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For Immediate Release: March 26, 2025

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VAPA Foundation Wins Inaugural Prebys Sparx Award, Bringing Transformative Arts Programming to San Diego Youth

\$1M Prize provides critical mental health support through a new Expressive Arts curriculum in schools

San Diego, CA – The VAPA (Visual and Performing Arts) Foundation has been awarded a \$1M grant by Prebys Foundation to support student well-being through the arts. The funding will support the VAPA Foundation’s groundbreaking new concept that connects thousands of students with impactful arts programs to improve youth mental health and well-being in school. In partnership with the Expressive Arts Institute and San Diego Unified School District, The VAPA Foundation will bring in-classroom arts programs to 25 schools with limited arts offerings, impacting over 4,700 students across 135 classrooms. The VAPA Foundation is a catalyst organization that facilitates bringing arts programs to schools through partnerships with teaching artists and community arts organizations. Their signature program, Arts Access, is modeled after other successful arts education programs in cities like Miami, Chicago, and Boston.

The initiative redefines mental health support in schools, creating a scalable curriculum for arts-based social-emotional learning (SEL). Through the Expressive Arts Institute’s 60-hour certificated training, teaching artists are equipped with evidence-based, trauma-informed practices that blend visual art, music, movement, drama, and writing into dynamic social-emotional learning experiences in the classroom.

The VAPA Foundation was selected as the winner of the inaugural Prebys Sparx, a challenge launched by Prebys Foundation to support innovative arts, culture, and nature programs that empower and uplift San Diego’s youth.

“The VAPA Foundation is deeply honored to receive the Prebys Sparx Challenge award. This investment not only expands access to arts education but also empowers teaching artists and arts organizations with the tools to create meaningful, lasting change,” said Katelyn Woodside, Executive Director of the VAPA Foundation. “By strengthening the connection between the arts and mental health, we hope this initiative becomes a model for how creative expression can shape healthier, more resilient communities for years to come.”

Comprehensive studies by the World Health Organization have consistently shown that engaging in the arts improves mental health, and Expressive Arts offers an integrative arts curriculum designed to cultivate self-awareness, self-reflection, and empathy. By actively engaging the senses and imagination, this curriculum facilitates a deeper understanding and connection to oneself and others. This accessible approach empowers students to effectively navigate challenges, build resilience, and foster sustained emotional well-being.

“When we launched Prebys Sparx, our goal was to inspire bold thinking to help young people find hope and well-being through the creative power of the arts,” said Grant Oliphant, CEO of Prebys Foundation. “We were stunned by how many outstanding proposals came our way, but The VAPA Foundation stood out for how it connects artists and teachers with thousands of young people to provide new tools for self-discovery and self-expression.”

Honorable Mentions: Four nonprofit organizations were chosen to receive \$25,000 in support of their innovative proposals for arts, culture, and nature-based programs:

- **A Reason to Survive (ARTS):** Community ARTS is a creative youth development program that co-creates accessible pathways to expressive art + nature experiences and practices, for young people in National City and the wider South Bay.
- **Coastal Roots Farm:** The Seed to Table Program, a partnership between the Red Earth Movement and Coastal Roots Farm, addresses mental health disparities among Indigenous youth by reconnecting them to ancestral food traditions, and nature.
- **United Women of East Africa Support Team (UWEAST):** Roots of Resilience (RoR) addresses mental and behavioral health disparities among ethnically and culturally diverse immigrant, refugee, and first-generation youth in San Diego.
- **Youth Creating Change:** By integrating mental health curriculum into film and art contests, this programming places youth at the center of the solution to create safe places where young people feel seen, heard, connected, and supported in reaching out for help.

About Prebys Foundation

Prebys Foundation is the largest independent private foundation in San Diego County, a unique tri-national area encompassing communities from San Diego, Tijuana, and the Kumeyaay Nation. The foundation works to create an inclusive, equitable, and dynamic future for all San Diegans. Prebys advances excellence and shared opportunity through investments in groundbreaking institutions, ideas, and people to ensure more people in the region are financially secure, healthy, empowered, and connected.

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