

Holding Space for Community and Belonging

Founded in 2013, Vancouver Youth Choir (VYC), which is made up of over 375 members and 7 ensembles, offers opportunities for young people at all levels in their musical development to sing together. One of their programs, VYC Kindred is an annual 6-week long program for newcomers to Canada to gather and sing indigenous music. Chorus America funding in 2022-2023 helped VYC expand their program to add an additional 6-week Kindred program, six intergenerational VYC family workshops, two community workshops, and provide food and transportation to all participants in the Kindred program, to develop cultural bonds.

Led by First Nations musicians Deanna Gestrin and Russell Wallace, VYC Kindred offers an opportunity to newcomers of any level of musical experience and English language skills to find a place of community and learn Indigenous music and culture. People are encouraged to come as they are able and bring friends and family members to join as well. The welcoming environment resulted in a much larger gathering than VYC expected. This year, in order to remove barriers to participation, VYC provided participants with food at each session that they could either mingle with others and eat at the session or take home with them. All participants also



received a transit stipend that they could use to get to and from the sessions.

Deanna's intention for this program was to put aside the performance aspect of singing together and instead just be with one another in community as they sang Indigenous music and learned about each other's cultures. Deanna said "I just hope that the participants have an experience of connection, and that they're fed in some way that they need. And I don't mean the falafels that we send them home with, but I mean, that they're nourished by the program in some way."



Students learn singing and drumming at VYC's Kindred program.

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—Deanna Gestrin, Program Lead, VYC Kindred