



— 2024 —

# CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

— AWARDS —



**GREATER  
FORT WAYNE INC.**  
METRO CHAMBER ALLIANCE

**W** women's  
network



WOMEN'S NETWORK TITLE SPONSOR

JPMORGAN CHASE & CO.

2024  
CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE  
AWARDS



CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE PRESENTING SPONSOR



2024  
CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE  
AWARDS



CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE EVENT SPONSORS





## CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE EVENT SPONSORS

INDIANA**TECH**



PURDUE UNIVERSITY.  
**FORT WAYNE**

**Sweetwater®**







— 2024 —

# CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

— NONPROFIT FINALISTS —





## Gaby Aleman

Executive Director/Pastor,  
Principe de Paz Fort Wayne, Inc.

Gaby was nominated for her servant leadership and commitment to addressing critical welfare needs within Fort Wayne such as housing, clothing, medical care, and more. As a dedicated member of the Allen County Health Equity Coalition and Fort Wayne Women for Good, she actively contributes to initiatives aimed at women's equity and empowerment to foster a sense of belonging for all and celebration of our diverse community. Gaby also created a Facebook group devoted to supporting the Hispanic community, which has grown to a resource hub of nearly 25,000 members. Her actions serve as a beacon of inspiration, raising awareness of issues and amplifying voices of marginalized individuals, notably immigrants who often lack representation.





## Amy Binkley

Ministry Director - Urban Ministries,  
Youth for Christ of Northern Indiana

Amy was nominated for her mentorship of youth over the past three decades and notable impact in Fort Wayne's urban neighborhoods. Through her visionary leadership, Amy founded the RealTALK mentoring program that has reached over 1,000 young women – building consistency, trust, and relationships with caring adults and empowering individuals to obtain mental health services, meaningful employment, and higher education. Her collaborative spirit has enhanced partnerships with local school administrators, youth workers, and service providers to create a shared purpose of helping teens thrive. Through her own example of resilience and perseverance, Amy shows other women that obstacles can be overcome and barriers can be dismantled with unwavering determination and the support of others.





## Tomi Cardin

Founder & CEO,  
Redemption House

Tomi is a Champion of Change in our community who leads with unconditional love, grace, and passionate faith. Drawing from her own past struggles with addiction, she recognized the community's need for structured support for women re-entering society after incarceration. Her tireless efforts led to the establishment of Redemption House in 2012, providing a safe haven for women transitioning to sober living. Through her example, she instills hope in residents and extends support during their recovery journey. Her passion for empowering women and sharing her own story inspires others to overcome adversity and pursue positive change in their lives, even breaking generational cycles.





## Ewelina Connolly

Chief Executive Officer,  
Amani Family Services

Ewelina Connolly demonstrates exceptional leadership and commitment to the immigrant and refugee community in Allen County. After personally having a positive experience moving to Fort Wayne from Poland, she is dedicated to paying that support forward to other newcomers and creating a sense of belonging for all. Ewelina prioritizes collaboration and sharing of resources with organizations and adapts to serve the community's real-time needs. As a mentor, she empowers women, especially those from minority backgrounds, fostering a culture of solidarity and equitable opportunities. Ewelina's advocacy extends beyond her organization, amplifying the voices of immigrant and refugee women in public forums and community events to achieve their fullest potential.





## Vanessa Escobar

Fitness Instructor,  
Renaissance Pointe YMCA

Vanessa shines bright as a leader and inspiration for the Hispanic community of Fort Wayne. As a fitness instructor and cultural advocate, she uplifts and empowers women through her classes, artistic dance group, and local festivals. Vanessa's dedication to promoting an appreciation of one's heritage and health extends beyond just physical fitness. She fosters a sense of pride and unity among her students and residents, building confidence, compassion, and connectivity of total mind and body wellness. She is a courageous champion who has persevered, demonstrating how to succeed in a new country despite the language barrier and other challenges. Vanessa's positive energy and welcoming spirit make women of all ages feel accepted and a sense of belonging.





## Andrew Gritzmaker

President & CEO,  
YMCA of Greater Fort Wayne

Andrew has been a steadfast leader in our community for over a decade, serving on multiple boards and leading organizations like Mad Anthony's Children's Hope House and Habitat for Humanity of Greater Fort Wayne. His passion for helping others shines through his commitment to tackling challenges and making a positive impact. Andrew's leadership is marked by his ability to inspire teams, rally support, and set ambitious goals, as evidenced by his role in developing the YMCA's strategic plan. He actively supports women in leadership roles, inviting them onto his teams and advocating for their growth and development. Andrew's dedication to fostering an inclusive and supportive environment has made him a role model for female leaders, earning him the respect and admiration of his colleagues.





## Brittany Hall

President & CEO,  
Fort Wayne Philharmonic

Brittany's leadership at the Fort Wayne Philharmonic showcases her dedication to innovation and community engagement. Since becoming President and CEO, she has spearheaded initiatives that have revitalized the orchestra's offerings and boosted ticket revenue, setting a national benchmark. As the first woman in this role, she champions gender equality and mentors women both within the organization and beyond. Brittany's commitment to empowering women is evident in her Executive Team and Board Leadership, where she advocates for diversity and inclusion. Her passion for music and community service embodies a spirit of positive change, making her a role model for aspiring leaders of all ages.





## A. Diane Starks

CEO,  
Urban Beginnings Choice Federal  
Credit Union

Diane sets herself apart in the community by providing competitive financial services with a focus on increasing financial literacy and stability, particularly in underserved areas of Southeast Fort Wayne. As one of a few African American female CEOs managing a nationally regulated credit union, she inspires others, particularly women and minorities, to attain senior roles of responsibility and achieve their professional goals. Diane personally engages with members, offering tailored financial coaching and counseling to improve their financial well-being and access to non-predatory financial products. Her leadership has led to significant grant wins and loan distributions benefiting the community and positioning Urban Beginnings Choice as a vital resource for financial empowerment.





## Tisha Strasser

Founder and CEO,  
Bring It Push It Own It

Tisha embodies authenticity and dedicates herself wholeheartedly to empowering young women in the community. She serves as a role model and mentor to countless young women, sharing her personal stories of struggle to inspire inner strength and resilience. Tisha's commitment to empowerment extends to innovative programs, working with organizations like Pave the Path and Allen County Juvenile Center, aimed at promoting physical and mental awareness among young women. As a female entrepreneur, she demonstrates unwavering dedication to mentoring women from all backgrounds and advocating for the success of fellow nonprofit leaders in our community.





## Denita Washington

Executive Director,  
Girlz Rock

With a heart full of love and visionary leadership, Denita has ignited a movement that transforms lives across Fort Wayne. As Adams Township Trustee, Founder of Girlz Rock, and Community & Family Manager at FWCS, she is a source of inspiration and a catalyst for change. Denita's leadership is driven by her belief in the potential of every individual. She has empowered hundreds of at-risk girls and their mothers by providing programs that address physical and mental health awareness, financial literacy, and leadership skills. She has also organized events like the Get Lit for Leadership conference, where over 300 middle and high school girls get inspired by successful professionals. As Chairwoman of the Women's Fund Young Women & Girls Committee and dedicated member of countless other boards and committees, Denita advocates for the success and empowerment of women and girls in our city while leaving a legacy of impact.





## Donna Wray

Board President, Meeting Leader, &  
Outreach Speaker,  
The Mom of an Addict, Inc.

Following the tragic loss of her daughter to substance use disorder, Donna became a dedicated advocate for mental health and substance use awareness in our community. As a founding board member of The Mom of an Addict, she provides education and encouragement to families affected by substance use disorder and regularly speaks at events to raise awareness and end stigma. Donna serves as a role model and mentor to women by leading support group meetings with those who have experienced similar losses, demonstrating resilience and providing hope for those navigating grief. Her commitment to advocacy has made a significant impact in the community, inspiring others to find strength and healing in the face of adversity.





## Angie Zaegel

President/CEO,  
Neighborhood Health

Angie was nominated for her leadership and commitment to improving healthcare access in the community. Under her tenure at Neighborhood Health, the organization has expanded its service lines and facilities, including the addition of behavioral health, optometry, chiropractic care, and the development of a new clinic in southeast Fort Wayne. Angie's mentorship and advocacy for women are evident in her leadership of an organization where 86% of the workforce is comprised of women, with many in key leadership positions. She actively participates in community initiatives addressing maternal healthcare and infant mortality, exemplifying her dedication to women's health issues and serving as a role model for other female leaders in healthcare.





— 2 0 2 4 —

# CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

**CORPORATE FINALISTS**





## Whitney Bandemer

Principal,  
WB Consulting, LLC

Whitney has dedicated her career to investing in and growing our community's leaders and positively influencing workplace culture. Through her coaching sessions and speaker engagements, she meets women exactly where they are, seeks to understand, and challenges them in a safe and supportive environment. As a recovering attorney, she is an advocate for women's advancement in industries and positions historically dominated by men. She is an organizational architect, change agent, and connector who is passionate about nonprofit leadership and governance, promoting and supporting women, and ally for underserved populations including those living in poverty and people with disabilities.





## Lanitra Berry

Board President,  
Believe in a Dream

Lanitra demonstrates an unwavering commitment to empowering women in our community through her philanthropic service and civic engagement. As the board president of Believe in a Dream and secretary for the Pave the Path Youth Leadership Program, Lanitra has dedicated herself to nurturing the growth and success of young women, particularly those enrolled in Historical Black Colleges & Universities. Through her roles at Vera Bradley, Fort Wayne League of Women's Voters, and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, she has created inclusive environments where all individuals can thrive and make their voice heard. Lanitra is a super connector that builds authentic relationships, an advocate for women and minorities in the workplace, and mentor to our next generation of leaders.





## Britney Breidenstein

Principal Growth Strategist,  
upLinked

Britney's leadership shines through her active involvement in various boards and committees while advocating for diversity, equity, and inclusion in Allen County. She actively works to amplify the voices of marginalized groups, especially women and people of color. As a branding expert, Britney helps businesses refine their messaging and increase their impact, showcasing her commitment to building a stronger, more inclusive community. Serving as a mentor and role model for women, Britney shares her knowledge generously and empowers others to achieve their goals with courage and integrity. Britney strives to create spaces where everyone can thrive, both professionally and personally, and unlock their full potential.





## Michelle Gladieux

President,  
Gladieux Consulting

Michelle is known for her generosity and bold leadership, serving on multiple boards and embodying the ethos of leaving a positive mark on the world. Her training and coaching company prioritizes community support, often aiding nonprofits with donations and sponsorships to “leave the world better than we found it”. Michelle has dedicated her professional life to helping people face fears, develop strategic communication skills, and embrace leadership roles - even when (and especially when) they’ve never previously thought of themselves as a leader. As an entrepreneur celebrating 20 years of full-time consulting, an author, and speaker, she lifts women up daily. As an adjunct professor teaching graduate and undergraduate leadership and business courses for 18 years with PFW, Indiana Tech, and Trine University, she’s inspired students to reach their full potential. Known as a “human potential whisperer”, Michelle’s commitment to community betterment makes her a true role model in empowering women and enriching lives.





## Grayce Holloway

Owner,  
Icing For Izaac

Grayce's leadership shines through her bakery, where she not only makes delicious treats but advocates for mothers who have experienced child loss, offers support groups, and raises mental health awareness. As a mentor, Grayce spotlights women-owned businesses, provides business advice, and nurtures her team's skills and talents. In addition to managing her bakery's operations, she prioritizes her family, never missing important events for her children. Grayce's dedication to uplifting women and fostering a supportive community makes her an inspiring role model and leader in Fort Wayne.





## Kasee Lamm

People Rewards Manager,  
Fort Wayne Metals

Kasee's leadership shines through her extensive community service including the board of First Fridays Fort Wayne, where she shapes the content and direction of transformational presentations, fostering growth within the community. Her passion for personal and community development is evident as she actively seeks opportunities to enhance her leadership skills and connect with others, making a positive impact on everyone she meets. As a role model and mentor to women, Kasee champions for others through her participation in local events and panel discussions. As a mother, she is also a pillar of encouragement for her daughter by demonstrating resilience, ambition, and a commitment to growing each day. Kasee's eagerness to learn and desire to make a difference is the definition of a Champion of Change.





## Kathy Rogers

President and Founder,  
KB Search Team

Kathy possesses a keen intellect, relentless work ethic, and unique ability to foster dynamic relationships. Through her family business, she prioritized hiring and promoting women while actively training their leadership skills. In her current role at KB Search Team, an all-women search firm, she continues to advocate for women's success by mentoring, coaching, and preparing female candidates for job opportunities. Her dedication to female empowerment extends beyond her professional endeavors, as she volunteers in schools, assists with interviewing skills, and mentors young leaders through programs like the Parkview Mentoring Program. Through her leadership in various board positions and industry associations, Kathy has made significant contributions to advancing women in both the workforce and the community.





## Gwen Ruppert

Associate Vice President, Investments,  
Raymond James

Gwen exemplifies outstanding leadership through her diverse professional background and extensive community involvement. Her service in organizations and programs like The Luger Series, Lead Her Forward, Ambassador Institute for Civic Engagement, and the GFW Inc. Women's Network, she has served as a mentor and advocate for women aspiring to achieve personal and professional goals. As an investment advisor, Gwen utilizes her skills to support women in securing their financial futures and those of their families. Because of her dedication to enhancing the relational health and vitality of women, our community is a better place to live, worship, and work.





## Amy Stauffer

Vice President,  
Global Business Operations,  
Franklin Electric

Over her 25-year tenure at Franklin Electric, Amy has demonstrated remarkable leadership and dedication women, notably through her establishment of the Franklin Women's Network. She has served as a mentor and role model to numerous women, providing personalized guidance and support for their professional development and success. Her commitment to empowering women extends to creating a supportive and inclusive workplace culture, where team members feel comfortable prioritizing family events and emergencies without judgment. Amy's pioneering vision has led to the network's significant success and expansion, with a focus on fostering growth and opportunities for future generations within the organization and the community at large.





## Carmen Tse

Director of Financial  
Planning & Analysis,  
Sweetwater Sound

Carmen's enduring commitment to Allen County spans over two decades, particularly evident in her dedicated service to advancing the local arts community. Through her roles with esteemed organizations like the Indiana Arts Commission and Arts United, Carmen has tirelessly worked to enrich the cultural landscape of Fort Wayne. As Chair of the Arts United Taste of the Arts Festival, Carmen's leadership has transformed the event into a celebration that unites and inspires the community. She also serves as a role model for women, sharing her courageous journey from Hong Kong to the United States and mentoring others through initiatives like the Women's Fund Take a Girl to Work Day and Sweetwater's Food for Thought sessions. Carmen stands as a beacon of positive change, embodying the spirit of innovation, collaboration, and transformation.





— 2024 —

# CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

PUBLIC SERVICE FINALISTS





## Stephanie Crandall

Director of Intergovernmental Affairs,  
City of Fort Wayne

Stephanie was nominated for her passionate leadership and advocacy for women in Fort Wayne / Allen County. While actively serving with many nonprofit organizations and running for Fort Wayne City Council and Mayor, she has demonstrated her commitment to empowering women by promoting supportive workplace benefits and policies, and equitable compensation. In her current role, she provides strategic counsel on matters related to all levels of government to achieve legislative, administrative, and community goals that benefit local residents. Through her strategic counsel and civic engagement, Stephanie works tirelessly to advance women's economic wellbeing and make Fort Wayne a city where all can thrive.





## Kristy Lindeman

Director, Victim Assistance,  
Fort Wayne Police Department

Kristy's leadership and commitment to the community is demonstrated through her involvement with various organizations, such as Fort Wayne Pride, the Mayor's Commission on Domestic Violence, and the Anti-Trafficking Network of Northeast Indiana. As a safe harbor for women and children, Kristy is an advocate for victims of violent crime and those struggling with their identity. Her dedication to making a better future for girls, women, and the most vulnerable in the community is evident through her compassion, encouragement, and mentorship. Inspired by her first supervisor's positive leadership style, Kristy strives to have a ripple effect in her community by being a supportive and servant leader to the teams she leads, amplifying their own impact.





## CAPT Ashlee Lowe

Maintenance Director of Operations,  
122nd Fighter Wing, Indiana Air  
National Guard

In her role with the 122nd Fighter Wing, CAPT Lowe oversees aircraft maintenance operations and ensures F-16 aircraft is combat-ready. With a passion for inclusivity and diversity, she actively recruits and advocates for women to join the Air National Guard, fostering an environment where everyone has a voice and can reach their fullest potential. As a mentor, she supports women seeking guidance and advancement opportunities, including those transitioning from enlisted to officer ranks, advocating for equal opportunities and representation. CAPT Lowe is committed to collaboration and supporting her team, encouraging the sharing of struggles and successes to normalize experiences and strengthen bonds. Through her involvement in local councils and advocacy efforts, she ensures that women's voices are heard on important issues, making significant contributions to empowering and advancing women in the military community.





— 2 0 2 4 —

# CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

— EDUCATION FINALISTS —





## Shenita Bolton

Executive Director of College  
and Career Readiness,  
Fort Wayne Community Schools

Shenita is uniquely talented in the way she transforms the educational experience into an authentic and valuable journey for students. Her philosophy of “leading by walking beside” has transformed her team of educators, inspiring others to serve with humility and integrity. Shenita advocates for inclusivity regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity and empowers others to succeed. Through the Portrait of a Graduate program, she has helped students reach their potential through equitable and relevant community connections. Shenita is a true champion of change and role model for our next generation of leaders.





## Nicole Edmonds

Associate Professor,  
Trine University

Nicole was nominated for her tenacious leadership and dedication to the community through her roles as a professor and pediatric specialist in physical therapy. She teaches in Trine University's Doctor of Physical Therapy program while actively practicing at various agencies, serving children with delays and disabilities. Nicole also partners with community organizations like Turnstone and GiGi's Playhouse, providing hands-on opportunities for her students to serve those at risk or in need. As a mentor, Nicole pours into new graduates and sets an example of how to find harmony and balance with her career and family life. She fosters a supportive environment in the classroom and beyond, cheering on her students and advocating for their success in the community.





## Dr. Angie Fincannon

Dean of the College of Business,  
Indiana Tech

Dr. Fincannon's impactful leadership at Indiana Tech has reshaped academic landscapes and empowered students to achieve greatness. Through her inclusive leadership style, she fosters collaboration and creates a nurturing environment where diverse perspectives are valued. Angie actively advocates for gender equality and inclusivity, supporting organizations and programs that empower women economically, socially, and politically. As a mentor, she leads by example, demonstrating integrity, empathy, and resilience. Angie inspires women to overcome obstacles and is a driving force for positive change in our community.





## Lisa D. Givan

Vice President for Institutional  
Diversity, Equity, and Belonging and  
Senior Diversity Officer,  
Indiana Tech

Lisa is a Cultural Navigator, Inclusion Specialist, & Transformation Agent. Her leadership shines through her tireless efforts to ensure opportunities remain accessible and equitable to all people in the community, whether it's speaking at a local event or serving on a nonprofit board. Lisa also established a scholarship for black students at Indiana Tech, removing financial barriers and creating opportunities for underrepresented groups in a more inclusive academic environment. Lisa challenges inequalities and biases, especially for women, and was honored with the Distinguished Women Leader Award by the ACE Women's Network of Indiana. Her dedication to inclusion and belonging extends nationally, serving within the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education. As an advocate for minority and women-owned businesses, Lisa is a changemaker that makes Fort Wayne a better place to live, work, and play.





## Shubitha Kever

Associate Chief Diversity Officer,  
Purdue University Fort Wayne

Shubitha demonstrates exceptional leadership, passion, and commitment to the community through her involvement in Leadership Fort Wayne and as Chair of PFW's Women's Conference. She leads a number of programs including TRIO Student Support Services & Upward Bound that focus on supporting first-generation pre-college and college students; the Women's Center for women, returning adults, and students with families; and the Q Center for students and allies within the LGBTQ+ community. She is a tireless advocate of diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus. Shubitha created a Women's Affinity Group and leads Women's History Month book discussions on campus, serving as a role model and mentor for women. Her dedication to empowering women is evident in her advocacy for fair salaries and commitment to developing staff and direct reports. With over 18 years of experience in higher education and advocacy, Shubitha's leadership and mentorship have positively impacted countless individuals in our community.





## Sarah LeBlanc

Associate Professor of Communication,  
Purdue University Fort Wayne

Sarah LeBlanc was nominated for her devotion to empowering women, specifically through menstrual education and combatting period poverty. Built on her research around period equity and the effects of menstruation on teen's mental health, she works with various organizations and the statehouse to champion for tax elimination on menstrual products and provision of free products in schools. In her role at PFW, she engages students in initiatives like Trunk n' Treats and health fairs to educate others about period tracking, preparedness, and more. Sarah serves as a role model and mentor to young people with uteruses, helping them strengthen their voice around menstrual health and making the community more comfortable discussing an issue that is often ignored.





## MAJ John Sheaffer

JROTC Instructor / SAI MAJ (Retired),  
Concordia Lutheran High School

MAJ Sheaffer's leadership, passion, and unwavering commitment to the community are evident through initiatives such as his founding of the AJ Arnett Honor 5K, raising \$100,000 for Honor Flight, and his involvement with Cancer Services of NE Indiana and the Shepherd's House. Actively involving cadets in community events and fundraising efforts, he fosters a sense of civic responsibility and engagement among youth, particularly advocating for women to assume leadership roles within Concordia's JROTC program. Under his guidance, the program has achieved remarkable milestones, including an all-girl drill team and robotics team and the acceptance of female cadets into prestigious institutions like West Point and the Naval Academy. MAJ Sheaffer creates an inclusive environment where women can thrive, break barriers, and achieve excellence. His contributions to community service and mentorship make him a significant asset to Allen County and role model for veterans and women.





## Dr. Aisha-Amina Smiley

Bachelor of Social Work Program  
Director / Assistant Clinical Professor,  
Indiana University  
School of Social Work

Dr. Smiley is an advocate for change through her education and community engagement, particularly in areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. As a higher education professor and program administrator, she leads by example while empowering others to lead and contribute to meaningful impact. Aisha is a compassionate and inclusive leader who works to create equitable pathways that address social deficits through increasing economics of access, standards, and practice of health care. Serving as a role model and mentor, she shares her lived experiences transparently and actively supports the development of others, prioritizing authenticity and intentionality in her approach. As a licensed social worker with over 25 years of experience, she is a champion of change in our community that combats and advocates for child welfare, maternal health, HIV/AIDS, mental health, nutrition and wellness, trauma, and domestic violence.



## ABOUT THE WOMEN'S NETWORK

### MISSION

Greater Fort Wayne Inc.'s Women's Network exists to connect, inspire, and empower women. We do this by convening programs and events that encourage career enrichment and professional development.

### VISION

We strive to embrace and unite the many individuals and organizations that support the diversity of our community. We look forward to connecting the individuals, networks, and organizations that support women in our great community, helping us to build a nationally recognized economy in Allen County.

Apply today at [WOMEN.GFWINC.COM](https://www.women.gfwinc.com)

A dark blue background image showing silhouettes of women in professional settings, including one woman speaking at a podium and others in a meeting or conference.

# 6

EVENTS

# 1,177

INSPIRED

# 228

CONNECTED