



NEWS FROM TCA: FEBRUARY 2026

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We hope you've been staying warm and listening to great music! This month, we're sharing a story of how the Winnsboro Center for the Arts used a TCA Cultural District Project grant to make an economic impact in their community by expanding their Cowboy Music & Poetry Gathering. Scroll down for that and more news! Photo: Mary White

Texas Poetry Out Loud Competition Finals February 28



The 2026 Texas Poetry Out Loud finals will be held at the Texas Spirit Theater in the **Bullock Texas State History Museum** on Saturday, February 28 at 1:00 PM Central. The finals will be open to the public and free to attend. This year's finals will bring together the top ten competitors from across the state to determine the state champion and runner-up. As well, the program will

recognize each school winner for the year. The event will be hosted by internationally-renowned Texas poet Naomi Shihab Nye.

The [Poetry Out Loud](#) recitation contest is a project of the National Endowment for the Arts. This exciting program helps students master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about their literary heritage. High school students memorize poems and perform them in competition. This year's anthology of poems celebrates the United States' 250th anniversary. At the state level, the winner and runner up receive cash awards and their school libraries receive money to help them buy poetry books. Each state champ will compete in the national competition in late April for a pool of \$50,000 in scholarships for students and cash awards for schools. TCA is proud to be a part of Poetry Out Loud, which helps high school students explore poetry interpretation and find new modes of self-expression while refining their public speaking skills. The state finals event is graciously hosted by the Bullock Texas State History Museum.

Three TCA Application Deadlines

TCA has several imminent application deadlines. As always, the TCA staff is happy to discuss your goals and eligibility to determine which programs are right for you. You may also request that a TCA staff member review your application and provide feedback. Ideally, these requests would be made at least two weeks before the application deadline.

Designation Program: Cultural District Designation

This program designates special zones in cities and Texas communities that harness the power of cultural resources to stimulate economic development and community revitalization.

Application deadline: Letter of Intent to apply due February 2, 2026;
application due June 15

LOI form: On [Cultural Districts Program page](#)

Resources: [Program guidelines](#), [contact TCA staff](#)

Designation Program: Touring Roster Inclusion

Texas-based nonprofits, individuals, universities, and unincorporated/for-profit groups providing arts performances apply to be included on the 2026-2028 Texas Touring Roster.

Application deadline: February 2, 2026

Application form: On [Submittable](#)

Resources: [Program guidelines](#), [FAQ](#)

Grant Program: Arts Respond Performance Support

This program provides professional artist fees to Texas nonprofits, schools, colleges, and units of government for hiring an artist from the [Texas Touring Roster](#) to do a performance. These applications are funded based on a percentage of contracted fees.

Activity dates must start: Between March 15 and June 14, 2026

Application deadline: Midnight on February 2, 2026

Application form: [Online](#)

Resources: [Grant guidelines](#), [contact TCA staff](#), [FAQ](#)

TCA Speaker Series: Creative Approaches to Accessibility



TCA will be holding a free, optional online webinar titled **Creative Approaches to Accessibility**. This event is an opportunity to learn about the ways organizations can better and more easily incorporate accessibility into their work. **Celia Hughes**, from **Art Spark Texas**, will lead a discussion of the ways Art Spark Texas has helped organizations address challenges meeting Accessibility and Disability Act (ADA) requirements in creative ways, and how organizations can reimagine accessibility as a part of their work. A question-and-answer session will follow.

The virtual meeting will be on **Thursday, March 26 from 2:00 - 3:30 PM Central**. It is open to arts nonprofits, artists, and members of the public.

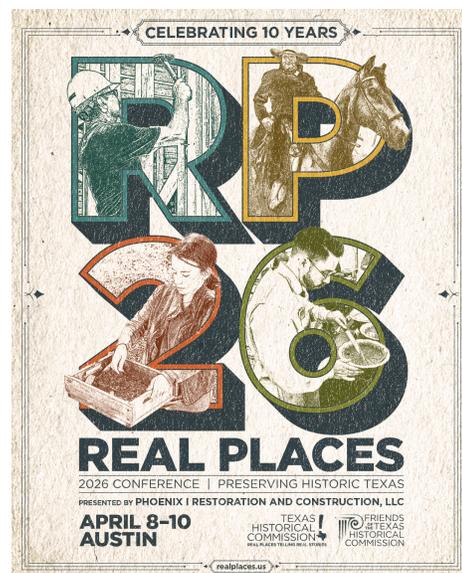
TCA is excited to feature Celia Hughes, Executive Director at Art Spark Texas. Celia Hughes has over 30 years of experience working in the arts and disability field, mainly focused in theater and music as a teacher, producer, artist and administrator. She has designed inclusive arts programs in partnership with public schools, community centers, cultural arts facilities, and disability service organizations in Austin and across Texas. These programs include *ArtWorks*, professional opportunities for emerging artists with disabilities; *Cultural Access Initiative*, workshops and trainings on disability awareness and/or Audio Description; *Speaking Advocates*, inclusive writing and performance training and performance opportunities; and *Texas Veterans Strong*, arts-based projects specifically focused on the needs of veterans and the military-connected community; and *Inclusive Arts Education*, in-school and community-based, multi-discipline, universally designed, art classes.

[Register](#) today and mark your calendar! Please note: registration does not guarantee a spot in this event, as spaces are limited. Be quick to join us on the day-of to experience this conversation in real time.

Real Places 2026

TCA is a member of a group of State agencies that work together under a memorandum of understanding to promote tourism. One of our partner agencies, the Texas Historical Commission, is holding a conference soon that will address the needs of museums and other cultural venues.

The Texas Historical Commission's Real Places 2026 conference will take place both virtually and in person in Austin, April 8-10. Presented by the Friends of the Texas Historical Commission in partnership with Phoenix I Restoration and Construction, LLC, Real Places is the premier historic preservation and heritage tourism event in the Lone Star State, where anyone interested in protecting our past can work



directly with industry-leading experts to learn practical, actionable solutions they can apply in their community.

The packed schedule features more than 50 workshops, tours, and sessions; over 100 expert speakers from across Texas and the U.S.; several keynote presentations; and a number of fun networking events. Recordings will be available to all attendees, whether joining online or in person, so you'll be able to watch the great presentations you missed due to concurrent sessions. Learn more and sign up at realplaces.us.

Save the Date!



In early March, TCA Commissioners will approve the 2026 class of Young Masters. We'll celebrate them in our March newsletter, and we can't wait to applaud them in person in April!

Young Masters is a joint initiative between the Texas Commission on

the Arts and the Texas Cultural Trust recognizing 8th through 11th grade students from across the state who demonstrate excellence in dance, theater, music, film/media, visual arts, literary arts, and folk & traditional arts. The students selected for this program will represent the 13th class of Young Masters, which is generously supported by the Butler Texas Young Masters Endowment. The program awards 15 students with up to \$10,000 in grants over two years to enhance and build their professional artistic study before they go to college.

The 2026 Young Masters will be honored at ZACH Theatre in Austin on Monday, **April 13**. The Young Masters event is fun for the whole family, featuring Ray Benson from Asleep at the Wheel, Trevor Scott from We Are Austin, Lauren Anderson, and other special guests! More information on the event is [here](#).

Apply to Be a TCA Grant Evaluator

Each year, TCA invites roughly 200 Texans to serve as peer reviewers of the grant applications we receive. We are grateful to these members of our arts field who donate their time and knowledge to our panel review process and assess the quality of grant applications. The peer review process is central to the Commission's efforts to maintain an accountable, accessible awards system for the State of Texas.

If you would like insight into the grant evaluation process, we invite you to nominate yourself to serve on a panel. TCA is not able to pay for this work, but it will allow you to gain experience as a grant evaluator, see how other organizations present their programs and challenges, and ensure that TCA grant decisions can be made—we really can't do this without you. Nominations are accepted year-round and can be made [here](#).

Panels can be held online or in person in Austin. TCA reimburses for travel and hotel costs for in-person meetings. For online panels, TCA assigns reviewers no more than 25 grant applications to help keep the workload reasonable. **Evaluators can also be grant applicants**—TCA excludes evaluators from reviewing and scoring an application that they submitted or have any other conflict of interest with.

Support Texas Arts with the *State of the Arts* License Plate



TCA's chic black-and-silver *State of the Arts* minimalist design license plate is available to order at <https://www.myplates.com/go/arts>. This plate design can go on a passenger car, motorcycle, trailer, or private bus (attention, Texas bands!). TCA will receive a portion of the sales of the plate. Note that

this plate is part of MyPlates' "Lone Star Series," but only the *State of the Arts* plate supports TCA. There is a price break for those ordering their plate for multiple years. Make a long-term commitment to the arts!

Grantee Spotlight: Cowboy Art in Winnsboro Cultural District Lassos Crowds

Every fall, TCA staff spend many, many hours reviewing report forms that grantees submit as they close out their grants. These reports share arts organizations' trials and tribulations, challenges and solutions. Many of these stories will resonate with others across our field, so we're sharing some of them through grantee spotlights.



This month, we're spotlighting the **Winnsboro Center for the Arts (WCA)**, a cultural center that serves their 3,400 local residents and communities throughout northeast Texas with programs ranging from concerts, theater performances, exhibitions, and festivals to open mic nights and summer camps. In 2025, WCA, located within the TCA-designated Winnsboro Cultural District, received a Cultural District Project grant in support of their Cowboy Music & Poetry Gathering. With TCA's support, WCA expanded the gathering

from a one-day celebration of East Texas cowboy culture to a two-day event with an increased number of involved artists.

The Gathering consisted of ticketed events like performances by local and nationally recognized musicians and poets, and conversations that explored the past, present and future of cowboy poetry and song. It also featured a wide range of free, family-friendly activities, like chuckwagon fare and wagon tours through downtown Winnsboro. This year, the mule wagon route was expanded to include a stop at the Farmers' Market in addition to the Bowery Stage (where WCA is located), which attracted crowds of curious locals and visitors. WCA expanded their use of the empty lot that the chuckwagon and wagon tours are centered around to provide more activities like square dancing demonstrations, steer roping, cornhusk doll-making, corn hole toss, horseshoes, and face-painting. From there, participants could take the wagon to see the Gathering's offerings, including WCA's Cowboy Tales Art Exhibition, a juried show open to artists across Texas.

One of the Gathering's most notable impacts was its ability to attract cultural tourists from well beyond the rural region. Survey data and ticket sales revealed that more than half of attendees traveled over 50 miles to attend, with **over 10% coming from out of state**, exceeding expectations based on WCA's other festivals. Many visitors stayed overnight, and 95% of attendees dined locally and explored Winnsboro's shops and restaurants, which provided **a welcome boost to the local economy**. One restaurant owner shared that it was the best weekend her business had ever experienced. As WCA looks to the future of the Cowboy Music & Poetry Gathering, they are committed to balancing national recognition with strong community support while continuing to grow the event. This year's expansion, from six to ten paid performers and from a single day to a full weekend, proved to be a successful step toward long-term sustainability and recognition as a significant cultural destination for cowboy music, poetry, and art.

TCA is proud to support the Winnsboro Center for the Arts and the many arts organizations across Texas who make the arts accessible to our fellow Texans.

Photo: Carolyn Stout

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