



JONAS C., MARIAN D., & ROBERT H. ERB CHARITABLE FUND PROPOSAL

Contact Information

People’s Light

39 Conestoga Road

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www.peopleslight.org

Year Incorporated: 1974

FEIN: 23-731-3407

ED: **Zak Berkman**
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 Board Chair: **Katherine H. McNabb**
 Board Chair Approval (check here):
 Contact: **Jane P. Moss**
moss@peopleslight.org

Organization Information:

Field/s of Interest:

Arts, Culture & Humanities Environment/Animal Welfare Education

Mission:

People’s Light, a cultural and civic center with theatre at its core, invites and creates opportunities for diverse communities to discover and celebrate our shared humanity.

Geographic Area Served Chester, Delaware, Bucks, Montgomery & Philadelphia Counties

Describe Population Served & Annual Number of People Served:

Annual Budget \$ <u>6,818,710</u>	<u>56</u>	# of Full-Time Equivalent Paid Staff
<u>62</u> % of budget for program expenses	<u>27</u>	# of Board Volunteers
<u>31</u> % of budget for administrative expenses	<u>24</u>	# of Active Non-Board Volunteers
<u>7</u> % of budget for fundraising expenses	<u>1,125</u>	# of Volunteer Hours
<small>100 % total</small>		

Top 3-5 funding sources:

William Penn Foundation - Pew Center for Arts & Heritage Shubert Foundation – PECO - Hamilton Family Charitable Trust

Grant Amount Requested \$ 50,000

Proposal Summary:

People’s Light respectfully requests funds to support of our youth education programming, *Arts Discovery*, for the 2026-27 school year. This suite of nationally-recognized arts education programs include: Arts Discovery Student Matinees, Extracurricular Artist Workshop/Residencies, New Voices, Theatre School (K-12), and Summer Studios (2-12).

I. GRANT PROPOSAL NARRATIVE

1. History, goals, key achievements & distinctiveness

People's Light, one of the largest professional theatres in Pennsylvania, forges cultural and civic connections throughout our rapidly growing region. Our home in the heart of Chester County places us at a unique crossroads of rural, urban, and suburban populations. Throughout our year-round season, we produce contemporary plays, classics, new forms of music theatre, and original work. People's Light attracts audiences from Chester, Montgomery, Philadelphia, Delaware and Bucks counties and beyond. We host a wide array of cultural experiences and education programs that inspire meaningful engagement with, and sustained investment in and from, our surrounding communities.

We surround our productions with activities that connect us with our neighbors, weaving the onstage work into the fabric of community life. We lead the nation in accessible theatre practices and strive to create programs and performances that can be enjoyed by everyone. As part of a longstanding history of new work development, People's Light commissions and produces world premiere plays, many of which go on to additional productions across the country. We established a nationally recognized model for locally inspired plays that aim to awaken a greater collective consciousness of our American experience.

Our increasingly diverse audiences include constituents of longtime partner organizations with whom we collaborate on **New Play Frontiers (NPF)**, through which we commission leading playwrights to create plays informed by meaningful stories of nearby populations, and simultaneously develop audiences with a stake in the work. Through NPF, playwrights spend residency time with specific communities in the five-county region, hosted by People's Light in collaboration with partner organizations. These partners are based in a broad range of communities surrounding the Theatre from Kennett Square, "The Mushroom Capital of the World," home to a large immigrant farming community; to the historically black East end neighborhood of Chester County seat West Chester; to economically depressed Coatesville, a former steel mill town. People's Light commissions, develops and produces plays inspired by this research and engagement.

A commitment to arts education through our **Arts Education** programs serves as a guiding tenet at People's Light. Theatre professionals design classes, workshops and summer programs for young people from a variety of backgrounds, communities, and schools. The Theatre maintains a longstanding deep connection with the City of Chester through **New Voices**, our fully-subsidized program for students from Chester (31.4% live in poverty), a key component of our Arts Discovery education programs. New Voices was launched in 1990 and continues to make an indelible impact on the lives of students each year. One of the alumni of the original New Voices ensemble is now the lead teaching artist for the program and full-time Resident Teaching Artist for the Theatre.

Accessibility

Each season, People's Light expands its offerings to insure accessibility to people with disabilities. As a field leader in accessibility practices, we launched in 2019 the American pilot of Smart Caption Glasses to serve the deaf and hearing loss communities. Open caption and American Sign Language performances continue for those who prefer these offerings to the Smart Glasses. In 2015 we held the first-in-our-region Relaxed Performances (RPs) which create a welcoming experience for individuals with a range of sensory, learning and communication differences.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Through artistic and civic practices, People's Light aims to provide a wide and thoughtful welcome to patrons, artists, staff, students, volunteers, and guests of all backgrounds and identities. We recognize that systemic injustice and inequity are deeply ingrained in our society. In the last ten plus years we have accelerated our inclusion of BIPOC artist voices through NPF, intentional color-conscious casting, and an increased number of deep multi-year partnerships with directors and playwrights of color. 65% of our NPF-commissioned writers identify as BIPOC (65% also identify as female).

2. Funding request

Description of key initiatives:

Arts Discovery

The wide range of People's Light Education programs, under the umbrella of "Arts Discovery," exists to involve students from around our region in theatre experiences which will enrich and deepen both academic and social-emotional learning. We strive to create diverse opportunities for students to engage critical listening, communication, and interpretive skills on several levels: 1) as audiences, 2) as interactive responders, and 3) as hands-on creators in artistic processes of their own. Our goal is to extend these experiences broadly, to all members of our region, regardless of financial ability or other potential barriers to participation.

Student audiences are primarily served through two main programs: Touring work that goes directly to schools, and Arts Discovery Student Matinees: specific productions within the People's Light season selected for their potential to make deep curricular as well as personal connections for students at specific grade levels.

~ Our Student Matinee programming aims to:

- Present productions of high quality to a diverse range of students at little or no cost to participating schools;
- Engage teachers and students in a creative, experiential process of approaching curricular texts and themes via theatre.

Within the Student Matinee offerings, we have committed one date for each of our winter, all-ages productions as a Relaxed Performance, including ASL Interpretation and Audio Description. Participating groups returning annually include the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf, Royer Greaves School for Blind, and other schools focusing on learners with special needs.

Only 18% of our Student Matinee audience tells us they see theatre outside of their school. To support access beyond economic barriers, People's Light provided over \$4800 in bus subsidy in 2024-25, and free or reduced price tickets to 1,034 guests from Title 1 schools.

~ Our theatre classes and workshops, residency at Royer Greaves School for Blind and Summer Studios, aim to:

- Foster an appreciation of theatre as a means of self-expression;
- Explore multiple solutions to a proposed inquiry or task
- Bring artists and young people together to work, to inspire each other, and to craft new theatre pieces in a non-judgmental ensemble environment of respect;
- Practice our 4 C's: collaboration, creativity, curiosity, and confidence

~ In addition to all the foundational goals of Theatre School (listed above), the most rigorous and longer-term offerings, such as our New Voices program, also:

- Build skills including literacy, decision-making, problem solving and critical thinking;
- Promote tolerance and an appreciation for diversity;
- Offer life-long learning opportunities in connection with themes, process, and the experience of live theatre

Specific needs & issues to be addressed:

People's Light is and has been committed to serving the diverse communities of our region, including those that are underserved with respect to the arts. Throughout our programs, we find ways to offer new opportunities through the arts to youth and adults from a range of socioeconomic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Why it is important to fund this now:

People's Light Arts Discovery programs are at the heart of the Theatre's deep and multi-layered connection with the communities surrounding our campus. With reductions in arts learning opportunities in schools, the Theatre's programs fill a void in the personal and cultural development of young people. We believe that sharing theatre creates opportunities for learning about ourselves, our community, and our world. Our performances welcome hundreds of students each year, including participation from area Title I schools who attend completely free of charge. Children might participate in a longer-term residency project, and work with a visiting teaching artist over many months to develop skills as creative storytellers, collaborators, performers, and problem-solvers. Residencies for students with cognitive differences allow us to share powerful tools with individuals who might have little or no exposure to theatre otherwise.

In 2025 we piloted a school-day mini-residency of 5 workshops for seventh grade students in the Toby Farms School in Brookhaven; it was so well-received by the school that People's Light was asked to develop an expanded 9 week series to serve the entire grade level, as well as become an afterschool enrichment provider.

How impact & results will be demonstrated:

Goals and measurements vary with each offering; *Arts Discovery* programs range from single contacts expanding access to theatre all the way to year-long participation inviting skill-repetition and mastery.

For Student Matinees, primary evaluation tools are educator and student surveys. Educators provide feedback on three key areas:

- Quality of the artistic experience, including curricular relevance and classroom observations before and after the performance;
- Logistics of school participation, including barriers PL might address;
- Priorities regarding future titles, topics, or genres educators hope to share with their students

At middle school and older, students complete post-play reflections, discussing themes in the production and connections to both academic and real-world experiences.

For extracurricular programs (with community partners, schools and Theatre School/Summer Studios) we prioritize experimentation and process over final product. As a result, most of the feedback we gather is from teaching artists' direct observation and reflective practice built into their lessons.

For longer duration offerings such as New Voices we assess many areas, including:

- **Literacy: Increased fluidity reading texts, close textual analysis for nuance, diction, and subtext; memorized delivery of text with character-specific analysis.**
- **Social skills: Embrace of diversity, comfort in unfamiliar situations, mentoring and volunteering**
- **Perseverance: Engaged participation level in discussions; increased stamina and focus**
- **Artistry: students deliver vocally-rich, physically expressive and emotionally truthful performances in solo and ensemble tasks. ###**