

A Year of Surprises

Planet Word • Museum of Language Arts
ANNUAL REPORT 2025



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Vision, Mission, and Values



VISION

To increase literacy, the foundation of a strong modern democracy.

MISSION

To inspire and renew a love of words, language, and reading through unique, immersive learning experiences for all ages and to provide a space to explore words and language that is grounded in a solid understanding of language arts and science.

CORE VALUES

Our exhibits and experiences are some combination of:

- fun
- playful
- unexpected
- motivational
- inclusive
- meaningful

A Message from the Founder and CEO

We thought that our fifth year of operations would bring smooth sailing. After all, we had successfully outlasted a pandemic and received accolades and awards for our experiences. Annual attendance continued to rise steadily, enthusiastic audiences were filling our auditorium, and our private events program was thriving. Field trips were back on teachers' agendas, and we were booked to capacity weeks ahead of time. There was no reason to believe that horizons would darken.

But they did. Politics, international and domestic, spilled over into Washington, D.C., and also into Planet Word. The arrival of the National Guard in response to alleged out-of-control violence immediately put a damper on tourism and discouraged even locals from coming downtown. The Department of Government Efficiency shut down all or parts of agencies and federal government departments in Washington, leading to unemployment and uncertainty. At the same time, immigration enforcement raids frightened immigrants away, further reducing street traffic and leaving the impression that D.C. was not a happening place. Keycard statistics revealed that most employees had still not returned

to work downtown. An obvious, measurable slowdown in Planet Word visitation was the unsurprising result, leading us to revise our budget projections mid-year to better match reality.

And then, another surprise: The 43-day government shutdown, which began in October 2025, actually had an unexpected salutary effect on Planet Word! Tourists who had already made plans to visit Washington, or local families who were searching for diversion, learned that Planet Word was open when so many other government-run museums were closed. These diverted visitors filled our galleries and helped us achieve the attendance and impact we had planned for.

Another hoped-for benefit from this unexpected uptick in visitation was that every visitor offered the chance to make new friends or donors or advocates for Planet Word, spreading the word about the fun awaiting at the nation's only museum dedicated to words. Our consistent 5-star ratings attested to the great experience we continued to provide. No surprise there!

And so, we ended 2025 on an unexpected high note, welcoming 160,000 visitors through our galleries to deepen their understanding of the power of words all around us.

Ann Friedman

ANN FRIEDMAN
Founder and CEO



A Message from the Executive Director

Although not quite what we expected, we are extremely proud of our accomplishments last year! Visitor feedback remained thoughtful and positive, as evidenced by our 2025 Trip Advisor Traveler's Choice Award; we enhanced content in our galleries to stay relevant and timely; we provided summer reading support for at-risk students; our public programs engaged diverse audiences; we continued to increase revenue; and we took good care of the Franklin School, the historic building we call home.

This annual report represents our collective commitment to Planet Word's mission and vision and recognizes the many community members who help to advance this mission, led by our Founder and CEO, Ann Friedman – a 2025 Washingtonian of the Year! Our nimble and dedicated team turned surprises into possibilities and obstacles into opportunities to share our message about the power of words to bring people together, a message that especially resonates in uncertain times.

When January and February attendance numbers reached unpredicted lows, we were able to quickly adjust, strategically working across teams to find ways to reduce spending without compromising the world-class visitor experience we are known for. And then when interest exceeded expectations following the government shutdown in October, our team was ready to accommodate all who wanted to visit, providing excellent customer service and a welcoming experience.

Thank you to the Washington, D.C. community and our many donors, visitors, and advocates around the country for standing by us to create and sustain Planet Word. We are grateful for your generosity and support. With your help, we will continue to celebrate the power, fun, and beauty of words and language through relevant and creative gallery experiences, meaningful educational and public programs, and timely thought leadership that underlines our belief that *words matter*.

.....

Nikki Sertsu

NIKKI DEJESUS SERTSU
Executive Director



Visitor Feedback

“The Wordshop was an engaging, hands-on way for students to practice persuasive writing, speaking, and critical thinking. It tied academic skills to fun, interactive activities that students genuinely enjoyed, and the real-world connection kept students motivated.”



“The space was perfect and staff assisted with all of our needs during the planning process and onsite! They made everything go flawlessly during the event.”



“I felt the class made our group of English learning students feel understood and gave them a new view of variations within the language.”

“Our team of 15 people had a great time bonding over interesting puzzles, enjoying the delicious meal from Immigrant Food, and then exploring the museum. We will certainly recommend this experience to other teams!”

“ I absolutely loved the program! I was engaged, got one of my questions answered by the speaker, and was left wanting to explore more!”



“ I appreciated the honest conversations about storytelling, creativity, and representation. [The speakers] brought energy, perspective, and depth that left me reflecting long after the session.”

“ So much fun and knowledge to be had! I am willing to come here and learn something new every week.”

“ One word: enchanting. From hidden doors leading to a serene poetry nook to interactive experiences tucked between the stacks, every corner invited wonder. This was truly an immersive literary dreamscape.”



“ All of Planet Word’s initiatives and support have made an incredible impact at the Downtown Day Services Center and on the clients we serve there.”



Amplifying Voices, Sharing Stories

The galleries at Planet Word welcome visitors to explore words and language in a playful and often unexpected way.

From a 20-foot wall of words that talks back to you to a hidden poetry nook to books that literally come to life — more than 160,000 visitors learned from and were inspired by these and other one-of-a-kind exhibits, leaving the museum with a better understanding of the immense power, beauty, and fun of words.



Visitors loved Planet Word's new stuttering beacon, created in collaboration with ASHA.



SHARING THE WORDS MATTER GALLERY

Thanks to the generosity of the **Diller - von Furstenberg Family Foundation**, Planet Word developed its first online exhibit, bringing visitors' stories from the powerful *Words Matter* gallery to people everywhere. A curated selection of 50 heartfelt, personal testimonials is now accessible online, showing how personal stories build confidence, encourage self-reflection, and foster empathy.

LAUNCHING NEW INTERACTIVE EXHIBITS

Two new touchscreen displays, or “beacons,” became a permanent part of Planet Word’s visitor experience this year. In one new beacon we explored the subject of questions, showing visitors what types of questions don’t elicit reliable responses (such as double negatives or leading questions) and demonstrating to visitors how small changes to wording can turn bad questions into good ones. Asking good questions is especially important in the age of chatbots, when how you word a prompt can easily determine the quality of the response you receive. We celebrated the installation of this beacon in July with **Curiosity Day**, welcoming more than 700 curious visitors to participate in a day of free, question-themed activities.

In November, in collaboration with the **American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)**, we created a new beacon about stuttering — exploring what causes stuttering, how it affects people, and how to be a good communication partner to someone who stutters. The beacon attracted significant media interest and enthusiasm from museum visitors, but nothing could have surprised us more than the hundreds of ASHA convention delegates who then visited Planet Word to see the beacon and explore the museum.

A SURPRISING SURGE

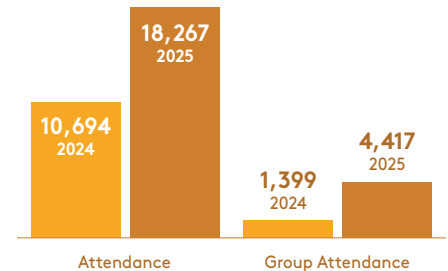
During a year of uncertainty in Washington, D.C., and around the country, Planet Word’s visitation fluctuated along with that of our peers in the museum industry. Whether to address dips in visitation or to accommodate significant increased interest, our nimble and entrepreneurial Visitor Services team pivoted quickly, accommodating furloughed visitors looking for a free activity or school and tourist groups who had long planned a visit to the Smithsonian and needed an alternative.



(Top) Planet Word Founder and CEO Ann Friedman accepts ASHA’s 2025 Annie Glenn Award; (Bottom) Planet Word Executive Director Nikki DeJesus Sertu cuts a ribbon to celebrate the new beacon about stuttering.



From October 2024 to October 2025, the number of visitors who came as a group **more than tripled**, while overall attendance nearly doubled.



PROGRAMS AND EDUCATION

Engaging New Communities

In 2025, we deepened our engagement with existing communities through popular program series, such as *Eyes on Reading* with education journalist Emily Hanford and *Between the Lines* with author Jason Reynolds. We also piloted programs to engage new audiences with mission-aligned topics and activities.

Planet Word on the first Wednesday of each month for after-hours hump-day wordplay.

First Wednesdays
5:00–8:00 p.m.



Several researchers were featured at the *Language & the Brain Music Symposium*, where they shared the connections between music and literacy.

Attendees at *The Reading Lounge* bonded over books and reading.



THE READING LOUNGE

To further our commitment to building community and strengthening bonds through words and language, we partnered with [@prettylittlebookshelf](#) to host *The Reading Lounge* at Planet Word. Featuring a comfy, bookish lounge space, author meet & greets, and personalized book signings, this new series immersed guests in culturally-inclusive literature and offered an opportunity to socialize with fellow book lovers.

LANGUAGE & THE BRAIN

With generous funding from donor **Ann Ziff**, we launched *Language & the Brain*, a thought-provoking series exploring the fascinating connection between how we think and how we communicate. Topics such as the power of music on the brain or how text analysis can identify emotions attracted and engaged a new community of people who learned about language science and its implications in real life.



SUNDAY STORYTIME

In partnership with **DC Public Library**, we launched **Sunday Storytime**, a monthly morning of read-alouds, songs, and hands-on word fun, designed especially to reach a new audience: younger children and their grownups. Though our Workshops and gallery experience are intended for students in third grade and older, we were excited to create meaningful, word-related activities for the younger visitors who enter our doors.



LITERACY LIFTOFF

Well-known data on “summer slide,” or the loss of academic skills during the long break, spurred our education team to design a new summer program, **Literacy Liftoff**, providing research-backed support and at-home resources to D.C. families of low-income 2nd and 3rd grade readers. Nearly 100 students received free backpacks filled with ten diverse, grade-appropriate books and an activity packet written by Planet Word staff that was intended to keep them reading and engaged with words all summer long. And it did!

Returning Programs, Events, and Initiatives

- Imagination Stage pop-up performance
- Student Workshops
- Juneteenth Jubilee
- Own Your Story
- Language Science Station
- *Having Hard Conversations* series
- Literacy Resource Fairs
- *Eyes on Reading* series
- Wordplay Wednesday
- *Between the Lines* series



“My favorite *Literacy Liftoff* book this summer was the one about the girl who loved sharks because she was so brave. My little sister kept takin’ it and I had to go get it back!”

—2ND GRADE STUDENT



TOTAL NUMBER OF WORDSHOP ATTENDEES

4,860 students served, including:

- 61% Title I students
- 91% satisfied students (based on feedback from students and educators)

Expanding Our Reach

None of our impact is possible without a loyal and growing community of supporters and followers who are fundamental to both our operations and the impact we seek to have, sharing our vision to increase literacy, the foundation of a strong democracy.



The Washington Nationals baseball team partnered with Planet Word to host the inaugural MLB Story Time series.



Founder and CEO Ann Friedman welcoming guests at the Fall for Words gala in October 2025.

CONVENING AND ENGAGING NEW AUDIENCES

We launched **Lunch Encounters**, a private speaker series featuring local women who are helping to make Washington, D.C., a thriving literacy hub. From journalists to small business owners to nonprofit leaders, these women shared the important work they do in words and language and inspired thoughtful conversations among a new community of interested women.

Our **Fall for Words** gala welcomed nearly 150 guests to celebrate the museum's five-year anniversary, MC'd by renowned education journalist and podcast creator **Emily Hanford** with entertainment by the mesmerizing magician and cruciverbalist **David Kwong**. We also honored three close friends of the museum, representing great achievement in the field of words, language, and reading: grammarian **Ellen Jovin**, linguist



Our popular Duck Cam and related webpage drew two *Washington Post* stories, mentions in *Politico*, the *Washingtonian* and more, plus **6,600+** unique webpage visitors and **39,000** total page views, peaking at **2,200+** in one day.

John McWhorter, and the owners of D.C.'s widely admired independent bookstore **Politics and Prose**. It was a beautiful evening of celebration, reflection, and renewed commitment to our mission and work.

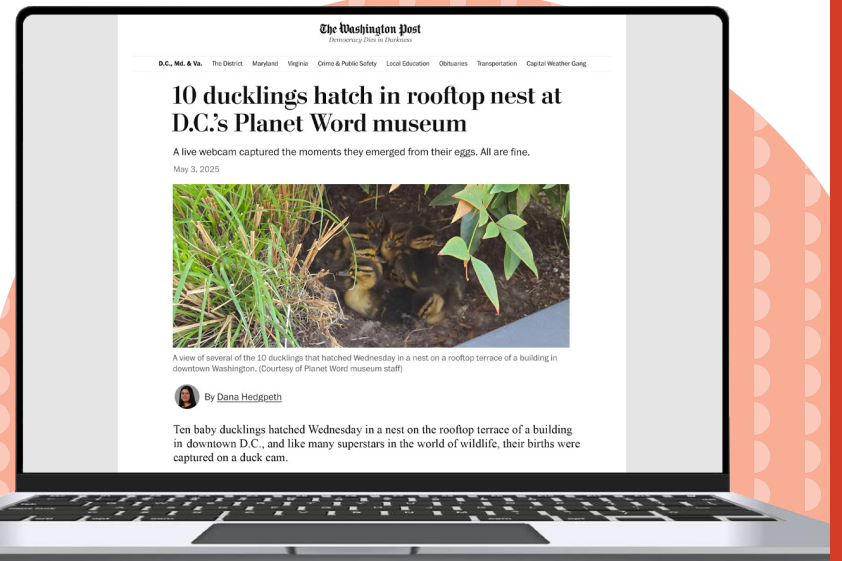
In addition to the external events we host, we saw great interest in our new **Lunch at Lexicon Lane** package, where private groups enjoy one hour of word puzzlemania to solve a grand mystery, followed by lunch catered by our restaurant partner, **Immigrant Food**. For organizations, corporations, and family groups, this experience offers a unique, inexpensive outing — a chance for teambuilding and bonding outside the usual. It generated new revenue for the museum, a growth in the number of visitors to this beautiful space, and a truly one-of-a-kind experience — yet another! — at Planet Word.

Our new media partnership with **WAMU, NPR's Washington, D.C., member station**, allowed us to meaningfully expand the reach of our **Having Hard Conversations** series through radio and digital channels, reinforcing Planet Word's role as a convener of thought leaders and sharing important bridge-building tools with a broader network.

As part of the inaugural **Major League Baseball Story Time** series, the **Washington Nationals** baseball team partnered with the museum to host a read-aloud activity at the ballpark, once again offering an opportunity to engage families with children (and, no doubt, baseball fans). Later in the year, the team co-branded one of our **Wordplay Wednesday** events, extending our reach through free advertising and enhancing the visitor experience with community giveaways.



(Top) Maureen Corrigan chats with Planet Word Founder and CEO Ann Friedman and guests at the inaugural Lunch Encounters program; (Bottom) Ten adorable ducklings hatched live on our Duck Cam.



Board of Directors *As of March 31, 2026*

Planet Word's governing Board of Directors includes leaders in education, media, real estate, technology, the arts, and museums. Board members serve by contributing their advice and service through committees and ad hoc working groups, as well as with financial support through annual and endowment gifts.

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The Advisory Board is a group of national and international scholars, linguists, and creative practitioners. Advisory Board members help generate ideas and decide how people will experience the museum through different displays of language and communication.

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We are deeply grateful to these donors who made gifts, pledges, or pledge payments of \$1,000 or more during fiscal year 2025. These contributions are vital in fulfilling Planet Word's mission. We also extend our thanks to the many guests who made donations when visiting the museum.

\$1,000,000+

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Every effort has been made to create a complete and accurate list of contributors. Please call 206-456-3983 with questions or corrections.

● Indicates Founder's Circle Member

Audited Financial Reports

Statement of Activities

For the Year Ended December 31, 2025

REVENUE AND SUPPORT	2025	2024
Gifts, grants, and corporate support	5,945,237	4,523,970
Group admissions, less donated admission fees	1,084,890	1,138,828
Shop, net of cost of goods sold	283,047	284,370
Fundraising events, net	128,557	N/A
Rental income	83,461	93,727
Program income	158,840	107,605
Contributed goods and services	175,409	182,958
Other revenue	149,485	92,158
TOTAL REVENUE AND SUPPORT	8,008,926	6,423,616
EXPENSES	2025	2024
Program Services	6,858,871	6,425,306
Management and General	691,937	592,962
Fundraising	365,864	283,591
TOTAL EXPENSES*	7,916,672	7,301,859
Change in net assets from operations before other items	92,254	(878,243)
OTHER ITEMS	2025	2024
Changes in net assets	92,254	(878,243)
Net assets at beginning of year	54,620,860	55,499,103
Net assets at end of year	54,713,114	54,620,860

The summary information presented here is derived from the museum's audited financial statements. A full copy of these statements is available from the museum upon request.

Statement of Financial Position

As of December 31, 2025

ASSETS	2025	2024
Cash and cash equivalents	4,755,779	3,347,326
Contributions and grants receivable, net	447,485	725,499
Other assets	161,078	250,279
Property, exhibits, fixtures and equipment, net**	50,055,047	50,695,998
Total Assets	55,419,389	55,019,102
LIABILITIES	2025	2024
Accounts payable and accrued liabilities	682,944	358,453
Other	23,331	39,789
Total Liabilities	706,275	398,242
NET ASSETS	2025	2024
Without donor restrictions	53,945,059	53,474,315
With donor restrictions	768,055	1,146,545
Total Net Assets	54,713,114	54,620,860
TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS	55,419,389	55,019,102

* Includes depreciation and amortization costs of \$1,901,233 in FY25 and \$1,910,487 in FY24, allocated across all three expense categories.

** \$36,900,000 of the total represents the gift of the Franklin School in 2022 to Planet Word.

Larry's Puzzle Corner

HEARD MENTALITY

By Will Shortz

The family of Larry Jeffers, an avid puzzler and language lover, made a donation to fund Larry's Puzzle Corner in our newsletter, *Word on the Street*. Subscribe for exclusive access to word puzzles created in Larry's memory by *New York Times* crossword editor and Planet Word Advisory Board member Will Shortz.

Change one letter in each word so that each pair of words rhymes.

(Ex. SLICK, QUARK → SLACK, QUACK)

- | | | |
|-----|-------|-------|
| 1. | BRAWN | CRAZE |
| 2. | HOARD | STORM |
| 3. | NORSE | PLOTS |
| 4. | SIEGE | BINGO |
| 5. | WHIST | PARED |
| 6. | TOUCH | SNIFF |
| 7. | NEEDY | WOODY |
| 8. | PRICK | TWINE |
| 9. | BIRCH | DARTH |
| 10. | ROUGH | THROB |
| 11. | FOYER | PRION |
| 12. | SPITE | GREEN |

Planet Word

Museum of Language Arts

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202-931-3139

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