

2024

LENS ON LIFE PROJECT
ANNUAL REPORT



OUR MISSION

Lens on Life empowers youth facing significant adversity through photography and digital literacy training. We help them **heal, reclaim their narratives, and harness their inner brilliance** to foster positive change within their communities.



As we reflect on our journey over the past year, we are filled with gratitude and pride for the remarkable accomplishments of our Lens on Life students in 2024. With a steady influx of new participants and alumni building brighter futures, these young individuals continue to defy the odds. Whether displaced by conflict, subjected to incarceration, or battling homelessness, they exemplify resilience and set inspiring standards for us all.

Extracurricular activities, such as those we provide, are crucial to the development of children and adolescents. They offer invaluable opportunities for self-expression, creativity, and personal growth. Through our programs, students can heal, reclaim their narratives, and harness their innate brilliance. Developing both creative and income-generating skillsets not only fosters individual resilience but also serves as a catalyst for positive change.

Our work remains urgent as we navigate ongoing challenges across the globe. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the repercussions of the protracted Congo War continue to impact young lives, leaving many vulnerable and displaced. Similarly, the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon persists, displacing countless youth and disrupting their futures. In Syria, while the situation evolves, the challenges faced by young Syrian refugees in regions like Iraqi Kurdistan and the Zaatari refugee camp remain critical. In New York City, we have witnessed an evolving criminal justice landscape, especially with the potential federal seizure of Rikers Island, which highlights the urgent need for programs that support young people affected by incarceration and systemic injustice.

Despite the vast distances between each of these groups of students, they have connected with one another and found a common thread in their individual stories. Many have discovered new ways to process severe trauma, often while earning income through their photography. Their achievements are a testament to the power of creativity and determination.

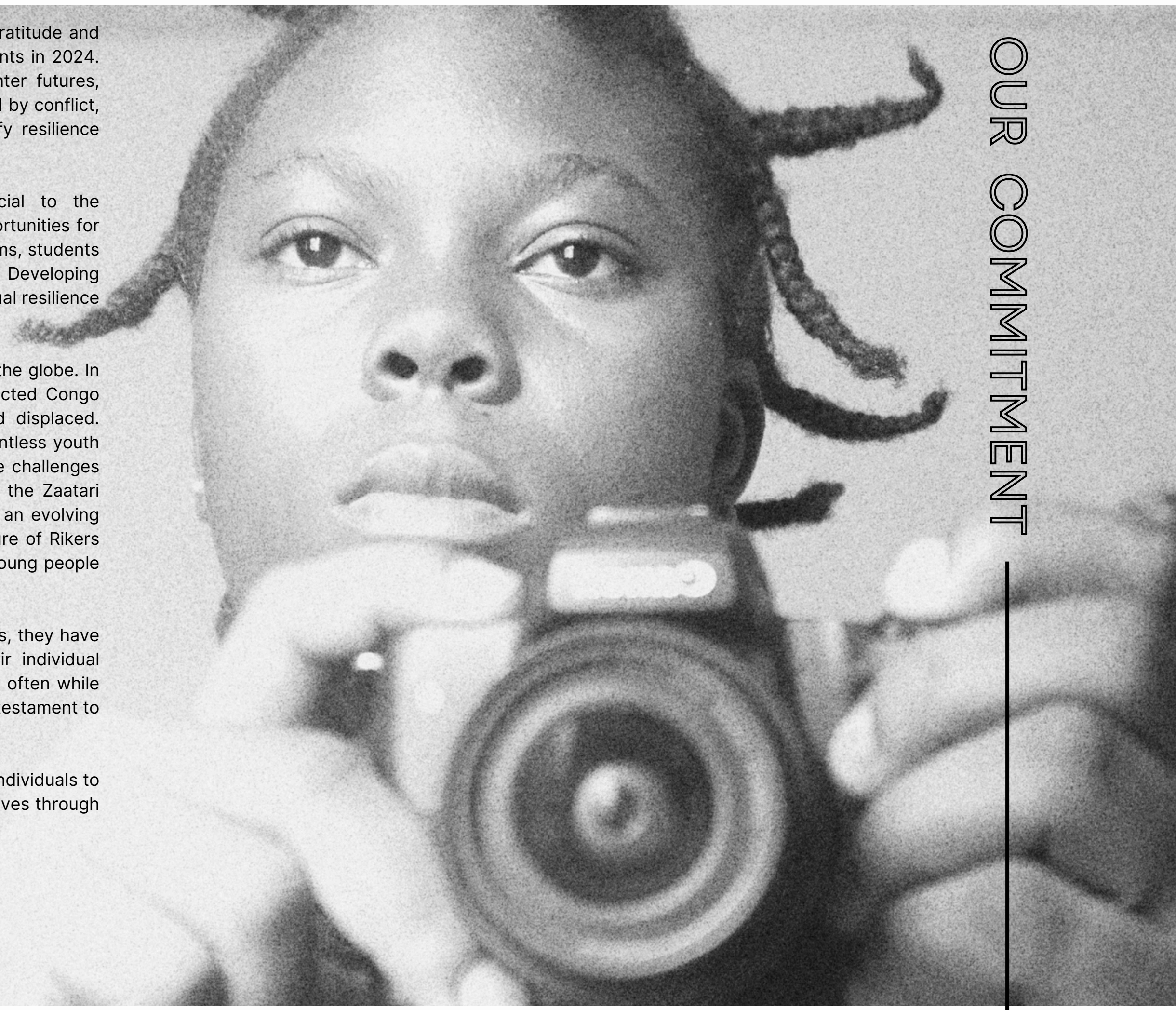
Together, we continue to create spaces for these remarkable young individuals to thrive. Thank you for your unwavering support in helping us change lives through the lens of a camera.

With gratitude,

Sam and Jack Powers
Cofounders



OUR COMMITMENT





OUR ADVISORY BOARD

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Gillian Laub

Philip Daniel Ducasse

Naomi Cohen-Thompson

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Andrew Vahab

Treda Collier

Stewart Lunanga

Jenard Brown

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Azadeh Shladovsky

Regina DeLouise

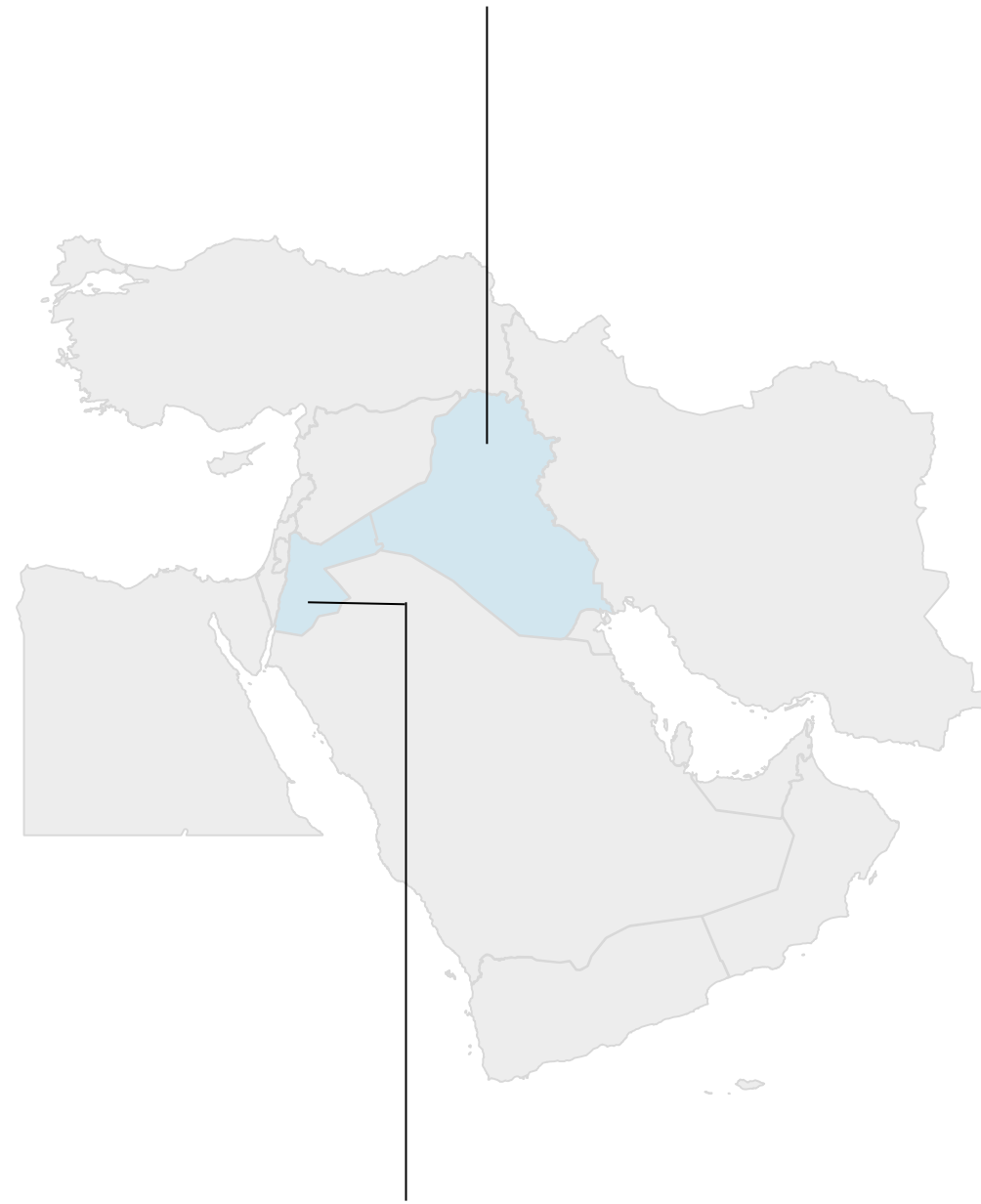
Jed Heuer

Michelle Heimerman

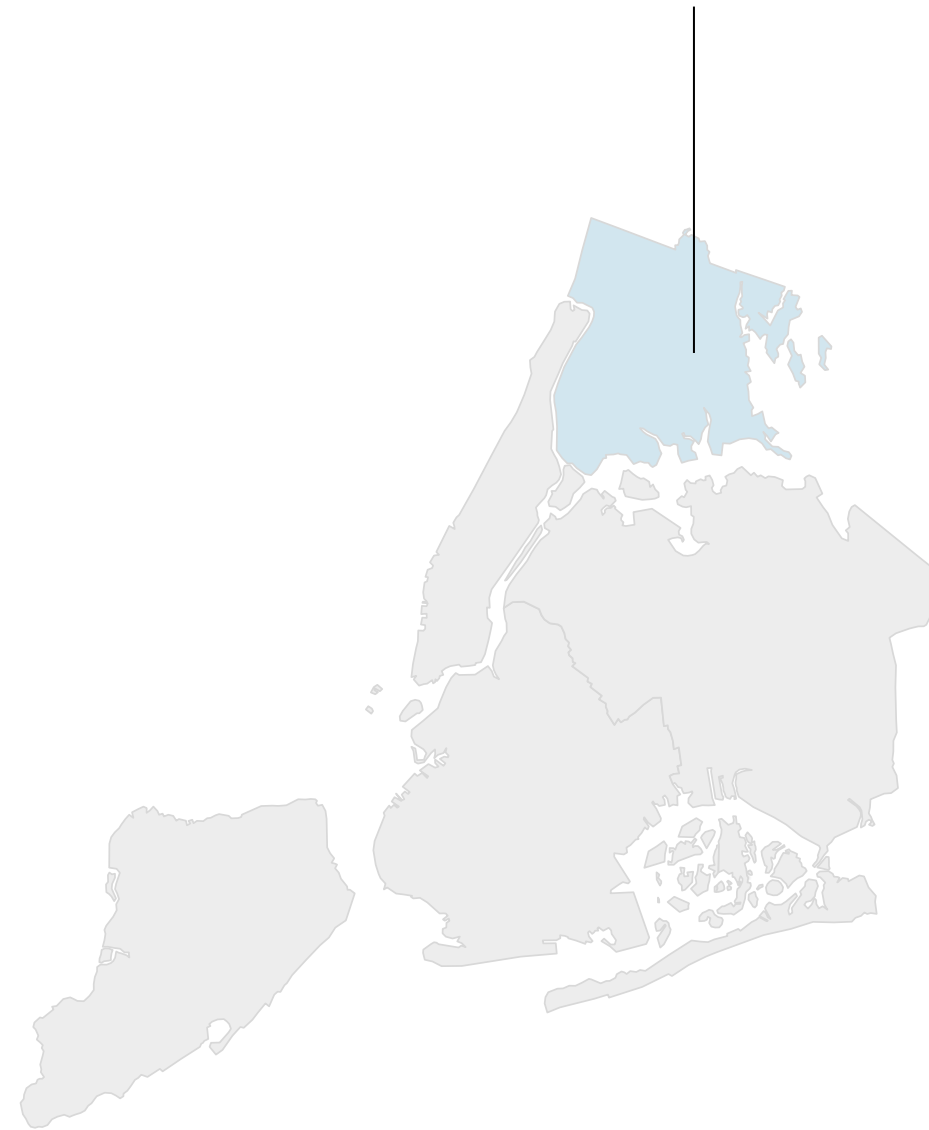
Savva Sveshnikov

WHERE WE WORK

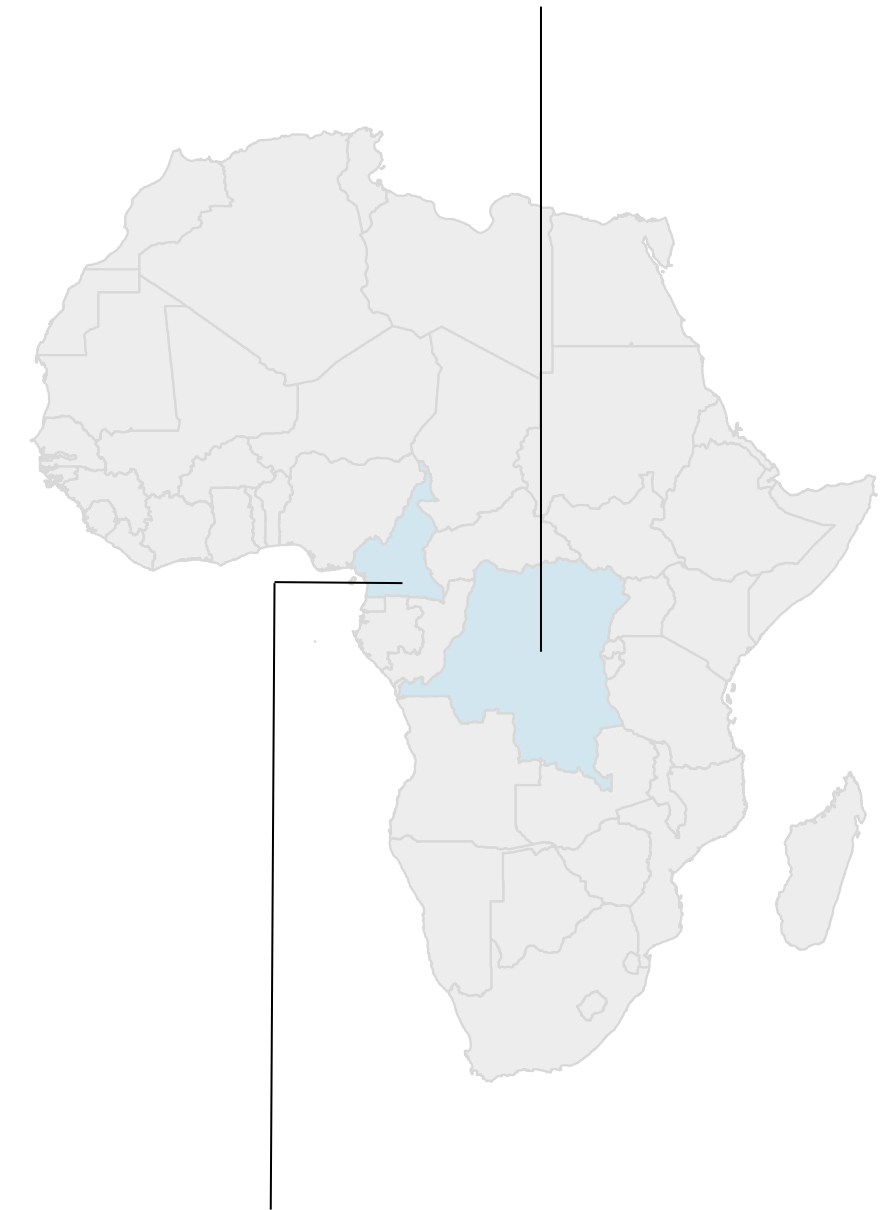
Arbat refugee camp, Iraq



The Bronx, New York



Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo



Za'atari Camp, Jordan



Yaoundé, Cameroon



OUR TEACHERS



Daniel
Photo Instructor
Cameroon



Niga
Photo Instructor
Arbat Camp, Iraq



Michel
Photo Instructor
DR Congo



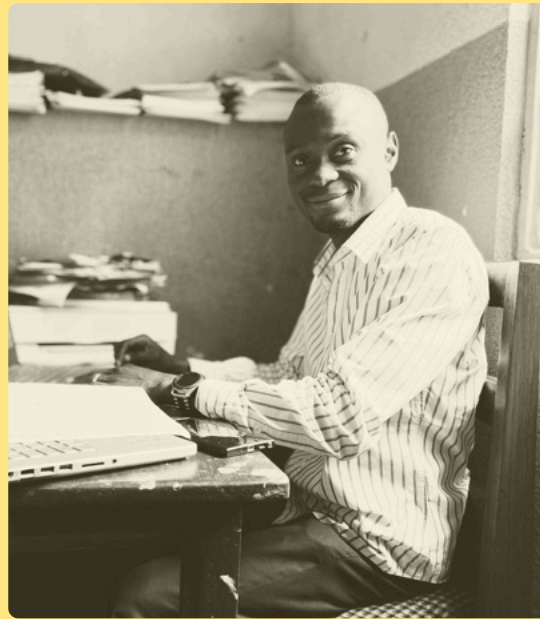
MJ
Photo Instructor / Intern
Bronx, NY



Preston
Photo Instructor
Cameroon



Erica
Photo Instructor
Cameroon



Jean Paul
Computer Instructor
DR Congo



Alaa
Photo Instructor
Zaatari Camp



Michel
Photo Instructor
DR Congo



Grace
Administrative Director
DR Congo



Corey
Photo Instructor
Bronx, NY



Ahmad
Photo Instructor
Zaatari Camp

OUR PARTNERS



B E N R U B I
G A L L E R Y



CONRAD N.



FOUNDATION



Over the years, we have cultivated strong partnerships with esteemed organizations that share our commitment to empowering youth and fostering positive change. These collaborations have provided invaluable support, resources, and expertise, enabling us to expand our reach and enhance the quality of our programs. By working closely with these partners, we have created a robust network that amplifies our impact, ensuring that we can continue our vital work in challenging environments. Their belief in our mission and dedication to supporting under-resourced communities have been crucial in helping us overcome obstacles and drive meaningful change in the lives of those we serve. Together, we are more than just allies; we are a united force working to transform the futures of young individuals in communities around the globe.

PARTNERSHIP GROWTH



Lens on Life is proud to be an official partner of Canon, which has supported our work in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, the Zaatari refugee camp, and most recently, Iraq. We were honored to receive the Canon Young Professional Programme Partner of the Year award for our impactful work in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Graduates of the Lens on Life program leave not only with our credentials but also with official Canon certificates and professional portfolios, significantly enhancing their ability to enter and thrive in the global economy.



Graduates of our DRC program have the opportunity to work with the Eastern Congo Initiative, documenting its impactful work in the field. This partnership not only allows our graduates to hone their skills as professional photographers but also positions them as influential storytellers and advocates for their communities. By capturing critical moments of change and resilience, they gain unparalleled experience at the intersection of photography and social activism, further empowering them to drive meaningful change both locally and globally.



Lens on Life is proud to be a member of the Conscious Fashion and Lifestyle Network, a joint initiative of the United Nations Office for Partnerships, the Division for Sustainable Development Goals (UN DESA), and the Fashion Impact Fund. Lens on Life alumni have had the opportunity to photograph events sponsored by the United Nations Office for Partnerships and have actively participated in various initiatives to raise awareness about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

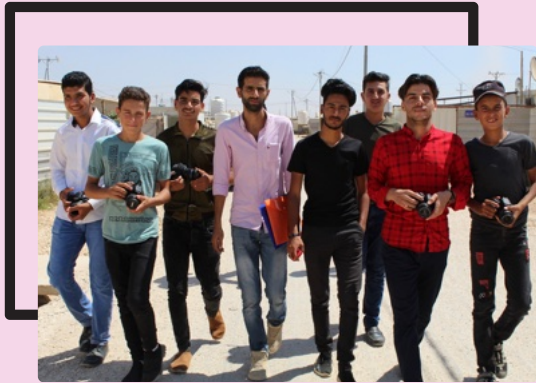


Our partnership with the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) continues to flourish through a dedicated internship program that connects Lens on Life with talented and qualified MICA students. The institution has also hosted exhibitions showcasing the work of Lens on Life students, bringing increased recognition and visibility to their talent and stories.



The International Center of Photography (ICP) has generously provided scholarships for continuing education to graduates of our program and has opened its New York City facility to support our local students, offering them a space to learn, practice, and grow their skills.

2024 IMPACT



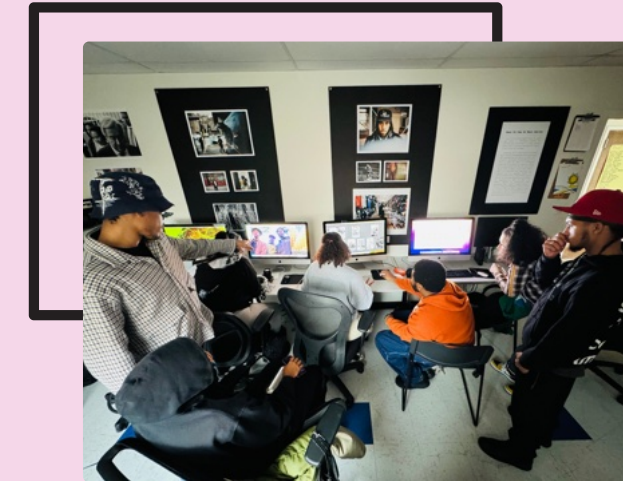
73 New Learners

In 2024, Lens on Life proudly welcomed 73 new participants into our global programs. Each student successfully completed a comprehensive curriculum focused on fostering creativity, enhancing digital literacy, and promoting self-expression.



Global Reach

Lens on Life empowers youth through five state-of-the-art photography and digital literacy centers in regions impacted by conflict, displacement, and community violence. These centers are located in Arbat Refugee Camp (Iraqi Kurdistan), Zaatari Refugee Camp (Jordan), Yaoundé (Cameroon), Goma (Democratic Republic of Congo), and the South Bronx (New York City).



Expanding Access to Safe Spaces

In 2024, Lens on Life achieved transformative growth with significant expansions in New York City, Cameroon, and Iraq. These developments dramatically increased student enrollment and provided greater access to essential technology, including desktop computers, large-format printers, and additional cameras. The newly enhanced media centers have become vital safe havens, empowering youth in conflict-affected and unstable regions to thrive creatively and rebuild their futures.



Health and Wellbeing

Pre- and post-program surveys, developed in partnership with Beyond Conflict, reveal a significant increase in self-esteem and a stronger sense of social empowerment among Lens on Life graduates. The program's curriculum fosters resilience and personal growth while equipping participants with essential technical skills.



Alumni Success and Economic Empowerment

Sixteen alumni successfully transitioned into careers in photography or digital arts, securing freelance work and generating income as photographers, film crew members, photojournalists, and corporate documentarians.



Bridging Borders Through Collaboration

Fostering a global community of learners, Lens on Life teachers and students actively engage in both in-person and virtual collaborations across programs. These cross-border exchanges broaden participants' global perspectives and strengthen connections among diverse communities united by shared experiences of trauma.

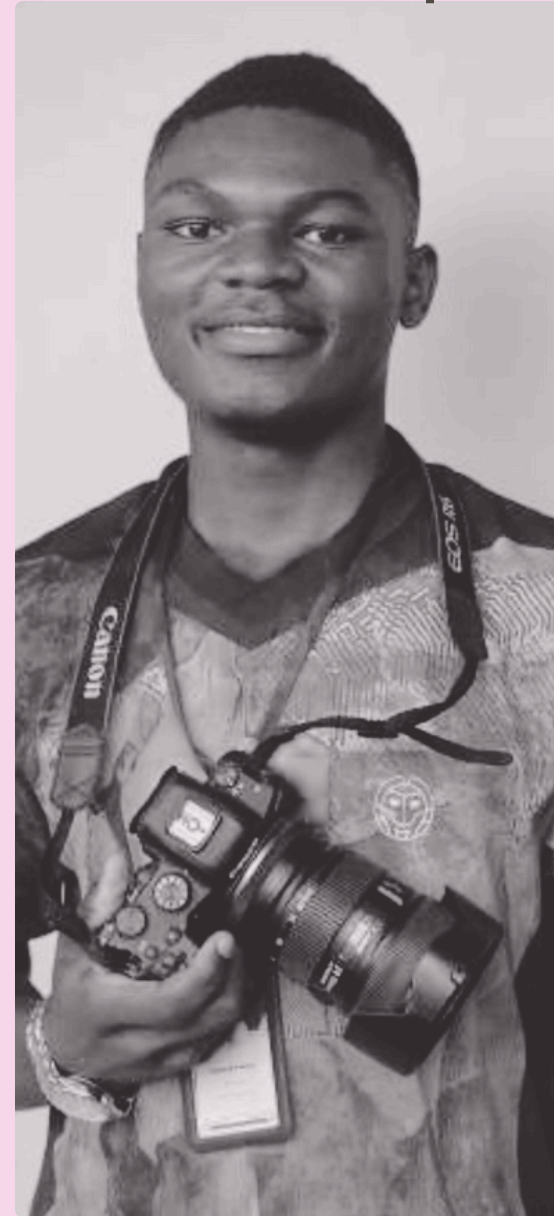
ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Arlette



Arlette, a 2020 graduate of the Lens on Life program in Goma, DRC, has risen to prominence as a highly respected photojournalist. Born and raised in Eastern Congo, her powerful work has graced the covers of esteemed publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, bringing groundbreaking stories from Central Africa to a global audience. Arlette's excellence in photojournalism has earned her numerous awards, and she has traveled internationally to speak at prestigious journalism conferences. Her journey from student to globally acclaimed photojournalist is a testament to her extraordinary talent and the transformative power of life through the lens.

Preston



Preston fled the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon's Northwest region in 2020 and soon joined the Lens on Life program in Yaoundé. Since completing his courses, he has made remarkable progress, becoming a teaching assistant within the program. Preston has also obtained his passport, enabling him to travel across Africa to document the work of various NGOs.

His talent and dedication earned him a scholarship to the Centre d'Éducation aux Médias et à l'Information (EDUK-MEDIA) in Yaoundé, where he further developed his skills. Preston's growth as a storyteller is evident in his work as a Director of Photography (DP) on documentary film projects in the region, demonstrating his commitment to creating impactful narratives.

Tyreese



Tyreese Nacho's journey with Lens on Life began after his incarceration, at a time when he was unemployed and lacked a high school diploma. Living in the South Bronx, he faced the constant threat of gang and gun violence that deeply affected his community. Fortunately, our program was located near his home, enabling him to attend classes regularly and build close connections with the Lens on Life team.

During his time in the program, Tyreese developed a compelling portfolio that vividly documented life in the Bronx. This body of work opened doors to freelance opportunities across the city and was featured in an exhibition in Manhattan, a significant milestone in his burgeoning career. His exceptional talent caught the attention of the United Nations, which hired him as a photographer for the General Assembly. Recognizing his skill and professionalism, the UN invited him back and added him to their payroll, making him a trusted photographer for local events.

Beyond his professional accomplishments, Tyreese is pursuing his High School Equivalency (GED) with support from our partner, Youth Justice Network, while also advancing his skills through photography classes at the International Center of Photography. Additionally, he had the opportunity to travel to Los Angeles with Lens on Life, where he showcased his work at a prominent gallery, further cementing his place as an emerging talent in the field.

Who we serve

Fifteen students participate in classes twice a week in Mabanga, Goma. Despite international efforts to promote peace and stability, the region continues to face significant challenges, including armed group activities and a lack of essential services. These issues severely impact educational opportunities and the overall well-being of children and families in Goma. The Lens on Life Project remains steadfast in its commitment to providing creative arts and skill training, fostering resilience and hope in this deeply affected region.

Canon and the SDGs

Our partnership with the Canon Young People Programme has enriched our curriculum by encouraging students to focus on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and explore how they can advocate for positive change within their communities. This integration inspires critical thinking about their roles in driving social impact, broadens their perspectives, and instills a strong sense of agency.

Through the Canon Miraisha Programme, students have also participated in intensive filmmaking workshops led by Canon trainers. These workshops have significantly enhanced their skill sets, equipping them with employable tools while fostering their creativity in storytelling and visual communication in an increasingly digital world.

Income generation

Our partnership with the Eastern Congo Initiative continues to thrive, creating significant opportunities for Lens on Life alumni to contribute as photographers to sustainable development projects across the region. This collaboration not only provides students with a steady income but also enables them to build impressive resumes while gaining hands-on experience in impactful work. Moreover, it connects them to a valuable network of professionals driving positive change in North Kivu, DRC, empowering them to play an active role in shaping their communities' futures.

Tools for the future

Graduates who complete the full Lens on Life program receive a DSLR camera, equipping them with the essential tools to continue their artistic journey. This support fosters a sustainable cycle of learning and creativity, empowering them to pursue their passions while inspiring future generations.

GOMA, D.R.C.

Program Highlights



GOMA, D.R.C.



Lens on Life has created in me the love for photography. I feel fulfilled, I feel happy, and through my pictures I can raise awareness on the importance of peace for my community.

**Jean De Dieu Mpabanzi
DR Congo Graduate**



BRONX, NEW YORK

Program Highlights

Who we serve

Seven students participated in this year's course, overcoming significant challenges such as homelessness, incarceration at Rikers Island and upstate prisons, and struggles with gang violence, parole, and probation.

Education and Career growth

Alumni from last year's program served as panelists at Photoville, New York City's largest photography festival, demonstrating the program's impact and active community engagement. Additionally, one graduate from this year's cohort received a scholarship to the International Center of Photography for 2025, underscoring the program's role in advancing students' careers.

Income Generation

The course concluded with a successful student exhibition at the Benrubi Gallery in Chelsea, where participants showcased their work, shared their stories, and earned up to \$2,000 each in sales. Each student graduated with a strong portfolio, which they have since leveraged to secure paid photography jobs across New York.

Changing the narrative

New York City instructors are redefining access to the arts and championing inclusivity, actively challenging societal perceptions of youth from systems-impacted backgrounds. They are paving the way for a more equitable and representative art world. Our newly established photo media lab in the South Bronx has become a vital hub where young people can safely gather, develop new skills, and foster aspirations to enter a job market that was once out of reach.

Broadening horizons

The program was enriched by renowned guest instructors Richard Renaldi and Gillian Laub, who elevated the learning experience. Students also had the opportunity to visit prominent institutions such as the United Nations, the International Center of Photography, and the Howard Greenberg Gallery. Upon program completion, students leave with their own Canon DSLR camera.

PHOTO BY NEW YORK STUDENT KEVAUGHN WILLIAMS

BRONX, NEW YORK



Photography has given me an outlet to express myself and create freely. It has opened my eyes to the many paths to becoming a successful artist and has shown me the importance of investing in the community and the people around me.

**Alondra Angulo
Bronx Graduate**



ZAATARI CAMP, JORDAN

Program Highlights

Who we serve

The 23 Lens on Life students at Zaatari Refugee Camp are young individuals who have endured the hardships of the Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011. The conflict, characterized by widespread violence and displacement, forced millions of Syrians to flee their homes. Established in 2012, Zaatari now hosts over 80,000 refugees, far exceeding its original capacity.

Many of these students have spent years in the camp, showing extraordinary resilience despite facing disrupted education and uncertain futures. Through the Lens on Life program, they use photography to share their stories, reclaim their narratives, and find hope and agency amidst adversity.

Consistent Support

Our classes continue to serve as a vital resource for youth in the Zaatari camp. While other NGOs have withdrawn, we have remained steadfast in providing essential support, even amid recent changes in the Syrian government, as most families have chosen to stay in the camp.

Canon and the SDGs

Students in the Zaatari camp recently completed an intensive round of training through the Canon Young People Programme, where they explored the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This hands-on program empowered participants to use photography as a tool for advocacy, encouraging them to tell powerful stories that highlight key global challenges and inspire change within their community. By integrating creativity with a focus on the SDGs, the training equipped students with the skills and knowledge to drive awareness and contribute meaningfully to a more sustainable future.

Upward Mobility

Graduates of our program have successfully transitioned into careers as working photographers both within and beyond the camp, leveraging equipment from our media lab to advance their professional pursuits. Others have started careers in the creative space upon migration to new countries including Canada.

PHOTO BY ZAATARI ALUMNI BILIAL EID

ZAATARI CAMP, JORDAN

Enrolling in the Lens on Life program was a fresh start for me. Through it, I learned the basics, understood how to adjust the camera, choose the right angles and lighting, and how to transform a simple moment into a lively picture. With the guidance of professional trainers, everything became clear, and I started to see photography from a different perspective. It was no longer just about taking pictures; it became an art I live in and tell stories through.

**Mohammed Nasser Al-Ahmad
Zaatari Graduate**



Who we serve

In 2024, our program welcomed 11 students who were either orphans or had been displaced by the ongoing Anglophone crisis, which began in 2016. This conflict stems from deep-rooted grievances in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon over political marginalization, cultural identity, and demands for greater autonomy. As peaceful protests escalated into violence, thousands have been uprooted from their homes, resulting in widespread displacement and severe humanitarian challenges.

This year, we have also welcomed refugees from the Central African Republic, further expanding our efforts to support young people affected by regional conflicts and instability.

Scholarships

Three alumni of the program were awarded full scholarships to the Centre d'Éducation aux Médias et à l'Information (EDUK-MEDIA) in Yaoundé, where they are receiving professional training in national media production.

New, Expanded Space

In 2024, we inaugurated a new classroom and gallery space equipped with cameras, laptops, Wi-Fi, and projectors. This facility allows us to host more students for bi-weekly classes and showcase student work through exhibitions open to the local community.

Canon and the SDGs

Our partnership with the Canon Young People Programme has significantly enhanced our curriculum by encouraging students to focus on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and explore how they can advocate for positive change within their communities. This integration fosters critical thinking about their roles in driving meaningful change, broadens their perspectives, and instills a strong sense of agency.

Additionally, through the Canon Miraisha Program, our students participated in intensive filmmaking workshops led by Canon trainers. These workshops enhanced their creative skills and provided an opportunity to explore storytelling and visual communication, preparing them for success in an increasingly digital world.



YAOUNDE, CAMEROON



Driven by a desire to learn more about photography and explore new opportunities, I decided to embark on this creative journey. Today, I volunteer to give back and help younger people in situations like mine. Photography has grown into more than a hobby for me—it is a powerful tool for communication and storytelling.

**Ngo Teng Christy Nguimbous
Cameroon Graduate**



ARBAT CAMP, IRAQ

Program Highlights

Who we serve

This year, we welcomed 12 new students, all Syrian refugees who fled either ISIS related violence or the Syrian Civil War. Despite recent shifts in the political landscape, our commitment to supporting these young individuals remains unwavering. Our photography center continues to serve as a vital space for learning and support, offering a safe haven where students can grow, heal, and pursue their passions through photography and digital literacy.

Canon and the SDGs

Students showcased their work in a groundbreaking exhibition titled “Out of Square”, held in the city of Sulimaniya. The event attracted special guests from across the region, including the First Lady of Iraq. Over six months, the students developed portfolios focused on six of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in collaboration with the Canon Young People’s Program.

New Facilities

We expanded our facility by adding a new building with dedicated classroom and media lab spaces. Students have embraced a sense of ownership over the facility within the refugee camp, taking an active role in its maintenance and upkeep.

Alumni success

Five graduates are now actively working as photographers and interning in communications roles with local NGOs, applying the skills they gained through the program.

PHOTO BY IRAQ ALUMNI JAMAL

ARBAT CAMP, IRAQ

In the heart of every person, memories are treasures— snapshots of happiness, comfort, and moments that make us feel alive. These memories are more than just images in our minds; they are sanctuaries we retreat to when reality becomes challenging. For many refugees, these memories are all they have left of the lives they were forced to leave behind.

**AWAZ SAUD
IRAQ GRADUATE**

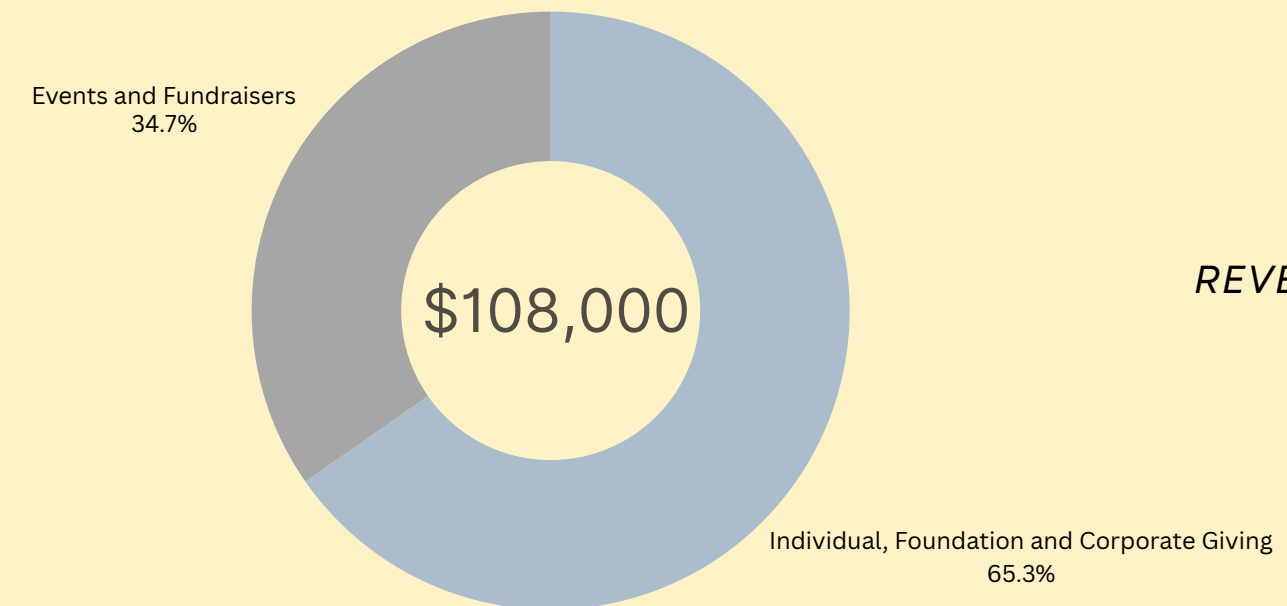


FINANCIALS

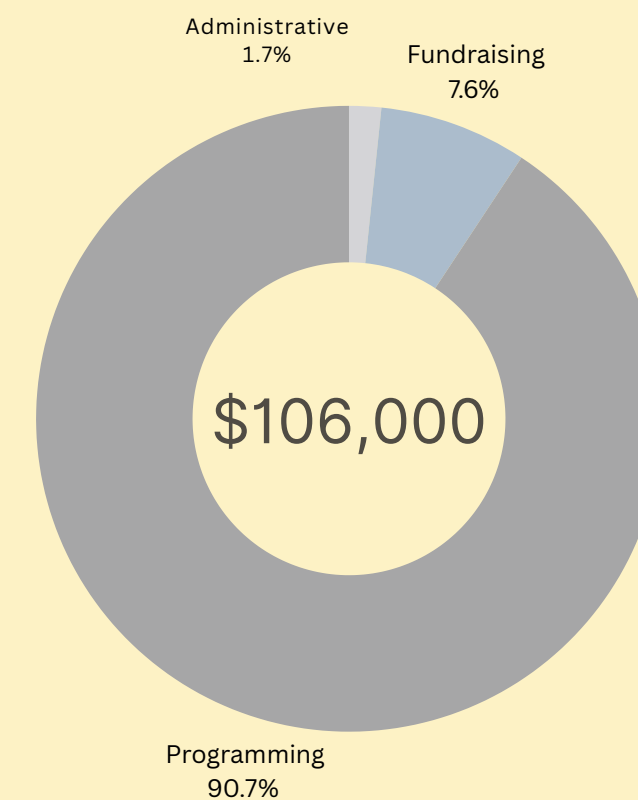
REVENUE AND EXPENSES

Lens on Life operates entirely through volunteer leadership, with no paid staff in the United States. In 2024, we successfully raised **\$108,000** through a combination of student photo auctions, our annual bike ride, and contributions from individual donors, foundations, and corporate partners.

Thanks to the dedication of our board and volunteer team, we have directed 91% of every dollar raised toward our 5 programs, including equipment costs, classroom improvements, and salaries for local instructors



REVENUE



EXPENSES

LOOKING AHEAD

In 2016, we began our journey in Goma, DRC, with just 10 point-and-shoot cameras for the first-ever Lens on Life workshop. From those humble beginnings, we have grown into a global organization with five year-round programs, dedicated to empowering young people in communities facing profound adversity and limited resources. In regions where political uncertainty and conflict persist, Lens on Life stands as a beacon of creativity, resilience, and hope.

By continually investing in our instructors, expanding our facilities, and upgrading our equipment, Lens on Life is prepared to inspire and equip the next generation of leaders in 2025 and beyond. None of this progress would be possible without your unwavering support, and we are deeply grateful for your role in making this mission a reality.

