

THE STAGE THEY SET

THE
FUTURE
WE
SHAPE

2024-2025 Season Highlights



W H
A R T
O N

The 2024-2025 season brought ...

206,500 *patrons*
to Wharton Center and

2,088 *donors*
generously supporting,

224 *performances*
and more than

30,000+ *learners*
engaged in Wharton
Center education
programs.

***"Whether it's a sold-out
Broadway show, a school
matinee or a concert,
Wharton Center creates
moments where strangers
come together and leave
forever changed, and that's
exactly the legacy the
Whartons hoped to inspire."***

– Eric Olmscheid, Executive Director

W H
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O N

A MOMENT OF REFLECTION

Every great performance begins with a company of artists—both those in the spotlight and behind the scenes. The magic of Wharton Center is a shining example of a performance brought to life by a passionate team of believers—the artists who grace our stage, the staff who work tirelessly to bring our programs to life, the educators who bring creativity into our classrooms, the students who seek out the arts for its endless possibilities, and, most importantly, you—our supporters.

Every time the curtain rises, someone in the audience is experiencing something that will stay with them forever: a moment of wonder, a shift in perspective, a spark of belonging. That's why we do what we do. These unforgettable experiences are a direct reflection of the innovative, dedicated community that surrounds Wharton Center. Thank you for believing in the power of the arts and for helping us connect people to life-changing moments.

As we reflect on the past year, we also celebrate the lasting legacy and honor the recent passing of two extraordinary trailblazers: Dr. Clifton and Dolores Wharton. Their advocacy and belief in the arts as a force for unity laid the foundation for something far greater than the amazing performances audiences see on stage. It's the work behind the curtain—educational programs, community engagement and a deep commitment to lifelong learning—that truly brings their vision to life. The stage they set through their values, leadership and unwavering belief in the arts continues to shape the future we are creating together.

Every story we tell, every program we host and every patron we engage is a continuation of their vision. In the following pages, you'll find highlights from the past year—a reflection of that enduring legacy and Dr. and Mrs. Wharton's belief that the arts are for everyone.

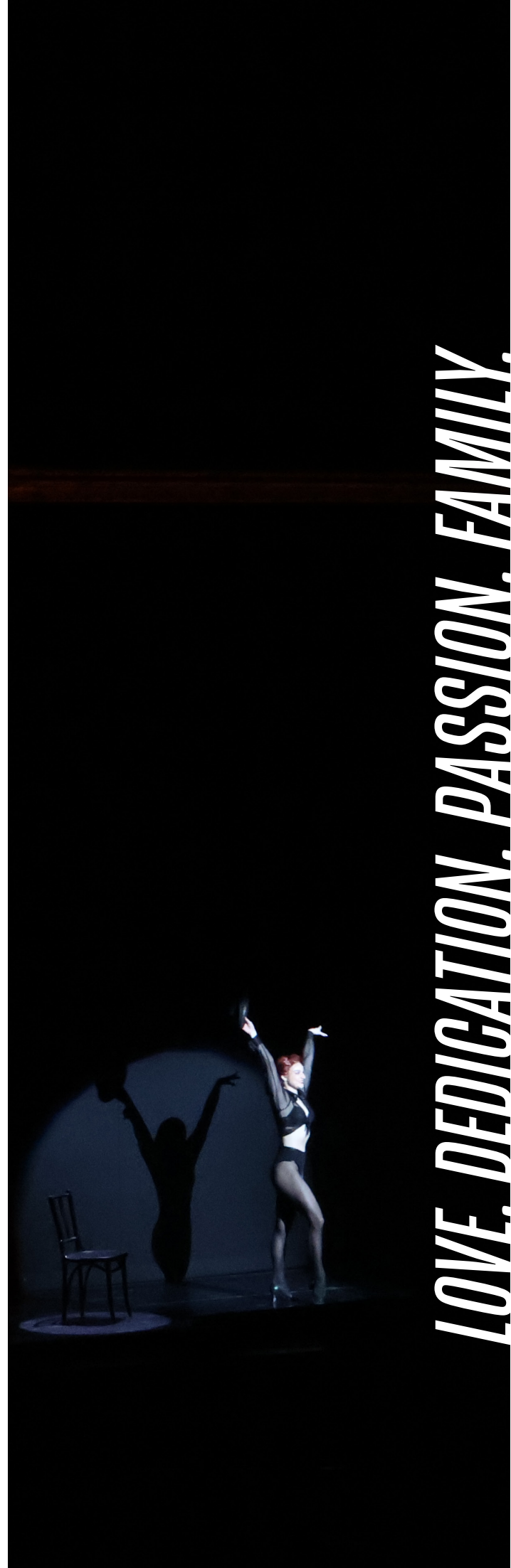
Thank you for standing with us in this belief and for your continued support.

With deepest gratitude,



Eric Olmscheid
Executive Director
Wharton Center for Performing Arts





LOVE. DEDICATION. PASSION. FAMILY.

THE ARTS.

To experience the arts at Wharton Center for Performing Arts is to understand its namesakes, Dr. Clifton R. Wharton Jr. and Mrs. Dolores D. Wharton, whom we honor for their vision of blending the arts with human connection and for making a lasting difference in our lives and community.

This past year, we said goodbye to Dr. Wharton and Mrs. Wharton. Though their passing marks the end of an extraordinary chapter, their legacy will live on through our stages, in our programs and in the hearts of everyone who experiences the power of the arts through Wharton Center.

"Music and the arts bring people together," says Dr. Bonnie Knuston, Wharton Center donor and longtime advisory council member. "Clifton saw the future before anyone saw it. Vision, passion and excitement oozed from both him and Dolores."

When Dr. Wharton became the 14th president of Michigan State University—and the first Black president of a major U.S. public research university—he brought a bold and compassionate vision for what a university could be. Alongside him stood Dolores Wharton, a visionary in her own right, with a deep background in the arts and a passion for equity and public service.

They believed the arts were essential to learning, growing, and inspiring oneself and others. They envisioned a performing arts center that would not only host world-class performances but also build community and elevate MSU's role as a cultural leader. The MSU Auditorium was not able to meet the needs of future performing arts events and the Whartons believed the university and its people deserved more.



Whartons in front of Cowles House

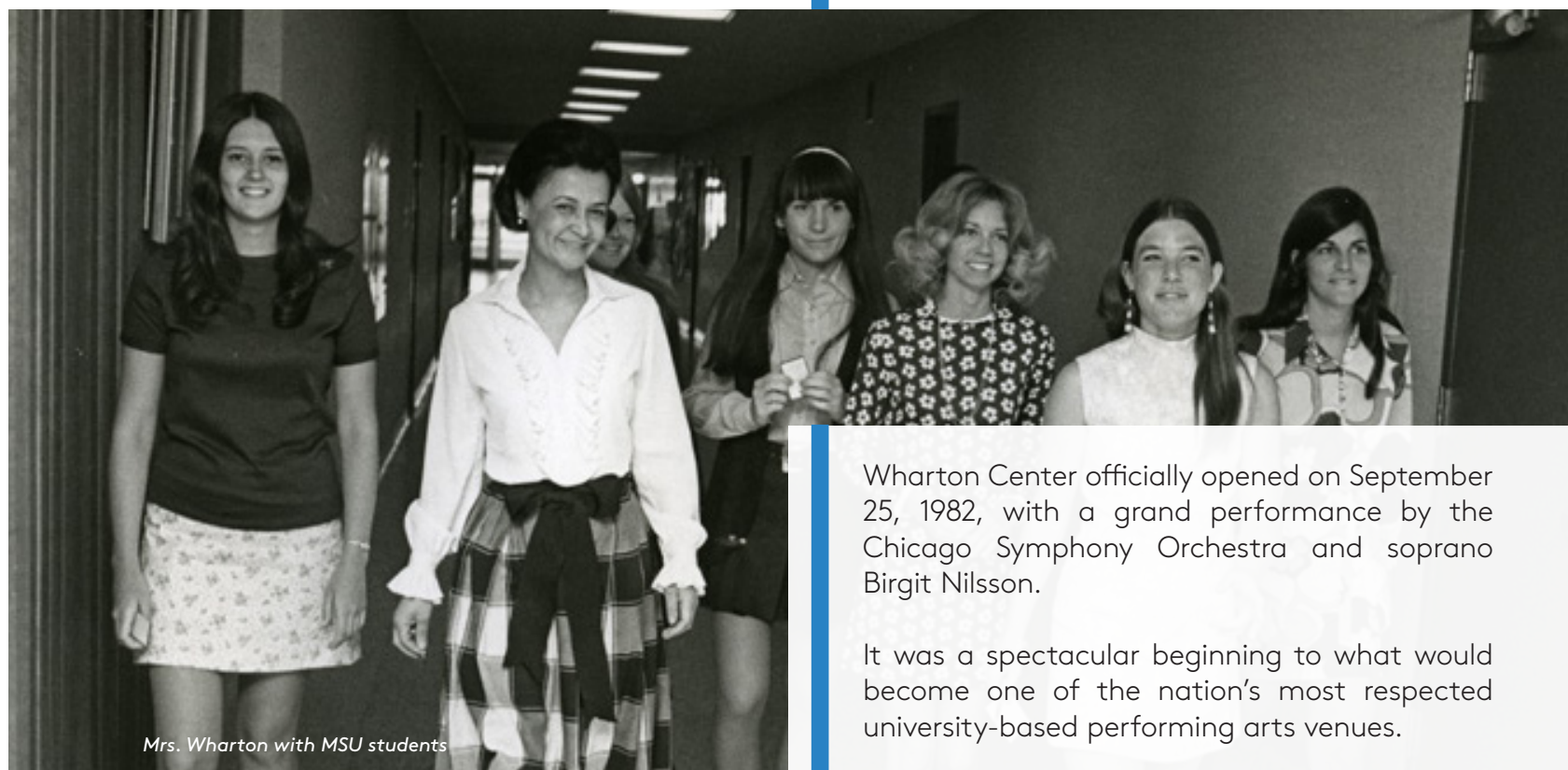
1970s

Dr. Clifton R. Wharton Jr. becomes 14th president of MSU (1970).

The Whartons began articulating the need for a new performing arts center at MSU.

MSU launches its first capital campaign under Dr. Wharton's leadership, raising over \$17M, some of which helped fund the new center.

With this idea as their foundation, they led the charge for a new performing arts center. Dr. Wharton initiated MSU's first major capital campaign, while Mrs. Wharton helped shape the vision with her experience in the arts and commitment to public engagement. Their leadership helped raise more than \$17 million to expand academic offerings and cultural experiences at the university. In 1980, two years after his presidency concluded, the MSU Board of Trustees unanimously voted to name the new performing arts center in their honor.



Mrs. Wharton with MSU students

Wharton Center officially opened on September 25, 1982, with a grand performance by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and soprano Birgit Nilsson.

It was a spectacular beginning to what would become one of the nation's most respected university-based performing arts venues.

1980s

MSU Board of Trustees votes to name new performing arts center after the Whartons.

Wharton Center for Performing Arts opens (Sept. 25, 1982).

1990s

Wharton Center becomes nationally known as a host for major touring shows—such as the first national tour of *Phantom of the Opera*—classical music, dance, lectures and student performances.

When Eric Olmscheid stepped into his role as executive director of Wharton Center in June of 2022, one of his most memorable experiences was meeting Dr. and Mrs. Wharton at their home in New York City that August—and being able to witness Mrs. Wharton’s joy as she danced when greeting him whenever they spent time together.

“From the very first moment, Mrs. Wharton’s love for the arts was undeniable,” he recalls.

The Whartons shared the guiding principles behind the creation of the center: it was always meant to be a home for the world’s best artists and a place where the arts could bring the community together.

***“Everything we do,”
Olmscheid remembers
Mrs. Wharton emphasizing,
“from the artists on our
stages to the education
programs we build, should
provide the utmost quality
experiences and use the arts
to strengthen community.”***

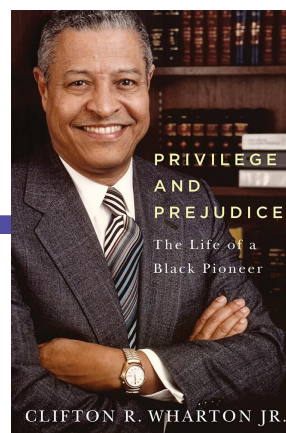


Even decades after their tenure at MSU, the Whartons remained deeply invested in the center that bears their name. They considered Wharton Center to be a crowning achievement of their lives, a place that reflects their vision for a community united through the transformative power of the arts.

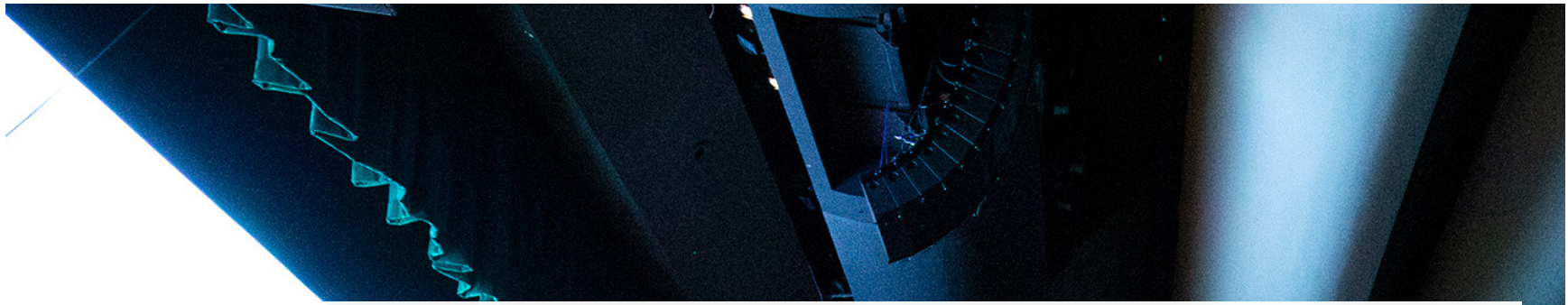
2000s

Dr. Wharton returns to MSU for special recognition of his leadership and to celebrate the center’s growth.

In 2015, MSU Press publishes Dr. Wharton’s memoir, “Privilege and Prejudice: The Life of a Black Pioneer”.



Wharton Center celebrates its 40th anniversary in 2022.



Wharton Center's mission today is a direct reflection of the values the Whartons instilled from the start. Our work honors their belief that the arts can and should be a catalyst for education and community engagement. Whether through Insight Previews that connect audiences with artists, Sensory-Friendly Performances designed for accessibility, or in-school programs that bring live theatre to young learners, their legacy remains vibrant and alive.

Dolores Wharton's commitment to amplifying diverse voices in the arts is embedded in our ongoing work. Dr. Wharton's belief in the university's role as a community anchor continues to inspire our partnerships across Michigan and beyond.

The Dr. Clifton and Dolores Wharton Legacy Fund helps sustain this mission, supporting long-term programming, education initiatives and artist residencies that make Wharton Center a space where creativity thrives.

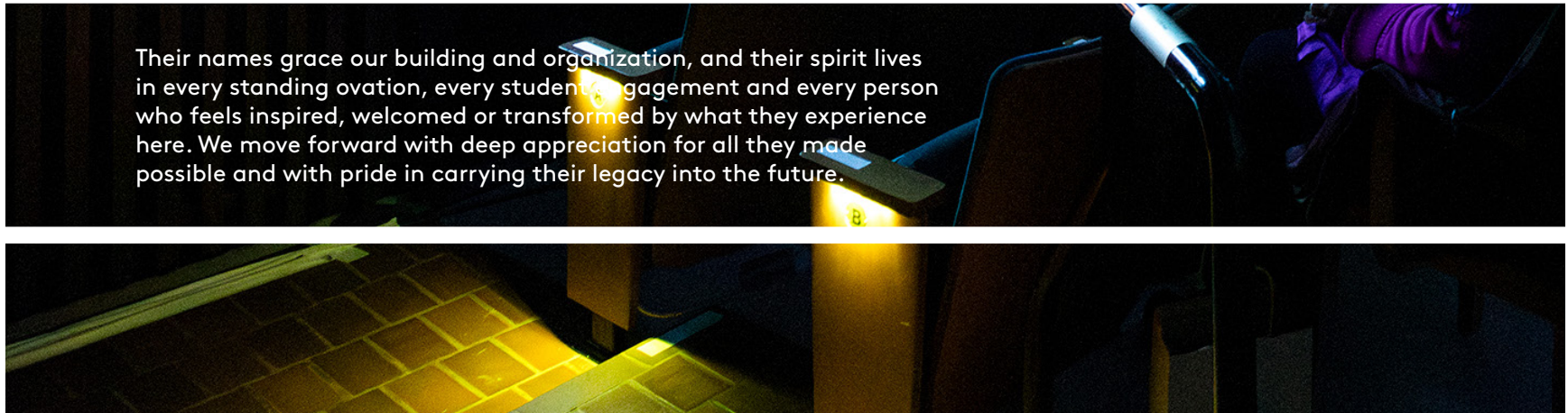
The best way to honor the Whartons' legacy is to keep building on it. As we move into the future, we remain committed to expanding our educational impact, strengthening community partnerships, and offering a platform for artists who reflect the full spectrum of human experience.

Dr. Clifton and Dolores Wharton transformed MSU not only through their leadership but also by affirming that the arts belong to everyone. Their dedication to access, excellence and meaningful connection continues to shape every corner of Wharton Center today.

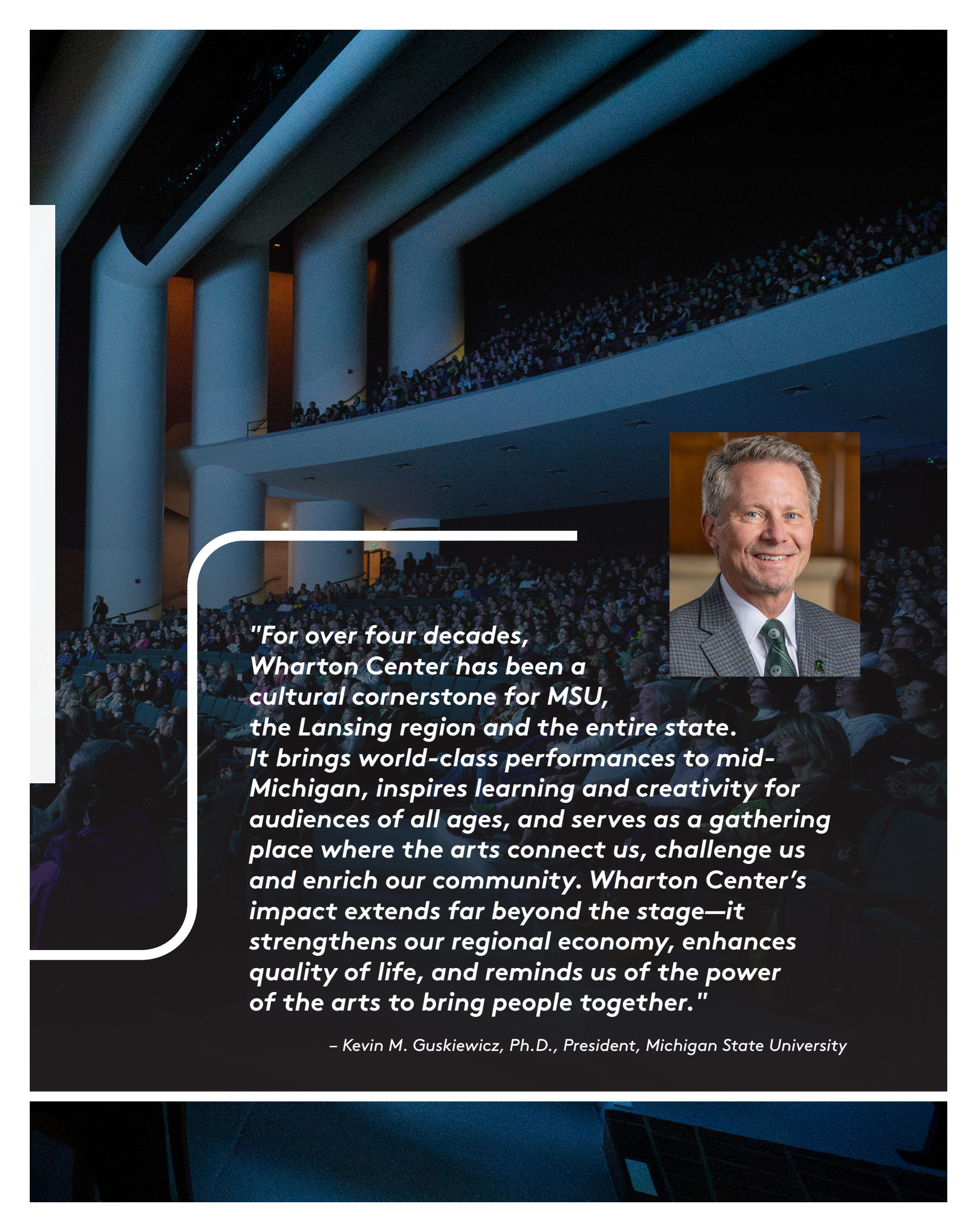
Their names grace our building, and their spirit lives in every standing ovation, every student engagement and every person who feels inspired, welcomed or transformed by what they experience here. We move forward with deep appreciation for all they made possible and with pride in carrying their legacy into the future.



2025



Their names grace our building and organization, and their spirit lives in every standing ovation, every student engagement and every person who feels inspired, welcomed or transformed by what they experience here. We move forward with deep appreciation for all they made possible and with pride in carrying their legacy into the future.



"For over four decades, Wharton Center has been a cultural cornerstone for MSU, the Lansing region and the entire state. It brings world-class performances to mid-Michigan, inspires learning and creativity for audiences of all ages, and serves as a gathering place where the arts connect us, challenge us and enrich our community. Wharton Center's impact extends far beyond the stage—it strengthens our regional economy, enhances quality of life, and reminds us of the power of the arts to bring people together."

– Kevin M. Guskiewicz, Ph.D., President, Michigan State University



'FULL-CIRCLE MOMENT':

Local alumni return to Wharton Center stage.

"Invest in your education. Take voice lessons, take acting classes, and do as much as you can to train, learn and grow as a performer."

Nick Rehberger, a 2009 graduate of Haslett High School, returned as Inspector Javert in *Les Misérables* and stopped by his alma mater to speak with students.

A DECADE OF MAGIC:

Celebrating 10 years of stage debuts with Disney Musicals in Schools

Disney musicals have been a mainstay on Broadway for decades, but their magic doesn't stop in New York City. 2025 marks the 10-year anniversary of Wharton Center partnering with *Disney Theatrical* to offer *Disney Musicals in Schools*, an after school theatre program, to introduce hundreds of students to musical theatre through familiar stories, beloved characters, and the transformative experience of bringing a production to life onstage.

The *Disney Musicals in Schools* program was created to provide students in under-resourced schools access to the arts. As the only *Disney Musicals in Schools* partner in Michigan, Wharton Center has teamed up with over 25 schools to reach more than 3,500 elementary school performers since the program started in 2015, helping connect students, educators and communities through the power of theatre.

"Every year we hear stories about students who struggle in school who are completely changed by the DMIS program," says Kelly Stuitable-Clark, Senior Education Program Manager at Wharton Center. "Attendance rates increase, discipline issues lessen, and in-class engagement grows. Some students start the program disengaged, but by the end, they're shining on stage and bringing that newfound confidence back to the classroom."

Each year, up to six schools are selected to receive free performance rights, scripts and music for a 30-minute version of a Disney musical. This year, those shows included *Aladdin KIDS* and *Finding Nemo KIDS*. Students and their teachers worked closely with two of Wharton Center's trained teaching artists over a 17-week residency where they focused not only on putting on a stellar performance, but developing their skills in creativity, problem-solving, discipline and self-confidence.



To showcase what they've learned, each school is invited to Wharton Center to perform one number from its production on the Cobb Great Hall stage. Showcasing the hard work of the students with their family, friends and teachers is one of the best parts of the program, according to Laura Showers, a second-grade teacher at North Aurelius Elementary.



"My fondest memory was watching the final performance of *Aladdin* from the front row," says Showers. "The students put on a flawless performance, which concluded with laughter and lots of hugs to celebrate. **We were able to build a community of thespians, teach our students confidence and camaraderie, and instill a love of the performing arts** into a group of rural students who may not have been able to experience the theatre without this program."

As Wharton Center celebrates a decade of *Disney Musicals in Schools*, the heart of the program remains the same: build life skills in creativity, collaboration, communication, and self-confidence through the arts.. By opening the door to the theatre for students who might not otherwise step into a performing arts venue (let alone onstage), *Disney Musicals in Schools* continues to spark imagination and transform lives. With each song sung, costume worn and performance shared, these young casts remind us why access to the arts matters and every child deserves the center stage.

CASTING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS:

A behind-the-scenes look at Wharton Center internships

SETTING: A bustling performing arts center in the middle of campus. Posters of Broadway shows and artists line the walls. Footsteps echo in the lobby as students—some still chatting about their latest class project—hurry between meetings and backstage doors. In the administrative offices, one student works on mailing thank you cards, while another is learning about the marketing and promotion plan for an upcoming show. Outside, the campus hums with movement, but inside, something else is happening. The stage is not just being set for the next performance, but for the next generation.

Internships at Wharton Center continue to be an integral part of the vibrant culture, shaping Wharton's story for the better. Every year, eight to 10 interns—and 200+ student employees—gain industry-specific experience in areas like marketing, event planning, education and backstage operations. But their growth doesn't stop there, because students leave Wharton Center with something even more special: an example of what happens when you work collaboratively to build a strong community through passion and human connection.



Jordan Ivezaj during her internship at Disney Theatrical Group after graduation and her time at Wharton Center

"Through Wharton Center internships, students acquire transformative and life-changing benefits—building self-confidence, professional skills, problem solving abilities and motivation, while extending their academic knowledge into the realities of the performing arts' workplace."

– Dawn Pysarchik, Wharton Center Supporter

Currently, Wharton Center has six endowed internships, generously funded by donors who are passionate about providing real-world, hands-on learning experiences. These internships are designed to do more than fill a resume: they prepare the next generation of the workforce by fostering creativity, accountability and problem-solving skills. Interns don't just assist: they lead projects, make decisions and walk away with tangible accomplishments that mirror their future full-time roles.

Among the endowed positions is the Trent Pysarchik Endowed Internship in the Performing Arts, conceptualized by the Pysarchik family in honor of their son, an MSU student who passed away before he could fully apply the multifaceted benefits he gained through his internship experiences as a student. In his memory, the endowed internship ensures that other students can experience the life-changing opportunities internships provide—from building self-confidence to developing professional skills and robust career networks. For many students, these experiences are invaluable in launching meaningful, purpose-driven careers.

"During my internship, I was supporting marketing campaigns, including collaborations with advertising agencies to create radio, print, TV and digital content," says Jordan Ivezaj, a former marketing intern and 2025 MSU graduate in mediated communication. "The experience was the first door that opened for me into the world of arts administration. The Wharton team surrounded me with guidance, kindness and encouragement, which left a lasting impact I will carry throughout my career." After graduating, Jordan completed an internship with the Disney Theatrical Group in NYC and this fall secured a full-time position with a major Broadway booking agency.

These experiences—and the confidence they build—stay with students long after graduation. Whether they are pursuing a career in the arts, fundraising, customer service or beyond, Wharton Center provides practical skills to help them succeed.

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM:

Bringing curriculum to life through the Act One School Series

What does it look like when learning comes out of the classroom and into the spotlight? Each year at Wharton Center, thousands of local students are eager to find out!

The *Act One School Series* invites young audiences from kindergarten to 12th grade to experience professional productions that enrich and expand their classroom learning experiences. During the 2024-2025 season, over 18,000 students from more than 75 mid-Michigan schools attended performances for just \$1 per ticket, ensuring cost is never a barrier to participation.

Whether students were laughing, learning or seeing themselves reflected on stage, every performance was an opportunity to make the arts accessible and unforgettable.

"Seeing the Mariachi performance fit perfectly with what the students are currently studying in our classroom."

We are reading, *Mexikid*, a graphic novel supported by an MSU grant to teach children about other cultures through graphic novels and this book highlights Mariachi bands in Mexican culture. They were so excited to experience this music live," said an Okemos Public Montessori Teacher.





*Three 2025 graduating interns:
Jordan Ivezaj (BA in Mediated Communication),
Jenna Hemmes (BA in Marketing),
and Maria Bonucchi (BA in Public Relations)*

At the same time, students are leaving a lasting impact on Wharton Center and its team. Interns play an essential role in keeping the organization innovative and future-focused. Their perspectives help Wharton Center stay connected to the pulse of MSU's student body and the broader campus community.

"When new interns come in, it allows us to reflect on how we do things," says Eric Olmscheid, Wharton Center's Executive Director. "Most importantly, it's an opportunity for us to rearticulate who we are, what we believe in, and ensure we are living our values every day."

That connection to campus is not just symbolic. Student workers in front-of-house roles display their majors on their name tags—a subtle but powerful way to spark conversations with audience members and share their diverse academic backgrounds.

Many of these students are not majoring in the arts. In fact, in 2024-2025, Wharton Center had over 200 student employees representing 90 majors across 13 colleges at MSU. Psychology, neuroscience, human biology and music are among the most popular majors. Their Wharton experience helps them develop transferable skills they will use in careers across industries.

For students, it's more than a job. It's a chance to discover their passions, connect their education to real experiences and shape their future. For the Wharton Center team, it's a way to stay connected to the organization's roots in higher education while investing in the next generation of innovators.

When students are open and eager to learn as much as they can, it creates a space for future leaders to grow. Internships at Wharton Center are a powerful reminder that the future of the arts—and the workforce—is already here. And it's expanding and thriving on MSU's campus.

LOCAL TEACHING ARTIST BUILDS CLASSROOM AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

**Meet Liz Wylegala: Visual arts instructor,
Arts in Classrooms program**

Through Wharton Center's *Arts in Classrooms* program, professional teaching artists team up with local educators to enhance classroom learning through artistic expression. As the visual arts instructor, Liz Wylegala helps students develop their artistic voice through a variety of media, including painting, drawing and 3-D sculptures.

During a recent program at Ingham Academy, Wylegala and students worked together to bring the story of *Hamilton* to life through visual art. Students spent five weeks creating collages that told personal stories, while weaving in quotes from the Tony Award®-winning musical. The art was even featured on display at Wharton Center during *Hamilton*'s tour stop!

Zebras and tigers and hyenas, oh my!

Characters from *Life of Pi* came to life in a visual arts workshop with the Refugee Development Center (RDC) led by Liz Wylegala. Over 50 students used cardboard to build masks based on the zebra, tiger and hyena characters from the show. Once finished, the painted masks were displayed in Wharton Center's lobby during the run of *Life of Pi*. RDC participants were then invited to attend the Saturday matinee, see their masks on display, and enjoy the show's dynamic visuals.



Student created artwork inspired by lyrics of *Hamilton*

"All our students at the center share the commonality of being displayed from their home country. Because art can be a tool for processing trauma, projects like these help our students through the transition to a new country and new schools. Visiting Wharton Center provides a chance to see the good in their community."

– Staff member, Refugee Development Center



Teaching artist Liz Wylegala working with participants from the Refugee Development Center on animal masks inspired by *Life of Pi*

WHARTON CENTER FOR PERFORMING ARTS CIRCLE DONORS

As a nonprofit organization, Wharton Center relies on the support of generous individuals and community partners. Funds support the artists on our stages, provide meaningful education programs, and maintain our state-of-the-art facility. **Every gift matters.**

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MSU Federal Credit Union
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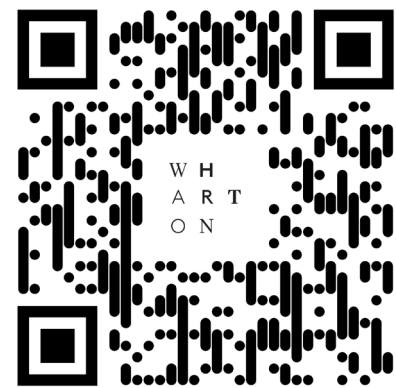
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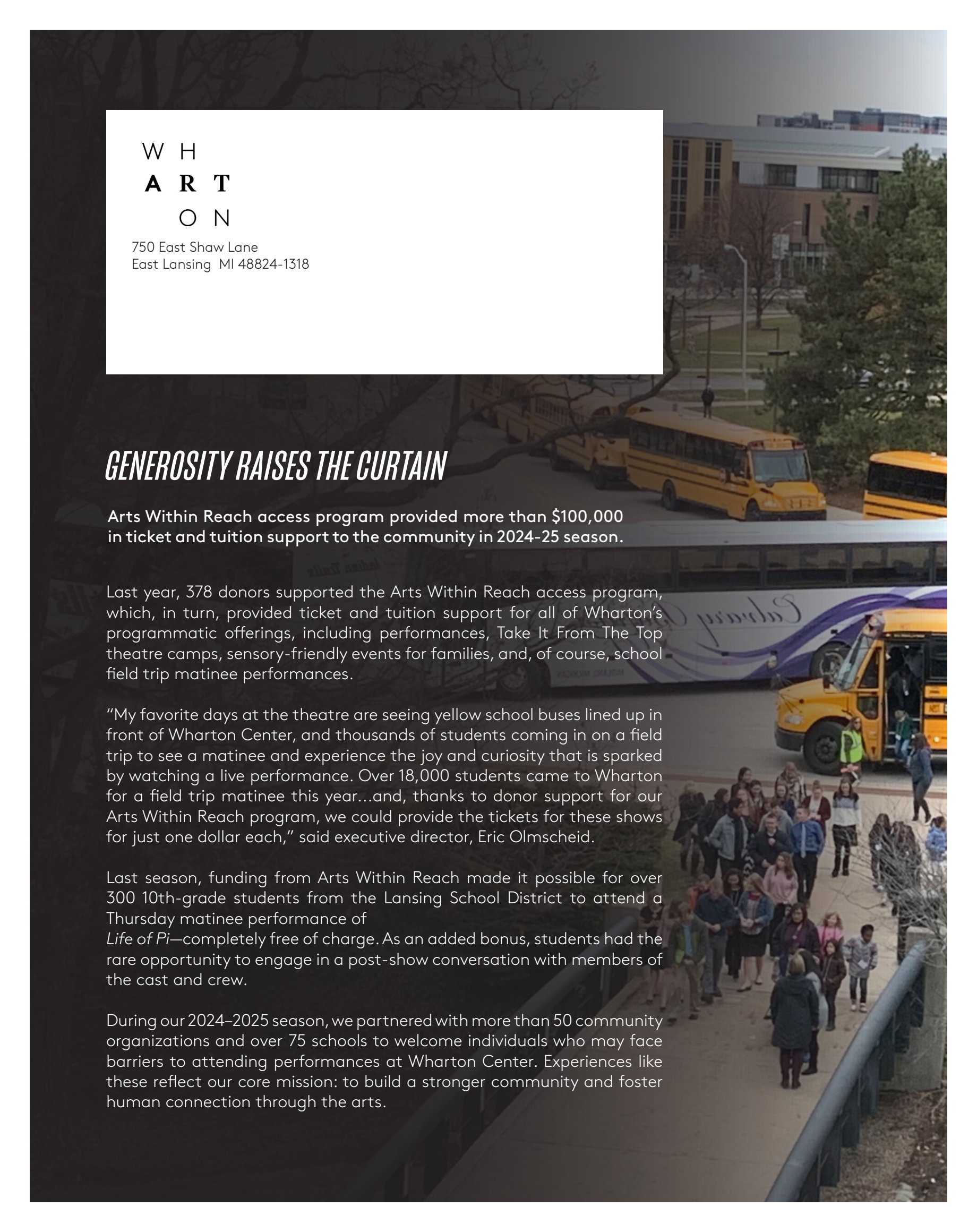
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The background of the entire page is a photograph of the Wharton Center campus. In the upper right, a large brick building with many windows is visible. Below it, several yellow school buses are parked in a lot. In the foreground, a large group of students, mostly young women, are walking along a paved path. The overall scene is a typical school day at a university campus.

W H A R T O N

750 East Shaw Lane
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GENEROSITY RAISES THE CURTAIN

Arts Within Reach access program provided more than \$100,000 in ticket and tuition support to the community in 2024-25 season.

Last year, 378 donors supported the Arts Within Reach access program, which, in turn, provided ticket and tuition support for all of Wharton's programmatic offerings, including performances, Take It From The Top theatre camps, sensory-friendly events for families, and, of course, school field trip matinee performances.

"My favorite days at the theatre are seeing yellow school buses lined up in front of Wharton Center, and thousands of students coming in on a field trip to see a matinee and experience the joy and curiosity that is sparked by watching a live performance. Over 18,000 students came to Wharton for a field trip matinee this year...and, thanks to donor support for our Arts Within Reach program, we could provide the tickets for these shows for just one dollar each," said executive director, Eric Olmscheid.

Last season, funding from Arts Within Reach made it possible for over 300 10th-grade students from the Lansing School District to attend a Thursday matinee performance of *Life of Pi*—completely free of charge. As an added bonus, students had the rare opportunity to engage in a post-show conversation with members of the cast and crew.

During our 2024–2025 season, we partnered with more than 50 community organizations and over 75 schools to welcome individuals who may face barriers to attending performances at Wharton Center. Experiences like these reflect our core mission: to build a stronger community and foster human connection through the arts.