

DENVER CREATES

A Collective Commitment to the Arts



DENVER
THE MILE HIGH CITY



FOREWORD

Arts, culture and creativity are integral to Denver's identity, intentionally woven into the very fabric of our city through public art programs, cultural investments and iconic landmarks. From vibrant Cultural Districts to world-class museums and theaters, Denver offers an immersive artistic experience for residents and visitors alike.

When Denver set out to develop a new cultural framework for our city, we took a nuanced approach to cultural planning and allowed ourselves to be guided by the hopes, dreams and visions of the creative sector. Now the city, through Denver Arts & Venues, will take on the role of conveyor to set the stage for a collective approach to advancing the cultural sector.



DENVER CREATES: A Collective Commitment to the Arts is our shared roadmap for fostering a thriving, inclusive and resilient creative ecosystem guided by our vision to grow and strengthen Denver's arts and culture ecosystem for everyone to enjoy. We'll achieve this by focusing on three key commitments: broadening access to arts and culture, cultivating our cultural community and strengthening the economic vitality of Denver's creative sector.

We have an opportunity to shape the future of arts and culture in Denver — a future where the arts are accessible to all, where artists and cultural organizations flourish and where creativity fuels innovation and connection.

Mayor Mike Johnston

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DENVER CREATES

DENVER CREATES: A Collective Commitment to the Arts is the city's roadmap for a thriving arts and culture ecosystem.

Grounded in research and driven by community voices, this roadmap outlines three collective commitments: broadening access to arts and culture, cultivating the cultural community and supporting the economic vitality of Denver's cultural sector.

DENVER CREATES sets the stage for an inclusive, dynamic arts and culture landscape. This initiative calls on all of us — artists, organizations, leaders and residents — to join in a continuous effort to co-create a more vibrant and equitable creative environment.

This is our collective invitation to shape Denver's artistic and cultural landscape together.



A CITY IN FULL COLOR

This is Denver —
where civic
investment fuels
arts and culture.

Throughout history, arts and culture have been the universal language of the people — speaking directly to our shared humanity, spanning age, race and culture. A strong civic infrastructure for arts and culture is a promise to the community that also speaks volumes to the rest of the world. That promise is alive and thriving in Denver.

From murals on buildings to music in parks, creativity pulses through the streets and open spaces of Denver. Arts and culture are at the heart of who we are as Denverites — driving the economy, sparking civic pride, deepening lifelong learning and inspiring change. Creativity weaves Denver's unique neighborhoods together and enriches daily life for all of us.

With collective support and steadfast dedication, Denver aims to shape our cultural legacy for future generations so that we're not just supporting a more creative city — we're drafting a collaborative masterwork of arts and culture. Strategic planning is key to shaping a city's creative future and serves as a framework and practical guide to strengthen and grow the arts and culture ecosystem.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

87% of Denver residents believe arts and culture create active, unique neighborhoods.

86% believe arts and culture attract tourism.

84% believe arts and culture improve quality of life.

CITY IDENTITY

73% of residents view the city as an “arts town,” highlighting the cultural sector's integral role in Denver's identity.



I see arts, culture and creativity as part of the civic fabric that helps us imagine who we want to be and what values we want to espouse as a city.

AISHA AHMAD-POST
NEWMAN CENTER
FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

INSIGHT IN MOTION



While arts have always been integral to the city, Denver's formal cultural planning began in 1989.

Denver's Cultural Planning Timeline

1989

Denver's first Cultural Plan, *Cultural Denver: An Action Plan for the Development of the Cultural Environment of the City and County of Denver* established the Denver Office of Cultural Affairs.

2011

Merger of the City and County of Denver agencies Theatres & Arenas Division and the Denver Office of Cultural Affairs to form Denver Arts & Venues.

2014

IMAGINE 2020: Denver's Cultural Plan launches with goals set around "7 Vision Elements," guided by the philosophy "For Denver, By Denver," ensuring the city's cultural landscape thrives through collaboration.



THE 7 VISION ELEMENTS OF *IMAGINE 2020*



INTEGRATION

embedding arts and culture into neighborhoods and daily life



ACCESSIBILITY

ensuring inclusivity in arts and culture for all



AMPLIFICATION

celebrating and elevating creative expression across the city



LIFELONG LEARNING

promoting artistic exploration at every stage of life



LOCAL TALENT

fostering growth and investment in Denver's creative professionals



ECONOMIC VITALITY

reinforcing arts and culture as a key pillar of Denver's economy



COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

guiding cultural development through collaboration



*Culture is supposed to expand and come back.
It's not something you're supposed to clutch to yourself;
it's supposed to breathe and evolve. From an Indigenous
knowledge perspective, it's not chasing your tail.
It's a spiral where you grow.*

KRISTINA MALDONADO BAD HAND
ARTIST

DENVER CREATES

Research Methodology

DENVER CREATES was built on a comprehensive, inclusive research process to ensure broad representation. The research methodology was informed by past frameworks like the vision elements of *IMAGINE 2020*, driven by insights from residents across Denver's diverse neighborhoods and grounded in the voices of the arts and culture sector. DENVER CREATES reflects the needs and aspirations of Denver's residents and the arts and cultural community.

RESEARCH PRINCIPLES

The following principles grounded the research process to shape the vision of DENVER CREATES:

- **Access, Equity and Belonging** form the foundation of a just and inclusive city. Centered in these values, artistic and cultural platforms make the invisible visible, challenge systems, imagine new futures and ignite change.
- **Partnerships and Collaboration** are the mechanisms for building thriving communities. Through partnerships and collaboration, arts and culture can build and strengthen meaningful relationships, create change and sustain transformational work today and into the future.
- **Thriving Communities** are where people want to live and work. A thriving community celebrates the diversity of its residents. Arts, culture and creativity have a role to play in celebrating our unique histories, addressing people's well-being and fostering a sense of belonging.



*Everything
rests on thoughtful,
intentional partnership.
The more you collaborate,
the more you inspire
collective change.*

LOUISE MARTORANO
REDLINE CONTEMPORARY
ART CENTER

KEY STEPS OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

- **Community Engagement:** More than 2,500 voices were heard through statistically valid public surveys in 2013, 2017, 2020 and 2024, offering insights into how arts and culture are perceived and accessed across Denver.
- **Arts and Culture Sector-Specific Research:** In 2021 and 2024, more than 100 in-depth interviews were conducted with a range of artists, cultural workers and organizations, providing insights into the sector's evolving needs, strengths and barriers.
- **Supplemental Data Analysis:** Trends in participation and funding were examined using longitudinal data from studies such as the *Colorado Business Committee for the Arts: Economic Activity Study of Denver Metro Culture* and *Americans for the Arts: Arts & Economic Prosperity*.
- **Collaborative Planning:** Community advisors, focus groups and targeted outreach ensured representation from historically underrepresented communities, fostering a commitment that prioritizes equity and inclusion.



THE GUIDING VISION OF DENVER CREATES

Together, we're building a city where the arts thrive and our culture flourishes.

DENVER CREATES is built on a foundation of community voices and scaffolded by a decade of introspection and progress in the cultural sector. Anchored in principles of access, equity, belonging, partnership and collaboration, our collective vision of creating thriving Denver communities will be bolstered by three collective commitments.

OUR GUIDING VISION: TO GROW AND STRENGTHEN DENVER'S ARTS AND CULTURE ECOSYSTEM FOR EVERYONE TO ENJOY.



We cannot operate on islands anymore. We have to be collaborative; we have to form strong partnerships.

donnie i. betts
FILMMAKER, THEATRE DIRECTOR



ACHIEVING THE VISION: THREE COLLECTIVE COMMITMENTS

These commitments outline actionable strategies, informed by data and community feedback from the arts and cultural sector, to create a more equitable and dynamic cultural landscape. With a collective focus, inclusive communities can flourish — and art will challenge systems and spark change — supporting the creation of spaces that celebrate diversity, prioritize well-being and cultivate a sense of belonging.



COMMITMENT 1

BROADEN ACCESS TO ARTS AND CULTURE



The strategies under Broaden Access to Arts and Culture provide actionable ways of advancing equity, boosting participation and supporting arts in Denver's neighborhoods by addressing barriers to funding, engagement and access. Actions are driven by feedback from the arts and culture sector and are focused on making arts and culture more inclusive and accessible.

STRATEGY: ADVANCE EQUITY AND ACCESS IN ARTS AND CULTURE FUNDING

VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY

- Research highlights barriers to affordability, equitable access and sustainable funding, especially for historically marginalized groups.
- To make funding opportunities more accessible, artists need clearer processes.
- Limited awareness of available funding opportunities hinders access for artists, especially early-career artists.

ACTION STEPS

1. Advocate for and implement equitable and inclusive processes in arts and culture funding to ensure opportunities for applicants and grantees are accessible and impactful.
2. Center equity and inclusion in grant-making and commit to regularly evaluating processes to continually align with new goals and best practices.



I believe that art and culture is the glue that holds the community together.

DAMON MCLEESE
ACCESS GALLERY

STRATEGY: REDUCE BARRIERS TO AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY

- Over half of residents cite time (55%) and cost (51%) as barriers to attending events.
- The need for accessible, welcoming spaces that foster a sense of belonging, especially for marginalized communities, was emphasized.
- Despite a 65% increase in attendance at Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD)-funded organizations, overall cultural participation remains below pre-pandemic levels.
- About two-thirds of residents express a desire to participate more in arts, culture and creativity but are held back by existing barriers.
- Nearly half of Denver residents (47%) continue to face difficulties due to a lack of information about events, especially younger audiences under 35.

ACTION STEPS

1. Develop clear and consistent methods of marketing arts and culture offerings in Denver to showcase the creative sector.
2. Identify and remove barriers, such as time, venue access, cost and/or sense of belonging, to increase participation in arts and culture, in particular for historically underrepresented community members.



I've been thinking a lot more about impact and how what we do as artists and creatives and culture bearers can be less about the thing and more about the lasting impact. What kind of ancestor do you want to be? How can we cultivate our future ancestors?

COURTNEY OZAKI-DURGIN
JAPANESE ARTS NETWORK

STRATEGY: SUPPORT ARTS AND CULTURE IN NEIGHBORHOODS

VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY

- 88% of residents believe arts, culture and creativity bring communities together, up from 82% in 2020.
- 87% of residents agree that arts, culture and creativity help connect them with others and create active, unique neighborhoods.
- Since 2020, there has been a 10% increase in residents who rate arts, culture and creativity in their neighborhood as poor.
- Only 45% of residents in 2024 believed it is easy to find and experience arts and culture in their neighborhood, down from 55% in 2017.
- The vast majority (85%) of arts and culture attendees consider these venues important pillars in their communities, and 88% feel a sense of pride from events in their neighborhoods.
- Concerns about gentrification and displacement were raised, affecting both artists and the broader community.

ACTION STEPS

1. Create and support neighborhood-led arts and cultural activities that celebrate community identity, promote belonging, support wellness, preserve local histories and unite neighborhoods across the city.
2. Develop and invest in cultural partnerships that strengthen neighborhoods and convey the value of arts and culture.



COMMITMENT

2

**CULTIVATE
THE
CULTURAL
COMMUNITY**



The strategies under Cultivate the Cultural Community aim to strengthen Denver by amplifying artists' successes, integrating them into community decision-making and enhancing their involvement in shaping policies to develop the next generation of arts leaders. By addressing key barriers and opportunities, like fostering cross-sector collaborations, the creative community can build a more vibrant, inclusive and sustainable arts ecosystem in Denver.

STRATEGY: AMPLIFY DENVER'S CULTURAL SUCCESSES AND REPUTATION

VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY

- 58% of arts and cultural attendees are nonlocal visitors, with 85% of them primarily visiting Denver for specific cultural events, showcasing the city's role as a cultural tourism hub.
- The economic impact of cultural tourism reached new heights in 2022, surpassing pre-pandemic levels, with a 15% increase in economic impact contributed by visitors from outside Metro Denver.
- 86% of residents believe arts, culture and creativity attract tourism, highlighting the sector's significant contribution to the local economy.
- 73% of Denver residents view the city as an "arts town," with higher percentages among Black/African American (79%) and Hispanic/Latino (78%) community members.
- 80% of residents agree that arts, culture and creativity help improve Denver's national reputation, underlining the importance of the arts in shaping the city's identity.
- Interviews with the cultural sector reveal a desire to amplify joy and celebration through the arts.

ACTION STEPS

1. Strengthen networks of support and appreciation in local communities to celebrate and promote the small successes and major milestones of Denver's local artists and arts organizations.
2. Amplify the achievements of Denver's arts and culture community to enhance its reputation locally, regionally and nationally as a premier destination for creativity and cultural excellence.



*Art will
always allow people
to see the beauty of the
human experience.*

QUINTIN GONZALEZ
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO DENVER

STRATEGY: BUILD CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATIONS

VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY

- 84% of residents believe arts and culture improve quality of life, underscoring the sector's broad societal value.
- 87% of residents agree that engaging in arts and culture improves mental health, highlighting the personal benefits of artistic participation.
- 66% of residents see the arts as a tool for addressing racial injustice, and 68% believe it helps communities recover during crises, emphasizing the role of arts in social change and healing.
- Over 80% of residents agree that arts, culture and creativity drive positive societal change, demonstrating the sector's potential to shape communities.
- Artists and cultural workers stress the importance of interdependence and collaboration in fostering meaningful, long-term change across sectors.
- 80% of residents believe arts and culture help raise awareness of social issues, demonstrating the power of the arts in bringing attention to critical causes.

ACTION STEPS

1. Support inclusive partnerships between artists, arts and culture organizations and other industries by organizing and encouraging cross-sector collaborations.
2. Build and support partnerships that increase cultural awareness, improve community well-being and integrate arts and culture into new areas such as business-sponsored public art and health and wellness initiatives.



Arts and culture is a celebration. It adds a language that people are able to connect through, that maybe they don't have the tools for otherwise.

ALEXANDRIA JIMENEZ
ARTIST



STRATEGY: INTEGRATE ARTISTS IN COMMUNITY DECISION-MAKING

VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY

- Arts and cultural workers emphasized that building a strong community identity involves embracing both shared values and differences, fostering growth through joy and discomfort.
- Artists should be valued as full partners, not as “add-ons,” in projects to achieve desired outcomes, according to interviewees.
- In 2024, artists and cultural workers stressed the importance of being included in decision-making and highlighted the need for increased access, particularly for younger and early-career artists.
- Some artists prefer not to be board or committee members but still want opportunities to voice the needs of their community and inform funding or policy decisions.

ACTION STEPS

1. Integrate artists into cross-sector grantmaking, public initiatives and collaborative efforts to address community needs and improve services at both a policy and a grassroots level.
2. Create diverse and flexible opportunities with broader entry points for artists and cultural workers to participate in decision-making processes.



STRATEGY: BUILD ARTS LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY

- Interviewees highlighted the importance of connecting early-career and young artists with mentorship to help them navigate funding and politics, empowering them to contribute more effectively in decision-making roles.
- Arts and creativity are recognized as essential for developing lifelong skills that address social issues and confront uncomfortable truths, fostering a thriving community.
- Nearly a third of Denver residents in 2024 reported feeling they lack sufficient background information to fully enjoy or understand arts and cultural events, a significant increase from 2013.
- Many in the creative sector have expressed a need for more educational opportunities to build leadership capacity, particularly for young, early-career artists and those from historically marginalized communities, helping them develop the necessary skills to succeed and lead.
- A gap in professional development and training opportunities, especially for arts and cultural workers from historically marginalized communities, was noted.

ACTION STEPS

1. Provide professional development, mentorship and funding opportunities for artists and cultural workers, particularly young, early-career artists and those from historically marginalized communities, and invest in arts education at all levels.
2. Build a local arts leadership pipeline through professional development, training, residencies and mentorship.



Arts must be at the table when civic conversations are happening. This is essential for demonstrating that the arts are one of the many tools we have at our disposal for addressing and solving citywide problems.

GARY STEUER
BONFILS-STANTON FOUNDATION

COMMITMENT

3



**SUPPORT THE
ECONOMIC VITALITY
OF DENVER'S
CULTURAL SECTOR**



The strategies under Support the Economic Vitality of Denver's Cultural Sector advance the city's economic vitality by addressing critical needs in affordable arts spaces, increased funding and retention of local talent. By enhancing collaboration, expanding resources and fostering an environment conducive to creative growth, this commitment seeks to strengthen Denver's role as a thriving hub for arts and culture.

STRATEGY: INCREASE ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY OF ARTS SPACES

VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY

- Artists and cultural workers emphasized that shared arts spaces are essential for fostering community connections where residents can engage with one another and build stronger relationships.
- These spaces are seen as key to creating environments where people can meet their needs and support one another, reinforcing the importance of accessibility and affordability in the arts.



Anybody who approaches art as problem solving, will always find creative solutions.

STEPHEN BRACKETT
FLOBOTS

ACTION STEPS

1. Develop residency opportunities and programs that support underrepresented communities by repurposing vacant venues.
2. Make arts programming and workspaces more affordable by addressing cost barriers through innovative funding models, partnerships and resource-sharing solutions.



STRATEGY: EXPAND ARTS AND CULTURE FUNDING

VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY

- Colorado ranks 46th in per-capita spending on arts and culture, with one of the lowest levels of state arts funding in the western U.S.
- The arts and cultural sector experienced a significant economic recovery in 2022, driven by federal pandemic relief funds and record-breaking individual giving.
- The direct economic impact of organizations funded by SCFD in 2022 amounted to \$827 million, a sharp increase from \$435 million in 2020.
- Artists and cultural workers now more strongly believe that funding for arts and culture is essential for a thriving, economically vibrant city, not just a luxury.

ACTION STEPS

1. Foster cross-sector funding partnerships that prioritize equitable access to resources and opportunities.
2. Expand funding to support local talent and creative initiatives in neighborhoods across Denver while addressing funding gaps across artistic disciplines.



STRATEGY: RETAIN LOCAL TALENT AND RESOURCES

VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY

- Denver's affordability crisis is a significant challenge for artists, with rising living and operational costs making it increasingly difficult for many to sustain their work locally.
- Almost one in three residents in Denver identifies as an artist, and the city has a higher concentration of artists and cultural workers compared to many other cities.
- Many artists and cultural workers shared that they could no longer afford to live in Denver, which also led to a decline in local funding opportunities and resources.
- Denver's creative business sector is large, with nearly 200 arts and entertainment businesses, including more than 100 independent artists, yet many in the sector still struggle with affordability and burnout.

ACTION STEPS

1. Build collaborative industry relationships to share resources, knowledge and information to strengthen mutual support across sectors.
2. Develop and implement creative solutions to provide affordable housing options for local artists to enable them to live and work in Denver.



When artists feel supported, they collaborate. You see musicians and visual artists come together in different ways. The community bubbles up with energy, people feel excited and they become engaged in conversations and the collective process.

RU JOHNSON
ROUX BLACK CONSULTING

COMMITTING TO DENVER CREATES

Arts and culture bring Denver to life — celebrating who we are, reflecting what we dream and connecting us in good times and bad.

DENVER CREATES is a roadmap designed to shape the future of arts and culture in our city. From artists and arts sector employees to community leaders and passionate arts supporters — each of us has something to give — and something to gain — from supporting arts and culture in Denver.

This is our collective invitation to co-create a city where imagination thrives, expression is everywhere and creativity belongs to us all. Together, let's:

- Celebrate successes within the sector — from small wins to huge accomplishments!
- Amplify the work of grantee and cultural partners, including art organizations, creative businesses and individual artists.
- Invest in relationships with arts organizations and artists.
- Cultivate funding that supports local talent and incentivizes collaboration and relationship building.

Artists and creators, businesses and philanthropists, arts patrons and cultural organizations — the stage is set — let's create what's next.



I see Denver now as a whole that it is a thriving community because we've intermingled, we've done so much, so many things together.

GRACE "SWAHUUX" GILLETTE
DENVER MARCH POWWOW



Denver Arts & Venues' Commitment

Denver Arts & Venues (DAV) is the City and County of Denver agency that will steward DENVER CREATES and serve as a convener of the cultural sector. Through DENVER CREATES, DAV aims to inspire collaboration within the arts community to collectively address sector challenges and bring the vision of this roadmap to life. DAV will support initiatives, facilitate partnerships and track sector progress, ensuring strategies remain aligned with Denver's evolving cultural needs — ultimately helping Denver's cultural community thrive — for good.



About Denver Arts & Venues: DAV is the agency responsible for operating some of the region's most renowned facilities, including Red Rocks Amphitheatre, Denver Performing Arts Complex, Colorado Convention Center, Denver Coliseum, the Theatre at Loretto Heights and McNichols Civic Center Building. As the city's local arts agency, DAV also oversees the Denver Public Art Program; manages grant programs that support artists, cultural organizations and creative initiatives; and coordinates entertainment and cultural events, programs and awards.

Funds generated by DAV are invested back into the community through grants for artists and organizations, free and low-cost cultural events, art in public spaces, venue operation and maintenance, and arts education. In other words, every good time at one of our venues enriches Denver through arts and culture and helps Denver's cultural community thrive — for good!

Join us!

Whether you've been doing this work for years or you're ready to make a commitment to the arts and culture sector, ask yourself:

- **How can I broaden access to arts and culture?**
- **How might I cultivate and elevate our creative community?**
- **What am I doing to help sustain the cultural sector financially or otherwise?**

Whatever role you choose to play — center stage or behind the scenes — your voice and your passion matter. Together, we can make a lasting impact.



**LEARN MORE AT
DENVER-CREATES.COM**



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special Acknowledgment

We honor and acknowledge the arts and cultural leaders who have passed since the development of this plan. Their vision, dedication and contributions have left a lasting impact on the arts and creativity in our city, shaping the vibrant cultural landscape we continue to build upon today. Their legacy will inspire and guide future generations of artists, creatives and community members.

Special Thanks

We extend special thanks to Bobby LeFebre for his work conducting over 100 interviews with arts and culture representatives across the sector. His thoughtful and inclusive approach in honoring these voices brought forward integral insights and key points that have significantly shaped this plan. Bobby's dedication to ensuring diverse perspectives were heard and valued has been invaluable to the process.

Denver Arts & Venues

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Denver Commission on Cultural Affairs (as of April 2025)

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Joshua Margolin

Damon McLeese

Alexis Moore

Tran Nguyen-Wills

David Olguín

Viniyanka Prasad

Kevin Smith

Nikki Swarn

Alisha Sweeney

Alicia “Bruce” Trujillo

Partners

Civic Arts

Corona Insights

GFM|CenterTable

Thank you to other community members who shared their voices to inform and guide the creative and cultural future of Denver.

Sameed Afghani	Betty Hart	Janice Sinden
Aisha Ahmad-Post	Christoph Heinrich	CeCe Smith
Lonnie MF Allen	Leah Horn	Suzi Q. Smith
Dr. Patricia Baca	Keandra Hunt	George Sparks
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Steve Chavez	Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand	Bert Vescolani
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Chloé Duplessis	Alfonso Meraza Prudente	Evan Weissman
Cal Duran	Renee Millard-Chacon	Suzanne Yoe
Joshua Emerson	David Moke	Chris Zacher
Thomas “Detour” Evans	Adrian H. Molina	<i>*Passed away in 2021</i>
Javier Flores	Sara Moore	<i>**Passed away in 2025</i>
Councilman Kevin Flynn	Chris Nelson	
Ryan Foo	Adri Norris	
Juan Fuentes	Yolanda Ortega	
JC Futrell	Courtney Ozaki	
Raquel Garcia	Alfredo Reyes	
Tony Garcia	Malik Robinson	
Grace “SwaHuux” Gillette	Karen Rojas Meza	
Quintin Gonzalez	José Rosales	
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Norman Harris	Danielle SeeWalker	

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