



# Annual Report

SOUTH ORANGE | MAPLEWOOD  
COMMUNITY  
COALITION  
ON RACE

2025



## **LEADERSHIP MESSAGE** Building community, fostering dialogue, and taking action

In 2025, the South Orange/Maplewood Community Coalition on Race continued its work at a moment of both challenge and opportunity. As national debates over race, history, and belonging intensified, our community showed—again—that intentional integration, truth-telling, and relationship-building remain essential to how we move forward together.

Our signature community gatherings brought hundreds together. The Dr. King Observance, Luminary Lighting, and Volunteer Fair once again illuminated SOMA—literally and figuratively—while Juneteenth, Black History Month, Women’s History Month, and Integrated Art Circles celebrated culture, history, and creative expression as pathways to connection and belonging. We were especially proud to expand our Integrated Art Circles to include dance, mosaic, mural, and opera workshops that brought neighbors together across generations and backgrounds.

And, throughout the year, we engaged residents in learning, dialogue, and action through a wide range of programs. Our Conversations on Race series addressed the backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion, while Deconstructing Racism workshops provided participants with practical tools to recognize and disrupt bias in everyday life. Our Schools Committee led critical advocacy and education around the Intentional Integration Initiative, including a well-attended forum on how all students benefit from integrated schools. We also continued to support families through programs like SOMA Neighbors Connect and the Roadmap to Homeownership workshop.

Our commitment to residential integration remained strong. In 2025, we expanded two Wealth Gap Equalizer Loans each to \$15,000, continued demographic research, and deepened partnerships to address opportunity gaps and promote stable integration.

None of this work happens by accident. It is made possible by dedicated volunteers, thoughtful trustees, generous donors, and community partners who believe—as we do—that equity and integration require intention, courage, and care.

With gratitude,

Nancy Gagnier, Executive Director

Anita Gundanna, Chair of the Board of Trustees, 2025



### **Celebrating the Life of Carol Barry-Austin**

The Community Coalition on Race mourned the Loss of founding member Carol Barry-Austin whose unwavering leadership, drive, and commitment for 28 years both shaped and built the organization we are today. Her mentorship of trustees, executive directors, and volunteers profoundly influenced the Coalition's trajectory, ensuring its positive growth and impact. Carol was a fierce ally and collaborator, and a warm and wise friend to all who worked with her. She pushed all of us to give the time, energy, thoughtfulness, and passion towards racial equity – particularly in our local school district – that she knew we had, driving all of us to be our most effective advocates for our beloved community. She touched countless lives, and her unwavering commitment to racial equity and inclusion remains her enduring legacy. In honoring her legacy, the Coalition pledges to continue embracing the values Carol taught us, and to be unwavering as we strive toward the inclusive, equitable community she envisioned.

## BUILDING COMMUNITY

### **The 24th Annual Dr. King Observance, Volunteer Fair, & Luminary Project**

We brought together community members, leaders, and activists to reaffirm Dr. King's vision of justice, equality, and beloved community. Our theme was 'Upholding Dr. King's Legacy in Challenging Times.' Speakers emphasized the Coalition's ongoing commitment to justice, anti-racism, diversity, equity, inclusion, and immigrant support—values that remain at the heart of our work. The event closed with a call to action: to continue building community, standing up for justice, and resisting oppression in all its forms. The event was followed by a volunteer fair and a community luminary lighting, including a public lighting in South Orange led by the Meadowland Park Conservancy.

### **Black History Month Events:**

#### **Black Women and the New Jersey Civil Rights Movement:**

In collaboration with Durand-Hedden House & Garden, Dr. Hettie Williams gave an informative talk on the history of the early Black freedom struggle in New Jersey. She made a powerful argument that the Civil Rights Movement began in New Jersey, and that Black women were central actors in this struggle.

#### **Highlighting the Life & Legacy of Sen. Wynona Lipman:**

We hosted a screening and talk with director Celeste Bateman of "Stronger Than Steel: The Senator Wynona Lipman Story," a documentary that explores the life of Sen. Wynona Lipman (1923-1999). Senator Lipman was the first African American Woman Senator in New Jersey. The film examines her remarkable achievements, her deep passion and commitment to social justice and equality, and highlights legislative initiatives and career benchmarks.

### **Juneteenth Celebration at Durand-Hedden House & Garden**

We honored the 160th anniversary of the day that freedom was finally announced to enslaved people in Galveston, Texas—18 months after the Emancipation Proclamation and five months after the 13th Amendment abolished slavery nationwide. Our annual Juneteenth celebration was co-hosted with Durand Hedden House & Garden. Set on their beautiful grounds, the day was filled with live musical performances, spoken word, West African drumming and line dance, historical reenactments, local Black art, arts and crafts for kids, and family-friendly activities.

### **Integration Through the Arts: Integrated Art Circles**

These programs, funded in part by a grant from the NJ State Council on the Arts through the Essex County Division of Cultural and Historical Affairs, support creative, sustainable communities by using the arts to bring together people of different races and cultural backgrounds and to build authentic relationships across racial boundaries. This year's art circles included: Line Dance Circles, which brought people together to learn dance steps in a fun, relaxed atmosphere; a Mosaic Art Circle in which people created art that reflects our community's diversity; a Mural Art Circle in which participants created a mural installation that reflects belonging and shared space; and the Opera Education Circle, a four-session workshop exploring opera through the lens of racial diversity and storytelling.



# ANTI-RACISM, ADVOCACY, RACIAL JUSTICE

## Now More Than Ever: How All Students Benefit from Integrated Schools

Hosted by the Schools Committee, the forum looked at why our community has committed to integrated schools, the many benefits of integration, and how sustained, intentional integration can uplift our students and our community. The conversation offered families an opportunity to learn about the history of school desegregation, including an overview of the district's 40+ years of desegregation efforts, how the current Intentional Integration Initiative (III) works, and a thoughtful examination of common misconceptions about the plan.

## Coalition Leaders Present at the 3rd Annual Conference on Building Anti-Racist Multiracial Community

Trustee Barbara Velazquez and Executive Director Nancy Gagnier presented at the Anti-Racist Community Network's (ARCN) 3rd Annual Conference on Building Anti-Racist Multiracial Community. They shared the Coalition's practical, intentional integration and inclusion strategies to inspire other communities to take action toward racial equity and solidarity.

## Deconstructing Racism Workshops for Community Members

We presented Part II of the Deconstructing Racism series, which consists of four modules, covering "The Impact of White Supremacy" and "How to Disrupt White Supremacy." Participants discussed how white supremacist ideology has impacted people of color and how it has negatively impacted white people, limiting our nation's evolution and advancement. The presenters focused on the various ways white supremacy, and its affiliated racism, can be disrupted and deconstructed through individual, group, government and national endeavors.

## The Wealth Gap Equalizer Loan: Increasing Racial Equity in Homeownership

South Orange and Maplewood are among the few communities taking intentional steps to address racial equity in housing. We believe that equitable access to homeownership is essential to maintaining and strengthening our racially integrated towns. In 2025, we increased two of our Wealth Gap Equalizer Loans from \$7,500 to \$15,000. This change comes in response to rising housing costs in our towns and is designed to make homebuying more attainable for Black and non-White Hispanic families.

## Board of Education Candidates Forum

The Schools Committee sponsors this annual forum as an opportunity to hear about the candidates' commitment to excellence and equity for all students in SOMA and to integrated schools and classrooms. The 6 candidates running for the three open seats on the SOMA Board of Education participated on this well-attended forum and addressed community concerns about the Integration Initiative, transportation, and racial equity issues.



**NOW MORE THAN EVER:  
HOW ALL STUDENTS BENEFIT FROM  
INTEGRATED SCHOOLS**

A public forum to learn more about the history of integration efforts in our schools: How we got here and why

Columbia High School  
November 12<sup>th</sup> 2025  
7:30pm



**LEGAL OBLIGATIONS TO DESEGREGATE NJ**

- 1947** NJ becomes (and remains) the only state with a constitutional ban on public school segregation.
- 1963** NJ Commissioner of Education rules that "Reasonable means consistent with sound educational and administrative practices" must be employed to eliminate or reduce racial imbalance.
- 2004** In denying the request of largely white North Haledon to withdraw from Manchester Regional High School District, the NJ Supreme Court ruled that "racial imbalance resulting from de facto segregation is inimical to the constitutional guarantee of a thorough and efficient education."
- 2023** NJ Superior Court finds that "de facto segregation is prevalent and persistent across the State. Defendants [the State] are obligated and empowered to minimize segregation."



## DEVELOPING UNDERSTANDING

### Conversations on Race: Confronting the Backlash Against DEI

Hosted at Seton Hall University, we grappled with the growing national backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) with clarity, urgency, and a deeply local lens. The panel was moderated by Coalition trustee Robert A. Marchman; the panelists included SHU Dean Lori Brown, Maplewood Township Committee member Dean Dafis, South Orange Township Councilwoman Dr. Olivia Lewis-Chang, Assemblywoman Garnet Hall, and SOMSD Assistant Superintendent Dr. Kerri Waibel. We discussed the local threats to racial justice and the implications for racial integration and focused on:

- Threats to affordable housing and support for seniors and trans youth in our own towns
- Erosion of mental health care and DEI protections across institutions
- Concerns about disinvestment in Black and Brown communities
- Budget cuts and policy rollbacks affecting school integration, inclusive curricula, and safe spaces

The group conversations made it clear that our community is ready to support those most affected by DEI rollbacks.

### Roadmap to Homeownership

This informative session was designed by the Coalition's Residential Committee for first-time homebuyers. Wealth Advisor William Vaughan covered essential topics such as how to secure a loan, understanding the homebuying process, and offered tips for navigating the housing market.

### SOMA Neighbors Connect

The evening featured updates on the spaces and places where neighbors connect. We shared why studying town demographics is important to our mission and had a look at neighborhood integration levels. We learned about the greenway, the establishment of safe bike lanes, the SOMA bike bus, and heard from local dads/husbands who formed a neighborhood social group as a way to relax and form new friendships. Attendees shared their experiences in strengthening community bonds through block parties, Halloween traditions, group chats, and more.

### Demographics Research

The MERT (Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, Testing) team reviewed data on increasing home prices, income levels in SOMA, market trends, the progress of the school district's Integration Initiative, and in-mover trends. They are anticipating mid-decade US census data in 2026 to assess stability in or disruptions to racial integration.

### Targeted & Affirmative Marketing

The Marketing Committee strengthened the Coalition's visibility and impact through a new strategic digital marketing approach that promotes the benefits of racial integration and equity—growing our social media interactions by nearly 200%. The committee expanded outreach to residents of color, promoted programs and advocacy efforts, and developed a robust online resource page offering vetted information on diversity, equity, and inclusion for individuals and community groups locally and beyond.



**#ChooseSOMA**  
The Communities of  
South Orange and Maplewood

# 2025 HIGHLIGHTS

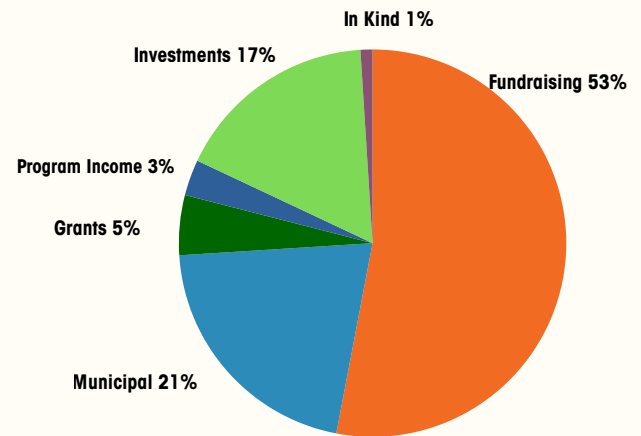
In 2025, we:

- Hosted 22 public events and workshops
- Provided anti-racism trainings, conversations, and learning workshops for nearly 2,000 community members
- Collaborated with 21 local and regional organizations
- Raised funds from over 550 donors
- Distributed 1,000 Luminary kits to shine on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

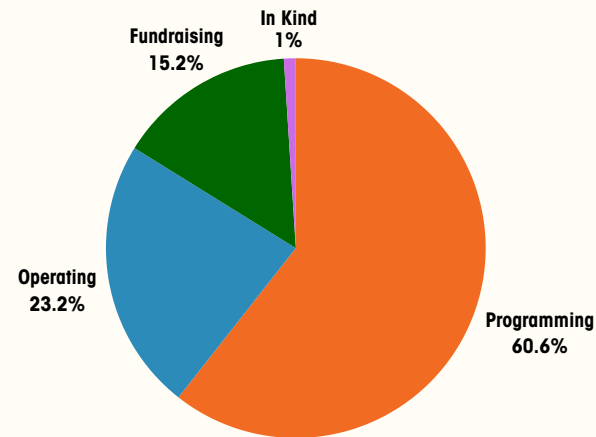
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|---|---|

**2025 Projected Income: \$284,286**



**2025 Projected Expense: \$200,809**



## IN THE NEWS & COLLABORATIONS

### The Institute of Human Development and Social Change Partnership Development Seed Award Program

Using this seed grant to work with Dr. Diane Hughes, NYU Professor of Applied Psychology the Schools Committee convened focus groups to gain perspectives on needs regarding racial equity and integration to share with the district.

### Local & Regional Media

Our community work was highlighted in:

*SOMA Living, The Village Green, Matters Magazine, The News-Record, NJ.com, NJSpotlight, Essex Daily News, TAP, Patch, the South Orange Gaslight, the Maplewood Township Newsletter, The Jersey Bee, and The Montclair Girl.*

### The Progressive Magazine

Nancy Gagnier and Audrey Rowe were interviewed by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and book author Tina Kelley for a 2026 Progressive magazine feature, "More Than Neighbors," highlighting the Coalition's decades-long work to advance social integration and foster authentic cross-racial friendships in our community.

### Great Homes and Neighborhoods for All

We shared our knowledge and understanding of the issues confronting communities seeking stable racial integration for the report:

*Averting Residential Displacement: Assessing Indicators of Risk to Enable Early Intervention.*

### Seton Hall University: Alpha Phi and Women in Leadership Organization

Executive Director Nancy Gagnier was invited to serve as a panelist for a discussion on 'Women in Leadership' by Seton Hall's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion leader. The conversation provided an opportunity to offer insights into leadership and share the work of the Coalition to support women at the university.

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John Velasco  
Indira Verastegui  
Debra Vogel  
Lou Vogel & Marcelo Mendez  
Jeremy Vogelmann  
Joan Walsh  
Danielle Walsman  
Ed & Holly Ware  
Bailey Warmack  
Ronald Weaver  
Lisa Weinberg  
Florence Weisz  
Hannah Wells  
Joy Wernick  
Allison Williams  
Magnus Wilson-Webb  
Eleanor Winslow  
Marieke Wijtes  
Gregory Wolski  
Janice Yawdoszyn  
Elizabeth Yomantas  
Joshua Zelkind  
Gabrielle Zola



SOUTH ORANGE | MAPLEWOOD  
**COMMUNITY  
COALITION  
ON RACE**

516 Prospect St., Maplewood, NJ 07040  
SOMA@CommunityCoalitionOnRace.org |  
CommunityCoalitionOnRace.org |  
973-761-6116

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Darren Vengroff

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**STAFF**

Executive Director  
Nancy Gagnier

Megan Clement  
Program Coordinator

Amanda Gutierrez  
Program Coordinator

Office Administrator  
Susan Pendleton



**Celebrating  
Integration:  
Rooted in History,  
Rising toward Justice**

We honored our longtime program director Audrey Rowe, seen here with her daughter SZA (known to her family as Solana Rowe). She worked for more than two decades to bring neighbors together across racial and cultural differences to build a shared vision of an inclusive community. Audrey's tribute was capped by a standing ovation and the love of family and friends whose presence made the celebration even more meaningful.



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