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CLOSER LOOK — TDF

## Deeksha Gaur's first 100 days leading TDF

The new executive director of the audience-facing nonprofit offers her initial assessment of where TDF is and its next steps in expanding audiences for Broadway and beyond.

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Deeksha Gaur (Credit: Jacquelyne Pierson)

Deeksha Gaur assumed the role of [TDF's executive director](#) on Aug. 7, 2023. Gaur officially marked 100 days with the organization on Nov. 15 and spoke to Broadway News about her progress on Nov. 20.

Established in 1968 as the Theatre Development Fund, [TDF](#) works to expand audiences for the live performing arts in New York and around the United States. Through discount tickets (TDF [membership](#) and the [TKTS](#) booth), education programs (the [Wendy Wasserstein Project](#) and [Introduction to Theatre](#) program), community engagement ([Create New York](#) and other [partnership](#) initiatives) and accessibility services ([sensory-friendly performances](#), [open-captioning and audio description](#)), TDF works to eliminate barriers to engaging with the arts, including Broadway.

TDF supports more than 1,000 plays and musicals and has returned more than \$2 billion in revenue to Broadway, Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway productions.

The good news for Gaur is that she has walked into a strong organization where she has, as she called it, the “luxury” of dreaming about its future. “The invitation [to the staff] was: Where could we go now? Where could we go in the future?” Gaur said.

She embarked on a listening tour, in which she met with every member of TDF's 65-person staff. “What I learned is there's a great deal of love for the organization,” she said. “A nonprofit's mission really works when every single stakeholder starts their conversation with them telling you how much they believe in the mission.”

After individual meetings, Gaur convened group work sessions in which every person that touched a particular program met to break down the current operation of an initiative. What resulted were brainstorming sessions for small, immediate changes. “You get to try a few things so that when you get to the [full] ‘doing’ phase, you already have some data points,” Gaur said of the approach. “The focus is really on learning as quickly as possible so we can move into action.”

Here, Gaur shared more about how she measures TDF's success, how the nonprofit can help expand Broadway audiences and how Broadway can collaborate with the organization.

**What have you learned on this listening tour about where TDF is in the current moment, internally and within the larger ecosystem of theater?**  
**Deeksha Gaur:** TDF's got an extremely strong mission. It's got a

dedicated staff and board. So now we're thinking: What more can we do? How can we partner more fully [with other organizations]? The big thing I've been thinking about is viewing everything through the lens of impact. How do we maximize our impact? And the truth is no one can maximize the impact on their own. The fact that people are open and excited to partner is just fantastic. And the fact that they see TDF as a solid, independent organization that can support those goals is exciting.

We had our first autism-friendly performance with the [Radio City] Rockettes for 2,600 people. We are working with "How to Dance in Ohio." We started new partnerships with shows in different ways around our existing programming. The appetite to work with us feels positive, and I think we have an opportunity to truly celebrate the social impact of Broadway and the theater community at large. Because when shows work with us through our open-caption performances, our education programs and things like that, what they're really saying is: We're committing to growing our audience and growing the future audience.

**Tell me more about the idea of social impact.**

For example, through our Introduction to Theatre (ITT) program, we bring 10,000 high school students a year to the theater for free. We support that with eight classroom sessions (before and after), where the teacher and a teaching artist work together to prepare students for the experience and digest it after. What our students tell us is it gives them a voice. That's social impact.

**How are you thinking about the message of what TDF does to all of your potential constituents?**

That was actually in the narrative of the job description. What is the story of TDF? The purpose that I've started holding central is: when every New Yorker feels a sense of belonging in and ownership of the performing arts. Our goal is to build belonging and ownership with the communities of New York City. We do it writ large across all our programming. We think about community building. And it's the TDF methodology, which is actually surprisingly similar across all our programs, that leads to the impact we have. For us it's about belonging.

**Can you summarize that common methodology that applies across all of what TDF says?**

It's not just reducing barriers to access like the ticket price, which we do already. It is about making sure that when audiences show up at the theater, they feel welcome, they feel safe, they feel comfortable, and they can watch shows on their own terms.

**The TDF programs you mentioned are long-established. Are you looking to scale them now or examining ways to improve them?**

The former. Like with Introduction to Theatre (which serves 10,000 students for free), we have demand for 20,000. We have to figure out how to get there. But the interest is there. How we maximize our impact might look very different for different programs. The key is to make sure we're bringing the same level of thoughtfulness and collaboration and attention that we always have.

**At 100 days in, where are you in formulating a plan to do so?**

We're in the process of laying all the pieces out in the next month or two.

**You've mentioned a few specific communities that TDF serves. There are many people outside of those groups (not students, not veterans, not in need of sensory-friendly shows) who have not come to the theater. If the goal is the belonging of every New Yorker, how does TDF play a role in reaching them?**

It's something we're thinking about. TDF administers a database called Audience 360, which historically has done some ecosystem-wide research. Audience 360 is a database of performing arts organizations and Off-Broadway theaters. It's not comprehensive, but we're working on that because we're an independent third party.

There's so much opportunity there around advocacy, around research, around community-building among audiences who already have volunteered and put their hand up and said, "I want to participate [in attending live arts]" but maybe don't participate as frequently as they used to.

I've been thinking about TDF as the audience development arm for New York theater. Some theaters have a marketing department and an audience development department. Marketing is where you have a show and you sell tickets; audience development is that you use the show as a tool, where appropriate, to build future audiences. TDF is perfectly positioned to be future-looking.

There are a lot of players out there — the shows individually, the agencies, other organizations — trying to bring in new audiences, but most people who do it on a sort of marketing basis are looking to minimize the cost for acquisition. So they're going for the lowest-hanging fruit. [Audience development overall] is a big responsibility that TDF, not uniquely, but that TDF owns.

**I was first introduced to you as the co-founder of [Show-Score](#), which leveraged technology to democratize reviews (like a [Rotten Tomatoes](#)). How are you considering technology as a tool to assist in the TDF mission?**

I think about it deeply. Technology could be operational, it could be transformational from a mission point of view, it could be a marketing tool. It frankly is all of the above. What we do [at TDF] is a relationship job. It's a collaboration job. Especially when you're serving communities that are historically excluded, particularly when it comes to economics, there's a lot of trust-building, there's a lot of collaboration, there's a lot of active listening. And that is a primarily human interaction. Technology can help us. With our older adults community partnerships, we actually host virtual viewings and post-show conversations in Spanish and Mandarin and English. That's an example of where we're using technology to foster connection. But the bulk is: How can we use technology to support that [interpersonal] work?

It also adds a layer of equity to access to leadership. Anybody in the office who works at TDF can Slack me and get a response. And Audience 360 feels like an exciting use of technology.

**What are the challenges to achieving your mission? Where can TDF use support from outside people or organizations?** I don't think we ever achieve our mission, realistically. We move closer and closer, but it's not 'Okay, we're done now.' The way this gets done is through partnerships, through finding people who share your mission and your passion, or where frankly your incentives align.

The arts can actively lead the way to being one of the solutions to loneliness, improving school outcomes, building empathy and changing discourse. There's plenty of research around creative placemaking that

when you bring art out into the communities, it increases community pride and civic participation. To take it back to your question about narrative: Is this the story we're telling and is this the story we're investing in? TDF can tell the story [of the arts' valuable contributions] and work with our partner organizations to actually start to solve some of this stuff.

### **What are the logistics to accomplishing that?**

The next phase, starting in January, is to put it all down on paper and map it out and then see what we focus on next year and the year after that and determine the three-year plan.

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