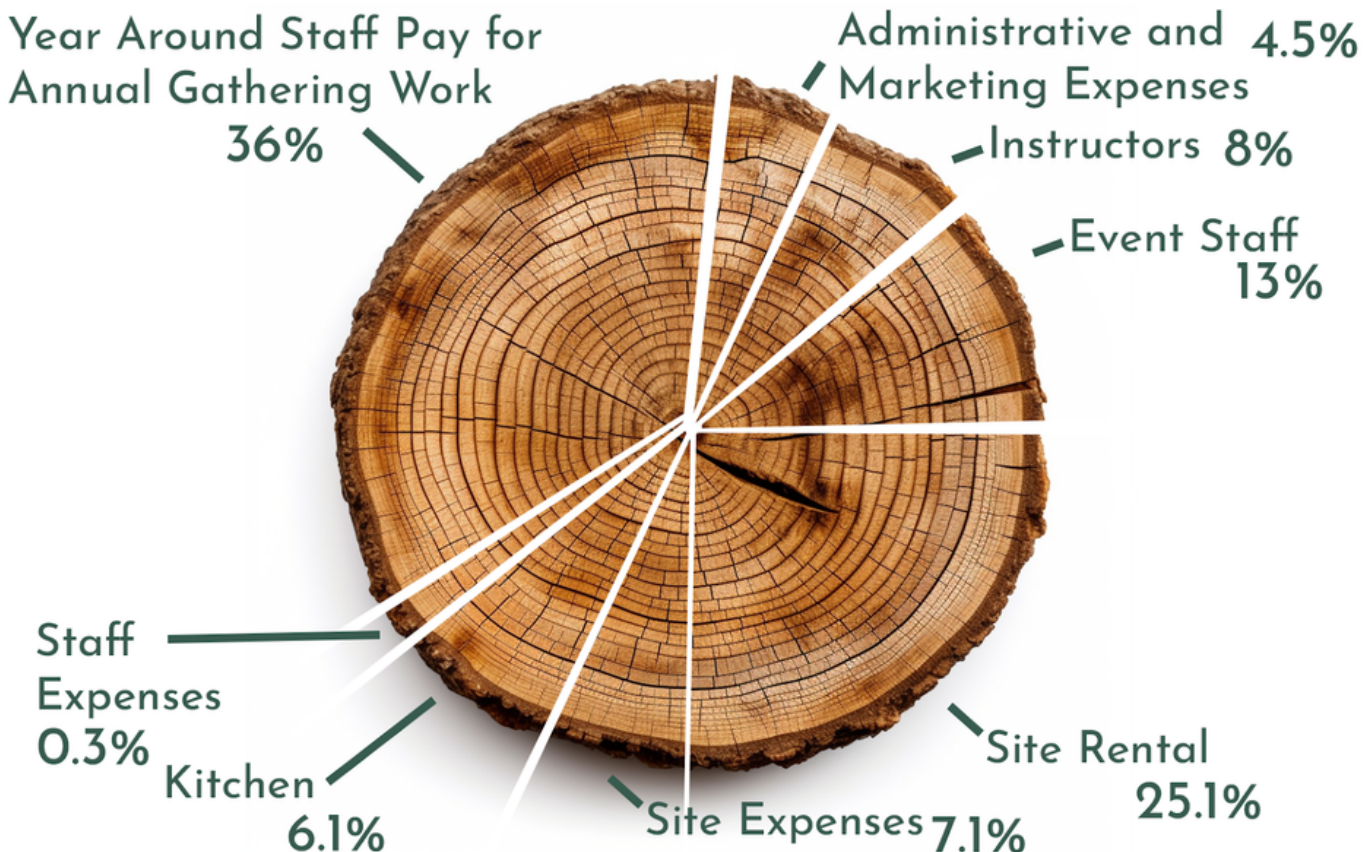
The Annual Gathering is the bulk of Firefly's expenses. In producing the Annual Gathering our largest expenses are Year Around Staff Pay (36%) and Site Rental (25%), followed by Independent Contractors, Instructors and other site expenses (totaling another 28% combined).

Year Around Annual Staff were paid for an impressive 4,220 hours dedicated to the production of the 2022 Annual Gathering, their efforts ensuring it all went off without a hitch! And of course there are also all the amazing annual gathering staff who join Firefly's team just for the spring and summer to make sure Firefly Gathering's infrastructure can coalesce, and all of the other details have an attendee.

However, Firefly wouldn't be possible without the incredible skill keepers within the community that are really the heart of the gathering. Without the amazing instructors, this gathering wouldn't have a reason to exist! Year after year, our amazing instructors bring their resources and years of practice to the gathering to share and teach, volunteering much of their time and energy to share their skills and crafts for living with the earth. We exist to support these instructors in sharing and spreading these skills!

Firefly also depends on the volunteer and compensated support of the broader community in the form of the amazing community of skilled instructors, work traders, and board of directors, and board committee members who volunteer their time in a wide range of ways to support the sharing and connection earth and these important skills and cultures.

We're really able to see how much the community comes together to support the Annual Gathering when considering the huge amount of work it takes to gather over 900 people to share skills for living with the earth.





# PERENNIAL WORKSHOPS EXPENSES

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2022 was our first year running a full year of our Perennial Workshops and we have been dialing in our systems. Coming into 2023, we're beginning to get a better pulse on the community's interests and further streamlining our systems. Still, to keep workshops as affordable as possible, currently a portion of the expense of producing the Perennial Workshops is effectively covered by Annual Gathering and Fundraising income. We hope to secure additional funding to support even more affordable Perennial classes as part of our diversification of funding sources.

