

Cottonwood Gulch EXPEDITIONS

2024 ANNUAL REPORT



“I love Cottonwood Gulch! It is one of my favorite places. I got 3 weeks of starry nights, of beautiful sunrises, of adventures, of amazing people, and memories that I will cherish for so many years.”

— Jun Silva, 2024 Trekker

What We Do

Since 1926, we've hosted transformative outdoor experiences that foster personal growth, build community, and inspire a lifelong connection to the natural world. In 2024, more than 1,500 young people discovered their own sense of independence and curiosity on our treks and became part of our Gulch family, spanning generations and connecting us all through our love of nature and our shared values. Thank you for being a part of this amazing community!



CON



CONNECTION

In 2026, we will celebrate an incredible milestone: our 100th Anniversary! For a century, we've been connecting people with the outdoors and creating lifelong inspiration. As we prepare for this occasion, we're thrilled to announce four transformative projects that will shape our next hundred years. Each initiative is driven by dedicated board members, Gulch staff, and volunteers who are turning these visionary ideas into reality. Below, you'll discover how we're honoring our past while continuing to innovate as a 21st century educational program. I invite you to join us on this journey.

Jordan Stone,
Executive Director



Our Upcoming **100TH** ANNIVERSARY in Four Projects

1. TREKKING INTO THE FUTURE, A PLANNED GIVING CAMPAIGN

Secure a second century of life-changing treks for thousands of young people

As we approach our centennial, we're launching "Trekkling Into The Future," a campaign to inspire more people to join our Red Rocks Society of individuals who have included Cottonwood Gulch in their estate plans. Currently, 23 individuals or couples have made this commitment, ensuring financial stability for our next century of transformative outdoor experiences.

As part of this campaign, we are launching a newsletter, Cottonwood Connections, which will provide information about how planned gifts can support the Gulch and provide tax benefits for our donors. Keep an eye out for this in the coming months — It will come out three times per year.

Where will your planned gift go?

Most planned gifts support our endowment, which was established in 2001 and currently stands at \$1.5 million. We distribute 3–5 percent annually to support our programs, while the rest is invested in diversified funds that have grown at an average rate of 8 percent since inception.

Looking to our second century, we have four funding priorities:

1. **Bolster summer treks** that keep a great tradition going while increasing accessibility;
2. **Innovate** like Howie by expanding school programs and investing in competitive wages for our staff, honoring our founder's spirit of innovation;
3. **Steward the land** we love by maintaining and improving our Basecamp—the heart of our operations;
4. **Electrify the future** by ensuring our infrastructure and programs are environmentally sustainable—we teach by example.

2. 100TH ANNIVERSARY EVENTS: REGIONAL RENDEZVOUS EVENTS, AND BASECAMP CELEBRATION IN 2026

Our centennial will be a coast-to-coast celebration! We are thrilled to announce a series of Regional Rendezvous events that will bring our community together in places across the country. We have a team planning events in Santa Fe • Los Angeles • Denver • Indianapolis • DC/ Baltimore • Philadelphia • New York City • Boston • Albuquerque.

Each Rendezvous will feature local flavor, inspiring trek stories, opportunities to connect with fellow Gulch enthusiasts, and a discussion about where the Gulch is headed in our second century. Gatherings are scheduled from February 2025 through summer 2026; full details for all events will be announced in January 2025.

The finale will be a grand anniversary celebration at Basecamp in August 2026. We hope to see you at any of these celebrations! Check out our website for more information.

4. HISTORY COLLECTION

For a century, Cottonwood Gulch trekkers have been documenting their adventures, lists of animal species, delicious (and sometimes odd) meals, and stories about personal growth and newfound connections. These logs are time capsules of laughter, challenge, and discovery, and we are in the process of collecting all of them.

If you have a log, talk to us! We are seeking both physical and digital copies. You can find more information on the 100th anniversary page on our website.

CONNECTING TO OUR ROOTS

3. A 100TH ANNIVERSARY BOOK

A team of editors and writers is hard at work putting together a 100th Anniversary book to celebrate all aspects of the Gulch experience. This will be a trove of fascinating stories and photographs to capture the spirit of connection and learning that defines us.

Publication is slated for late 2025, just in time to celebrate our centennial year. If you are interested in contributing to the book project, please let us know! Our editorial team is eager to include a diverse array of stories, photos, log entries, and more.

To learn more about any of the above projects, visit our website: www.cottonwoodgulch.org.

Silver Belt Buckle Awards go to Turquoise Trail Alumni

The Silver Buckle Award is a time-honored tradition at Cottonwood Gulch Expeditions, historically presented to trekkers who distinguished themselves in some way. Now this award is also given through an open nomination process each year to recognize excellence in volunteers, staff and/or donors who have demonstrated an impactful pattern of service to the Gulch. This year—the 90th anniversary of the Turquoise Trail trek—it seems fitting to honor two community-minded, curious and industrious women who embody the spirit of Cottonwood Gulch and are founding members of the original trek for girls.

WENDA'S STORY:

“I just love it. The Gulch is the most important thing in my life.”

So says Wenda Trevathan, whose connection to Cottonwood Gulch runs deep, tracing back to family ties and a personal journey shaped by determination. Her uncle attended the trek in the 1930s, and though her mother never had the chance due to it being boys-only at the time, she vowed to send Wenda when the opportunity arose. In 1962, Howie, the Gulch's leader, initially hesitated to accept her due to her Southern background, but relented, and Wenda embarked on a journey that would define much of her life. She worked her way through several summers, saving money and eventually securing a quartermaster position. Wenda's persistence led to 11 years on the Turquoise Trail, including trailblazing moments such as leading all-women treks with her sister, Sue, in the late 70s, and challenging the gender norms of the time by learning to drive the com vehicle, a task previously reserved for men. Reflecting on this breakthrough, Wenda proudly said, “Monty taught us all to drive, and after that, it was all women.”

Wenda's lifelong dedication to the Gulch shaped her academic and professional pursuits, leading her to earn a Ph.D. in Anthropology and to settle permanently in New Mexico, a place she fell in love with during her time on the trek. Over the years, Wenda has worn many hats at the Gulch, from being on the board to serving as acting Executive Director during challenging periods. Her involvement extends beyond personal passion; her commitment to the mission of the Gulch is unwavering, whether through board service, hands-on contributions like helping save the office building, or sending future generations of her family to participate.

Wenda's legacy is deeply intertwined with the preservation of its traditions and values, and she remains a steadfast supporter, ensuring more diverse groups can experience the transformative power of the trek.

“There's an important place for single sex education in the world. There were huge benefits to being on TT: gaining self confidence, leadership skills, camaraderie and mutual support. I would go as far as to call it transformative. I hope it stays like it is for a long time.”





MOLLY'S STORY:

Molly's roots with Cottonwood Gulch run back to her family's early connections with Hillis Howie, the headmaster and outdoor educator who shaped much of the Gulch's history. Her father and uncle participated in treks in the 1930s, and it was an unspoken certainty that she, too, would become a trekker. Recruited by Howie at age 14, Molly embraced the trek experience, rising to new challenges. She became the first Camp Assistant (CA), a role Howie specifically created for her, and worked her way through various leadership roles, including cooking for the group and leading the trek in the early 70s. "We always knew we would go on the trek," Molly recalled, reflecting on the deep-rooted family tradition of being part of the Gulch. Her involvement didn't stop there; she has since become a lifelong supporter, sending her own children, serving on the board, and playing a pivotal role in the Gulch's history, such as helping to hire a new Executive Director in the 90s.

Molly's deep connection to the Gulch and New Mexico has also shaped her academic and personal life. Earning a degree in Anthropology, she chose to make New Mexico her permanent home, driven by her love for the state that began on the trek. "From 1964, I knew there was nowhere I wanted to be but New Mexico," she said. Molly has continued her involvement with the Gulch as an educator, serving on committees, organizing trek logs, and supporting the organization's evolving mission. Today, she is particularly excited about the Gulch's expanding role in outdoor education for school groups, sharing, "We have the expertise to train others on how to help their kids experience the outdoors."

For Molly, the Gulch is more than a fond memory; it's a lifelong commitment to education, community, and environmental stewardship. "It's always been our top nonprofit to donate to," she said, emphasizing her dedication to ensuring future generations have the same transformative experiences she had.

"I think single sex groups are helpful for both girls and boys, especially during the teenage years. I'm one of 5 girls and our father treated us as a sports team. We were unusual among women in the 60s: we had more athletic opportunities and hand/eye coordination. We realized on the trek that we learned things about ourselves that we never would have understood in high school. Wearing pants and boots was amazing! We didn't want to put them away at the end of the summer. Beyond the superficial things like wearing pants, you were getting to know yourself in a bigger way than you thought your identity was. Suddenly having to rely on yourself and others for your food, shelter, and interactions was so important for our development."

School and Community Program Updates

Children in Nature Network reminds us: “Regular time outdoors helps children thrive. But over the past few generations, childhood has moved indoors. On average, today’s kids spend up to 44 hours per week in front of a screen, and less than 10 minutes a day playing outdoors. And for too many kids, regular and safe access to nature is determined by race, income, identity, ability and postal code.” At Cottonwood Gulch, we have always known the importance of getting young people outdoors, experiencing nature and working in community. Our summer treks have been doing this for almost 100 years. More recently, we have made it a priority to expand this opportunity to more kids from more diverse backgrounds. Our school and community programs have made this possible.

In the past year, we have partnered with 24 schools and community organizations to take 1,526 students on treks during our fall and spring seasons. Six of our partners are nonprofit organizations that work with some of the most underserved populations in New Mexico, and who understand what experiential learning can do for the young people they serve.

By the numbers: Over 7,000 field days, 24 partners, 1,526 students

Interview with Jun Silva

Jun has attended Cottonwood Gulch school year and summer treks for the past 3 years:



What are some of your favorite memories?

“I just remember that on that trip that the staff were always so kind. They had found out that I had anxiety and they were all just checking in on me and making sure I was okay.”

“In 8th grade the whole thing was pretty fun honestly. We went backpacking for 3 days. The group that we had bonded, and I still get messages from some of my friends now that they wish they could go back on that trip, like take two.”

How has the Gulch had an impact on your life?

“It’s something that’s special...the really cool thing about Cottonwood Gulch is that going outside isn’t what it is. That’s not the end of it. It’s this whole bonding experience of learning, of meeting new people, of learning how to deal with new people, of trying new foods, trying new places, trying new living situations, and overall building this whole other kind of independence while not feeling disconnected...It gives you a feeling of belonging—a whole other family that you get attached to.”



“The greatest gift, that we didn’t even realize...I don’t think there’s anything of more value than a connection that someone could have with another living, breathing, feeling person. And I think Cottonwood Gulch highlights that because you can’t have technology. You can’t do anything alone necessarily. You get to build this connection with people that I’m honestly not sure you get to build in any other situation.”

CONNECTING WITH NATURE





Mountain Desert Trek's favorite places of 2024:

Hindu Temple "I learned a lot, got to help people, and meet kind and loving people"

Basecamp "The atmosphere and independence given is unique"

Utah's Slot Canyon "This canyon was beautiful"

New Buffalo Commune "I loved hearing about hippie culture in the 60s"

Utah "The Death Hollow backpack may have been the COOLEST thing I have EVER done"

Escalante "So many cool views to be seen and fun stories I will be able to share"

Mt. Wheeler "It felt so rewarding to get to the top for such an amazing view"



RE-CONNECTING WITH THE GULCH

A Lost & Found Story from Brandon Nelson

Earlier this year, we received a touching email from Brandon Nelson's sister Amanda: "I write you in a humble attempt to express what Cottonwood Gulch meant to my older brother and to explain why I am adamant in my attempt to replace his outstanding camper buckle."

Brandon's silver buckle, earned in the early 2000's, went missing recently and Brandon was so disappointed, sure that the buckle was irreplaceable. Amanda noted "Brandon's outstanding camper buckle was his most prized possession. That buckle represented more than his hard work and dedication, because it represented rare moments of pure joy. I am unable to fully express what the Gulch meant to him."

Of course we sent Brandon a new buckle, and he shared with us what the buckle and his time at the Gulch meant to him. "The relationship that the Gulch has built with native people is transformative, and something not everyone can experience. I learned lessons there in my formative years that built good character. It's natural and cultural, and you learn reverence for both."

The appreciation for nature and culture has stayed with Brandon over the years and his first attempts at silversmithing at Basecamp ignited an interest in jewelry making that he still practices today. "This is what jewelry and art mean to me: it tells a story and puts you in a place and time that brings back a memory. It represents a relationship as well. I am getting choked up just looking at [the buckle]."

"We did not grow up in the best environment," Amanda says. "Brandon was blessed that our grandmother recognized his love for the outdoors and conservation." His grandmother heard about the Gulch through her job, and Brandon applied for scholarships for 6 years so he could attend every summer. Brandon feels so grateful for those scholarships and the outdoor experiences they allowed him to have.

"My experience with the Gulch has forever imbued my soul with the spirit of the Southwest."

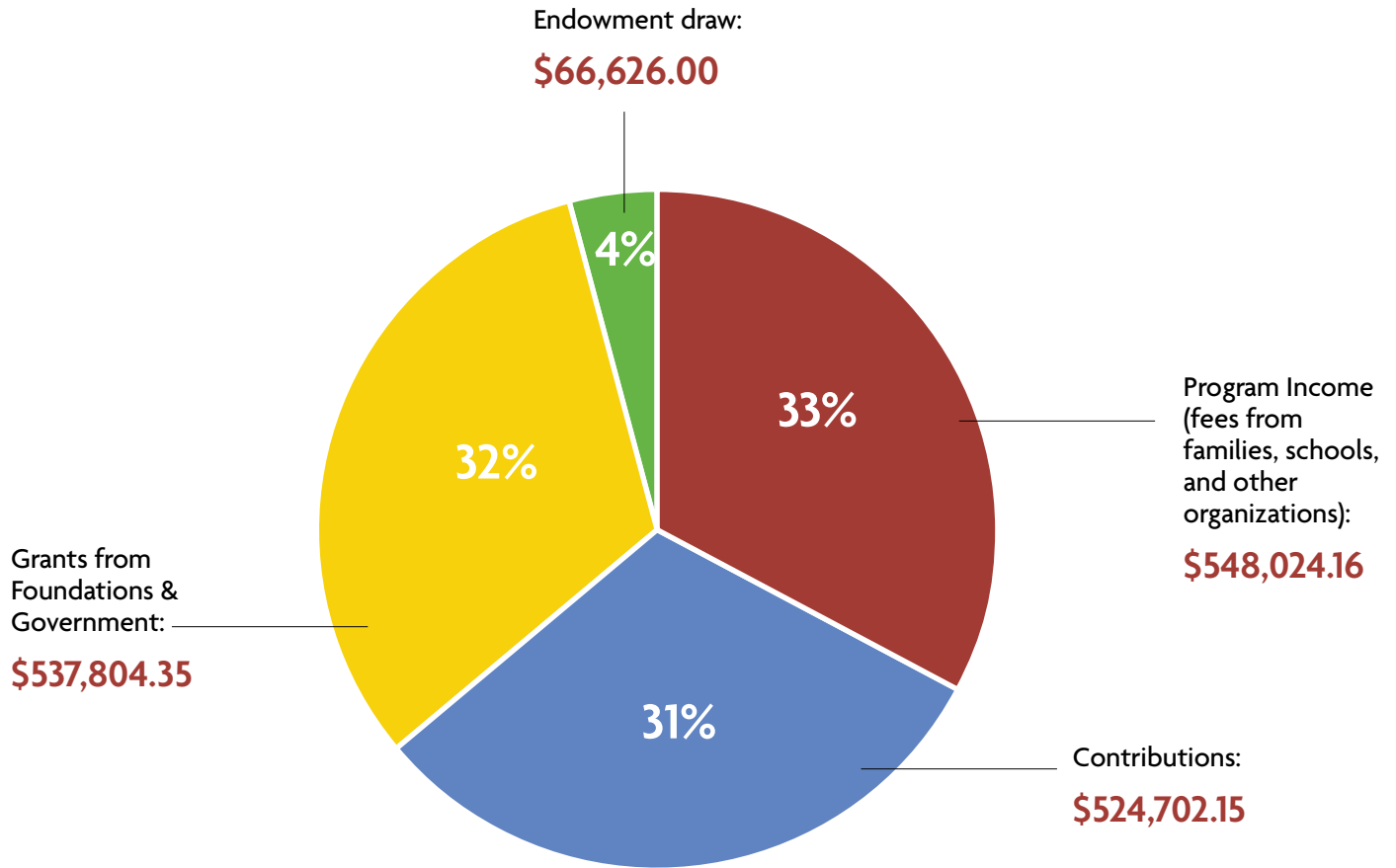
"Cottonwood Gulch turns money into mission, so financial support is important, especially for kids like me with limited means. This was something that was always going to be out of reach except for the charity of someone else and I understood that even as a child and really poured into it. It's been going for 100 years because it is so impactful."



Financial Review

PRELIMINARY NUMBERS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2023-2024

INCOME: \$1,677,156.66

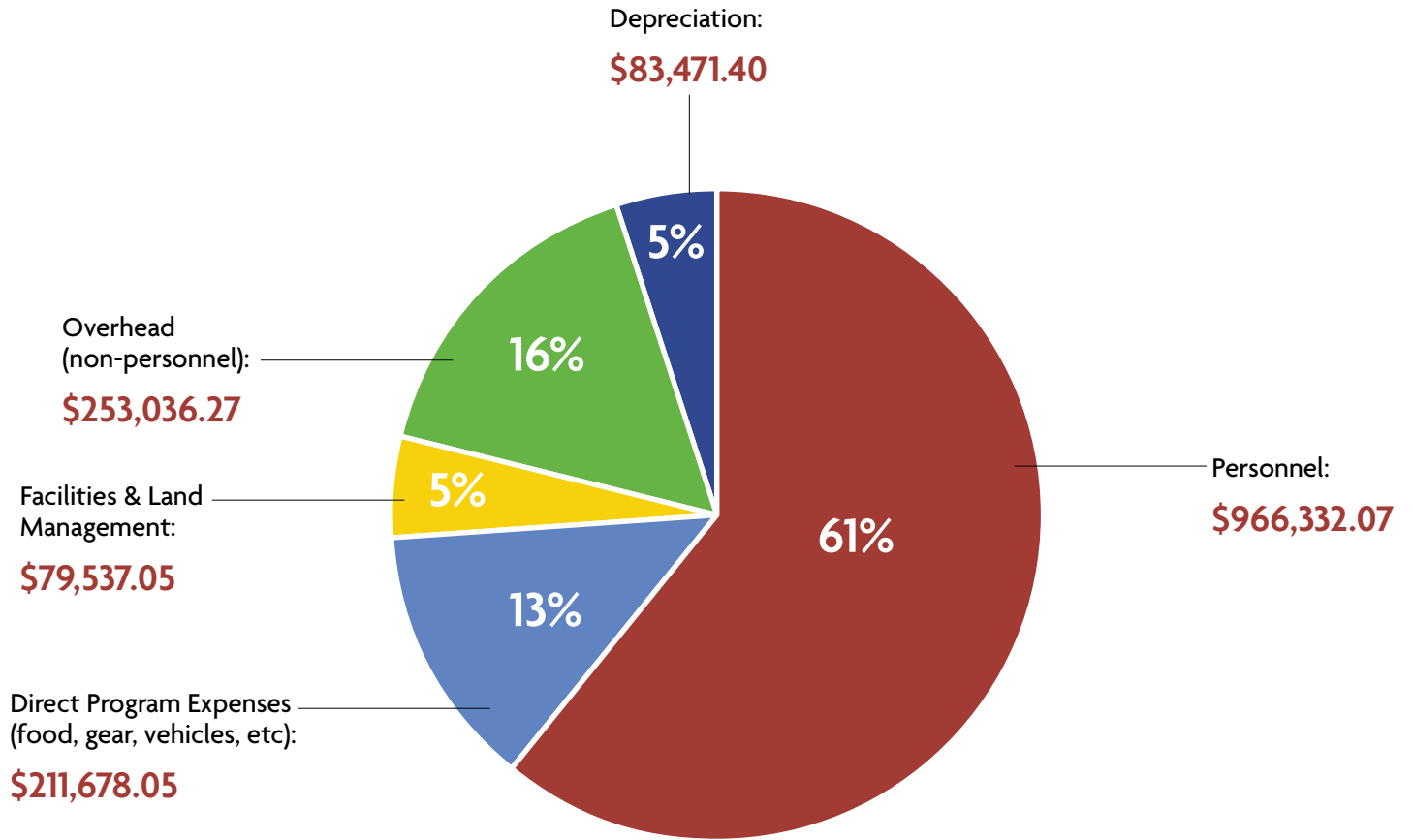


Notable Numbers:

- \$112,300** Awarded in Scholarships
- Over **2000** Trekkers in School and Summer Programs
- 29** Local School and Organization Partners
- 30** Seasonal Staff Facilitating Great Outdoor Adventures



EXPENSES: \$1,594,054.84



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Red Rocks Society are donors who have put Cottonwood Gulch in their will or estate plans as a beneficiary.

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The Wild Rockies Field Institute

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WITH GRATITUDE

2025 Enrollment is open for Summer, Adult and Family Treks

Visit our website for information





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COTTONWOODGULCH.ORG

RED ROCKS SOCIETY/GULCH ENDOWMENT

In 2006, Cottonwood Gulch alumnus Henry Berman and director Jeff Zemsky collaborated to help arrange a \$200,000 gift from a charitable trust, which established the Cohen Education Fund in our endowment. Since then, that gift of \$200,000 has provided \$160,679 in distributions (3-5% annually) that directly benefit our programs. With that money, we have hired visiting scholars, developed new school programs, and provided scholarships to more than 30 trekkers. And, because of the way the principal has been invested in diversified funds, the Cohen Fund now stands at \$303,901. **In other words, that gift of \$200,000 was actually a gift of \$464,580, and it's still growing.**

If you are interested in learning more about planned giving and joining the Red Rocks Society, contact Jordan Stone, Executive Director, director@cottonwoodgulch.org, 505-248-0563.

