



BLACK DIAMOND AWARDS 2026



A Celebration
**OF RESILIENCE
& ACHIEVEMENT**



Chuks Okoye

*President, Black Diamond
Awards Initiative*



www.blackdiamondawards.ca

"Welcome to the fourth Black Diamond Awards, where we gather to celebrate the extraordinary qualities of resilience, determination, and achievement. Tonight, we honour not just the heights of success, but the incredible journeys that have led to these accomplishments.

In a world where many awards focus solely on the pinnacle of excellence, we believe it is crucial to recognise the progress made despite immense challenges and suffocating pushbacks. True excellence is not just about the final destination, but about the perseverance and grit demonstrated along the way.

Our vision at the Black Diamond Awards is to bring balance and depth to the recognition of achievement. We understand that comparing individuals without considering their unique life journeys creates an imbalance and a form of contextual poverty. It is like striving for equality and fairness by treating unequal circumstances equally, which often overlooks the true essence of individual progress.

We believe that many people, given the same opportunities and support, can achieve great heights and excellence. Tonight, we celebrate those who have not only reached remarkable milestones but have done so by overcoming significant obstacles. Their stories of perseverance and triumph inspire us all and remind us of the power of the human spirit.

Thank you for joining us in this celebration of resilience, determination, and achievement. Together, we honour the remarkable individuals who exemplify the true meaning of excellence."

BDA 2026 RECIPIENTS

We celebrate the powerful journeys of resilience, determination, and success embodied by these exceptional individuals. Their stories reflect the strength of the human spirit and the impact of unwavering perseverance in the face of adversity.

Each of them has navigated challenges that might have seemed impossible, yet they chose to push forward, redefine their paths, and achieve remarkable outcomes. Their lives are a reminder that resilience is not about avoiding hardship, but about rising through it with courage, purpose, and grit.

Through their experiences, they offer inspiration to others who may be facing their own struggles. Their journeys serve as guiding lights—proof that even in the most difficult moments, growth and greatness are still within reach.

As we honor their accomplishments, we also recognize the limitless potential within us all. Continue reading to discover their incredible stories and the impact they are making.



Janelle Benjamin
Equity, Leadership & Social Impact



Peter Grant
Community Leadership & Public Service



Janel Morrison
Community Impact & Equity Leadership



Mengistu Mariam
Technology & Innovation



Brenda Okorogba
Equity, Diversity & Inclusion



George Sully
Fashion & Entrepreneurship



Nicholas Thompson
Social Justice & Systemic Change



Claudius Otegbade
Finance & Compliance



Aretha McCarthy
Community Impact



Dr. Narine Sookram
Social Justice & Community Impact



Rudolf-Ray Kwaku
Music & Community Impact



Dr. Chidi Nwanyanwu
Community & Humanitarian Impact



Dr. Chika Oriuwa, MD
Medicine, Leadership & Impact Award



Dr. Rosemary Sadlier
Social Justice & Historical Impact



Dr. Rosemary Sadlier

BDA recipient

Resilience, Achievements, And Commitment to Building a Legacy of Social Justice And Historical Impact

*“My work is to ensure our histories are recognized
as part of Canada’s story.”*

Dr. Rosemary Sadlier is a distinguished scholar, advocate, and national leader whose life’s work has been devoted to advancing equity, historical recognition, and community empowerment in Canada. As a researcher, author, educator, and policymaker, she has played a transformative role in ensuring that the histories, experiences, and contributions of people of African descent are recognized as an essential and permanent part of Canada’s national narrative.

Throughout her career, Dr. Sadlier has confronted and challenged systemic barriers that have historically marginalized Black Canadian history and perspectives. Rather than accept these omissions, she turned them into opportunities for education, advocacy, and lasting institutional change. As President of the Ontario Black History Society, she led groundbreaking initiatives that significantly increased public awareness, influenced educational resources, and strengthened recognition of Black history within schools, government, and broader Canadian society.

Her resilience and determination are perhaps best exemplified by her decades-long advocacy to establish Emancipation Day: August 1, as a nationally recognized day in Canada. Beginning in 1995, Dr. Sadlier worked tirelessly to build support across communities, organizations, and political parties.

Through persistent engagement, coalition-building, and unwavering belief in the importance of historical truth, her efforts culminated in a historic milestone in 2021 when the House of Commons unanimously adopted legislation recognizing Emancipation Day across the country.

An accomplished author, Dr. Sadlier has written extensively on Black Canadian history, identity, and social justice, contributing valuable scholarship that continues to inform and inspire. As an international speaker, she has used her voice to educate audiences around the world, advancing conversations on equity, belonging, and the importance of inclusive historical narratives.

Her exceptional contributions have been widely recognized through numerous honours, including the Order of Ontario and multiple honorary doctorates. These accolades reflect not only her intellectual leadership but also her steadfast commitment to advocacy, education, and community service.

Dr. Sadlier’s legacy is one of perseverance, impact, and transformation. Through her work, she has helped reshape how Canadians understand their collective history while creating space for future generations to see themselves reflected in it. Her journey stands as a powerful example of resilience, determination, and the enduring impact of purpose-driven leadership.

Peter Grant

BDA recipient

Resilience, Commitment and Achievements in Community Leadership & Public Service

*“My greatest accomplishment is the trust I’ve built
between policing and community.”*



Peter is a seasoned public safety professional and community leader whose career reflects over two decades of excellence with Peel Regional Police. With experience spanning courts, frontline operations, and community engagement, Peter has consistently demonstrated adaptability, professionalism, and composure in high-pressure and culturally complex environments. His work is grounded not only in operational effectiveness but in a deep commitment to service, inclusion, and building lasting relationships with the communities he serves.

A recognized leader in diversity, equity, and inclusion, Peter has played a pivotal role in shaping internal culture within policing while strengthening trust with historically marginalized communities. He currently serves as Co-Chair of the Peel Police Black Internal Support Network, where he fosters mentorship, advocacy, and collaboration across the organization. Throughout his career, he has been widely regarded as a bridge-builder—someone who brings cultural competence, empathy, and credibility into spaces where trust, understanding, and connection are essential.

Peter’s impact extends far beyond his formal role in policing. He is deeply committed to youth development and mentorship, using both direct engagement and innovative approaches to guide young people toward positive pathways. His work has earned him recognition from the United States Navy as a Key Influencer for his mentorship efforts—an honour that included the rare opportunity to fly in an F-18 fighter jet. He has also dedicated significant time to volunteerism and governance, serving on multiple boards of directors and currently contributing as a board member with Young Bosses in Business, supporting youth entrepreneurship and leadership development. Through sport, Peter has further invested in the lives of youth by using a local boxing club as a platform to instill discipline, confidence, and a sense of belonging among at-risk individuals.

This hands-on approach reflects his belief that mentorship is most powerful when it is consistent, accessible, and rooted in real connection.

Peter’s commitment to growth is equally evident in his academic achievements. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Public Safety and has completed advanced coursework in community development, leadership, and engagement at Toronto Metropolitan University. His dedication to learning continues to inform his work, ensuring that his leadership remains both informed and impactful.

Throughout his career, Peter has faced and overcome challenges that have strengthened his resilience and deepened his purpose. At one stage, serving as the only Black officer within a unit of 85 required navigating added pressures—balancing professional excellence while helping others understand diverse perspectives. Through integrity, perseverance, and consistency, he not only met those challenges but transformed them into opportunities to lead, educate, and influence meaningful change.

Peter’s contributions have been recognized through numerous awards, including the Peel Regional Police Civilian Supervisor of the Year, the L.W. Farrow Award, recognition from African Community Services, and the Sankofa Royale Award. These honours reflect both his professional excellence and his commitment to community impact.

At the core of Peter’s journey is his greatest achievement: the authentic, sustained trust he has built between policing and the community through mentorship and lived leadership. Looking ahead, he remains focused on expanding his impact through teaching at the college level, where he aims to shape the perspectives and approaches of the next generation of public safety professionals.

Grounded in gratitude and guided by purpose, Peter continues to serve with resilience, consistency, and an unwavering commitment to making a lasting difference.



Aretha McCarthy

BDA recipient

Resilience, Achievement & Commitment to Community Impact & Social Justice

“My greatest achievement is the choice to keep showing up with strength, faith, and determination.”

Aretha is a resilient, purpose-driven leader whose life and work are deeply rooted in service, advocacy, and transformation. As the oldest child in her family, she learned early how to care for others, shoulder responsibility, and lead through adversity. These formative experiences shaped her character and strengthened her commitment to creating meaningful change in the lives of others.

Her academic journey is a testament to her perseverance and determination. Aretha earned her undergraduate degree in Justice Studies and Police Foundations with an outstanding 3.9 GPA, despite facing profound personal loss with the passing of both her father and younger brother just one semester before graduation. Rather than allowing grief to derail her future, she used it as fuel to push forward. She went on to complete postgraduate studies in Child and Youth Mental Health and Public Administration and is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology, further equipping herself to support individuals navigating trauma and systemic barriers.

Aretha's commitment to her community extends beyond academics into impactful advocacy and leadership. She has contributed to initiatives addressing community violence, including working alongside Louise March on the Stop the Gun Violence Campaign. Today, she serves as the Chief Executive Officer of REVIVE, a trauma-informed organization dedicated to supporting individuals and families affected by violence. In addition, she is the Founder of DevelopME Youth, an initiative focused on empowering young people through mentorship, leadership development, and personal growth opportunities.

Her leadership is not only defined by titles but by action and impact. In 2023, Aretha survived a life-threatening accident when an eighteen-wheel truck struck her vehicle on the highway. During her recovery, she remained steadfast in her purpose, continuing to show up for her community. Around that same time, she stepped into leadership at REVIVE during a period of deep uncertainty, as the organization faced the withdrawal of key funding and the possibility of closure. Through her determination and vision, she fought to sustain the organization and protect the vital services it provides.

Throughout her journey, Aretha has also navigated the challenges of being a young Black woman in leadership, often facing underestimation and barriers to opportunity. Despite this, she has consistently proven her capability, strengthened her voice, and led with confidence and integrity. Her lived experiences—marked by grief, resilience, faith, and perseverance—have shaped her into a compassionate and empathetic leader who connects with others on a deeply human level.

Aretha's story is one of continuous growth, unwavering faith, and the choice to rise in the face of hardship. She is driven by a vision to expand the impact of REVIVE and DevelopME Youth, ensuring that more individuals and families affected by violence and systemic barriers have access to culturally responsive, long-term support. Through her work, she is building pathways for healing, empowerment, and generational change. Above all, Aretha is defined not just by what she has overcome, but by how she has transformed her experiences into purpose—dedicating her life to helping others heal, rebuild, and move forward.



Dr. Chidi Nwanyanwu

BDA recipient

Resilience & Commitment to Community Leadership & Humanitarian Impact

“My life is about serving God by building people and empowering communities.”

Dr. Chidi Nwanyanwu is a passionate community builder, entrepreneur, architect, and faith leader whose life's work has been dedicated to empowering individuals and transforming communities. With a dynamic career spanning over three decades, he has consistently used leadership, service, and advocacy as tools to inspire self-awareness, unity, and excellence across generations.

Holding a Doctor of Philosophy along with Master's and Bachelor's degrees in Divinity and Architecture from institutions including the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, the University of Toronto, and CICA International University/Seminary, Dr. Chidi combines technical expertise with a deeply rooted commitment to service. As a graduate member of the Ontario Association of Architects and the Royal Institute of Canadian Architects, he brings over 30 years of professional experience in architectural design, construction methods, and project management.

Alongside his wife, Dr. Erica Nwanyanwu, he is the Co-Founder and CEO of Fixteam Building Contractors Limited in Canada, a company that goes beyond business by creating employment opportunities for newcomers, particularly within the Nigerian community, helping them transition into the Canadian workforce. Demonstrating a heart for service, he has also supported seniors through free home renovation initiatives. Together, they also lead Worship Media Company, a multimedia platform that provides photography, videography, and digital content creation—often offering services free of charge for community events as part of their ongoing commitment to giving back.

Dr. Chidi's dedication to humanitarian work is further exemplified through the *My Roots Foundation*, a nonprofit organization he co-founded, which has received widespread recognition for its charitable efforts in Canada and across Africa.

Through this foundation, he continues to impact lives by addressing community needs and promoting development and support for underserved populations.

A devoted minister, Dr. Chidi actively serves in faith communities, including Kingston Road Community Church and Willowdale Pentecostal Church. His ministry extends internationally, with outreach missions in locations such as Northern Ontario and Guangzhou, China. As a musician, he expresses his faith and cultural identity through the “Grateful Family” band, producing a multicultural gospel album titled *Grateful*, with proceeds supporting charitable initiatives. Dr. Chidi's leadership also extends into civic and cultural spaces. He has served as President of the Enugu State Association of Canada and the Nigerian Canadian Association (GTA), and is a member of the Toronto Police Black Community Consultative Committee.

As a pioneer founder of the ECOWAS Association of Canada, he has played an instrumental role in uniting African diaspora communities. In recognition of his influence and service, he was honoured with a traditional chieftaincy title, “Nna bu enyi” (Father is King), by his home community in Enugu State, Nigeria. His impact has been recognized through numerous awards, including multiple humanitarian and leadership honours from organizations across Canada and internationally. Whether through business, ministry, advocacy, or culture, Dr. Chidi has remained steadfast in his mission to uplift others and build stronger, more connected communities.

With future initiatives such as the development of the My Roots Community Center underway, Dr. Chidi continues to expand his vision—leaving a lasting legacy defined by service, leadership, and a deep commitment to empowering people to thrive.



Janel Morrison

BDA recipient

Resilience, Commitment and Achievements in Community Impact & Equity Leadership

“I chose growth over limits—and turned adversity into purpose, confidence, and impact.”

Janel is a dedicated community leader, advocate, and mentor whose work is rooted in resilience, service, and a commitment to advancing equity. With over 15 years of leadership and mentorship experience, she has consistently used both her professional platform and lived experiences to create meaningful change, particularly for refugees, asylum seekers, and underserved communities across Peel Region.

Janel currently plays a key role in social services as a leader within the Income and Social Supports (ISS) system and as part of the Homelessness Provider Table, where she works collaboratively to address complex community needs. Her leadership extends into diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, including serving as a 2025 Co-Lead for ASCEND (Advancing Success through Culture, Equity, Networking, and Development), where she helps drive inclusive practices and strengthen organizational culture.

Her impact is widely recognized. Janel is the recipient of the 2025 Ubuntu Leadership Award (Peel Regional Police and Ameen’s Kitchen) and the 2025 CAO’s Award for Excellence for her contributions to the Asylum Claimant Response. She was also formally recognized by Regional Chair Iannicca at Council on May 22, 2025, for her outstanding contributions in support of Black communities in Peel Region. Her thought leadership extends nationally, having presented at the 8th Metropolis Identities Conference in Saskatchewan in 2025.

Janel’s commitment to service is reflected in the many initiatives she has led. She organized a natural hair care workshop to support asylum claimants navigating employment and housing, coordinated a catered holiday lunch for asylum seekers, and led annual winter clothing drives for refugees and asylum seekers from 2023 through 2025. She has also contributed to sector advancement as a committee member and moderator for the OMSSA Policy Conference (2023) and as an organizer for the OMSSA 75th Conference in 2025. Additionally, she implemented a Hospital Family Advisory Council, creating space for community voice and continuous improvement within systems of care.

Beyond her professional accomplishments, Janel’s greatest achievement lies in her personal journey of growth and self-discovery. As a first-generation Canadian raised in Brampton, she faced early messages of limitation and self-doubt. Through intentional healing, self-reflection, and both formal and informal counselling, she chose to confront those challenges and redefine her path. By transforming adversity into strength, she rebuilt her confidence and embraced her purpose—becoming not only a leader, but an example of what is possible through resilience and perseverance.

Throughout her career, Janel has navigated systemic barriers, limited representation in leadership spaces, and moments where her voice was overlooked. Rather than allowing these experiences to deter her, they strengthened her resolve to advocate for equity and amplify the voices of others. Her lived experience allows her to connect authentically with those she serves, bringing empathy, understanding, and a deep sense of purpose to her work.

Janel is also driven by a strong support system grounded in faith, family, and community. These influences have shaped her values, helping her establish boundaries, maintain authenticity, and lead with integrity. She has carried these principles into her professional journey, where she continues to mentor others, foster inclusive environments, and create pathways for those who may not yet see their own potential.

Looking ahead, Janel is focused on advancing into senior leadership roles where she can influence systemic change, increase representation, and continue building networks that empower underrepresented communities. She is committed to mentoring future leaders, supporting continuous learning, and advocating for policies that create lasting and equitable impact.

Janel’s journey is a powerful reflection of resilience, growth, and purpose. She is not defined by the challenges she has faced, but by the way she has risen through them—transforming obstacles into opportunities and using her story to inspire, uplift, and lead others forward.

Dr. Narine Dat Sookram

BDA recipient

Resilience, Achievement & Commitment to Social Justice & Community Impact

*“My work is about turning injustice into action and creating
fair opportunities for others.”*



Dr. Narine Dat Sookram is a distinguished social worker, psychotherapist, advocate, and community leader dedicated to advancing social justice, equity, and opportunity for marginalized communities. Born in Guyana and raised in a humble immigrant household, his journey reflects perseverance, purpose, and a deep commitment to creating fairer systems—especially in employment and access to opportunity.

His passion for advocacy was shaped by early experiences with discrimination, including bias in the hiring process despite being fully qualified. Rather than being discouraged, he transformed these experiences into a lifelong mission to challenge inequities, which later became the foundation of his groundbreaking work in inclusive hiring practices.

After a decade in the manufacturing sector, Dr. Sookram made the bold decision to pursue social justice full-time. While raising a family, he returned to school, earning a Social Service Worker diploma, followed by a Bachelor, Master, and Doctor of Social Work. His doctoral research has helped shape more equitable hiring policies, benefiting thousands from underrepresented communities.

Throughout his career, he has held key leadership roles across the social services sector, including at House of Friendship, Argus Residence, and Yorktown Family Services. In each role, he has prioritized vulnerable populations, leading with compassion, inclusion, and a commitment to meaningful, lasting impact.

In addition to his leadership in organizations, Dr. Sookram is a registered social worker and psychotherapist who runs his own private practice, providing mental health support and advocacy, particularly for those who cannot afford services.

His work bridges mental health, social justice, and employment advocacy—recognizing that true well-being requires access to opportunity, dignity, and support.

For over two decades, Dr. Sookram has also been a powerful voice in the community. Through his long-running radio program Caribbean Spice and his widely followed YouTube platform, The Dr. Narine Dat Show, he educates and empowers the public on topics such as legal access, human rights, and workplace equity. With hundreds of thousands of subscribers and millions of viewers, his platform continues to reach and uplift communities globally.

His dedication to service has been recognized through more than 200 awards, including some of Canada's highest honours such as the Sovereign Medal for Volunteerism, the June Callwood Outstanding Achievement Award for Voluntarism, and the Waterloo Award—the city's highest civic honour. These accolades reflect not only his professional excellence, but his longstanding commitment to volunteerism and advocacy, much of which he has carried out without compensation.

Now preparing to pursue legal studies through the LLB program, Dr. Sookram continues to expand his impact, further strengthening his ability to advocate within systems of power and policy. Despite the many roles he holds, he remains grounded in his purpose—to serve, to uplift, and to fight for justice.

Dr. Sookram's journey is a powerful testament to resilience, determination, and the transformative impact of purpose-driven work. From humble beginnings to national recognition, he has remained steadfast in his mission to break down barriers and create pathways for others to succeed.

Claudius O. OTEGBADE

BDA recipient

Resilience, Commitment & Excellence in Finance & Compliance



“I haven’t just overcome the system- I am actively reshaping it for those yet to come.”

Claudius O. Otegbade’s journey is defined by resilience, unwavering faith, and a deep commitment to excellence and community impact. After immigrating to Canada in 2015, he encountered many of the systemic barriers faced by newcomers—limited access to opportunities, difficulty gaining Canadian experience, and the persistent challenge of proving his value in competitive professional spaces. Despite arriving with qualifications and experience, he faced obstacles that could have discouraged many. Instead, Claudius chose perseverance.

Grounded in faith and driven by a vision for growth, he committed himself to continuous self-development, earning multiple internationally recognized certifications while building specialized expertise in Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and financial crime compliance. Through discipline, consistency, and strategic focus, he positioned himself as a trusted professional in a highly regulated and competitive industry.

His determination ultimately led to the founding of C&G Professional Services Inc., which has grown into one of Canada’s recognized Black-owned AML and financial crime compliance advisory firms. Through this venture, Claudius has not only achieved professional success but also contributed meaningfully to strengthening compliance standards and risk management practices within the financial sector.

Beyond his corporate achievements, Claudius is deeply committed to lifting others. Recognizing the very barriers he once faced, he co-founded the Nigerian-Canadian Compliance Professionals (NCCP)—a platform dedicated to mentorship, networking, and career development.

Through NCCP and other initiatives, he has supported newcomers and emerging professionals by creating pathways to gain practical experience, build confidence, and access meaningful career opportunities.

Claudius’ story is one of transformation—turning personal challenges into purpose and meaningful impact. What began as a journey marked by uncertainty and systemic barriers has evolved into a legacy of leadership, innovation, and service. His ability to remain steadfast in the face of adversity, grounded in faith and driven by vision, has allowed him not only to rise professionally but to intentionally create pathways for others to succeed. Through his work, he continues to challenge inequities within the system while equipping the next generation with the tools, access, and confidence needed to thrive.

Today, Claudius stands as more than a professional success story—he is a builder of ecosystems, a mentor to emerging talent, and a catalyst for inclusion within the financial compliance space. His impact extends beyond individual achievements, shaping communities and influencing industry standards. With an unwavering commitment to excellence and empowerment, Claudius embodies what it means to not only overcome barriers but to redefine them—ensuring that those who come after him face fewer limitations and greater possibilities.

Dr. Chika Stacy Oriuwa, MD

BDA recipient

Resilience, Commitment and Excellence in Medicine, Leadership & Innovation

“I use science, story, and medicine to help people understand themselves—and show up more powerfully.”



Dr. Chika is a physician, thought leader, and creative force whose work lives at the intersection of medicine, storytelling, and human connection. As a psychiatry resident at the University of Toronto, she is training to specialize in Brain and Sleep Medicine, with research focused on neuropsychiatric diseases and treatment. Alongside her clinical path, she holds a Master’s degree in Health Systems Leadership and Innovation, equipping her to influence both patient care and the systems that shape it.

A nationally ranked spoken word poet, award-nominated author, and internationally sought-after keynote speaker, Dr. Chika has built a powerful multidisciplinary platform that bridges science, art, and leadership. Her work translates complex ideas about how people think, lead, and belong into insights that inspire meaningful action. She has headlined engagements for global organizations including Microsoft, Mastercard, and Coca-Cola, and has lectured at medical schools across Canada and the United States. Through her speaking and advisory roles, she continues to shape conversations on leadership, equity, and workplace wellness at the highest levels.

Dr. Chika’s achievements have earned widespread recognition. She made history as the first Black female sole valedictorian at the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Medicine and has been named one of TIME Magazine’s Next Generation Leaders and one of Maclean’s Power 50. She has also been honoured as one of Best Health Magazine’s Women of the Year and selected by Mattel as a Barbie Role Model, with a one-of-a-kind doll created in her likeness—an emblem of representation and possibility for future generations. Her work and voice have been featured on platforms including CBC’s The National, CTV News, CP24, NBC’s TODAY, and in major publications such as the Toronto Star.

In 2024, she released her memoir, *Unlike the Rest: A Doctor’s Story*, a deeply personal exploration of medicine, identity, and belonging. Through her writing and storytelling, she continues to create space for reflection, dialogue, and transformation.

At the heart of Dr. Chika’s journey is a commitment to helping people better understand themselves and one another so they can show up more powerfully in the world. Her work is not only rooted in intellectual excellence, but in lived experience. Throughout her academic and professional journey, she navigated systemic barriers, including racial isolation as the only Black student in her undergraduate and medical school classes, while balancing the demands of motherhood, medical training, and a growing global platform. These challenges, while often isolating, strengthened her resilience, sharpened her voice, and deepened her sense of purpose.

Above all, Dr. Chika considers her greatest achievement to be the life she has built with intention and alignment. As a mother of three, she holds her role at home as her most meaningful responsibility—raising her children with a strong sense of identity, confidence, and purpose. Balancing family, medicine, and global leadership has required discipline, clarity, and resilience, all of which continue to shape the leader she is today.

Looking ahead, Dr. Chika is focused on completing her medical specialization while expanding her global platform as a speaker and thought leader. She aims to bring cutting-edge neuroscience into leadership and performance spaces, redefining how individuals and organizations understand “soft skills” through the lens of science.

Dr. Chika’s journey is a powerful reflection of excellence, resilience, and purpose. Through her work, she continues to challenge systems, uplift others, and create meaningful impact—proving that when passion and purpose align, the possibilities are boundless.



Mengistu H. Mariam

BDA recipient

Resilience, Achievement & Excellence in Technology & Innovation

*“Having walked through closed doors, I now dedicate my
life to opening them for others.”*

Mengistu Mariam is an accomplished technology workforce leader with over 20 years of experience delivering large-scale recruitment and talent solutions across Canada’s public and private sectors. Throughout his career, he has played a pivotal role in transforming the lives of more than 20,000 IT professionals—from CIOs and CTOs to entry-level support specialists—by connecting individuals from diverse backgrounds to meaningful, well-paying careers that contribute to both family stability and the broader Canadian economy.

As an Executive Consultant at Akkodis, Mengistu leads national public sector IT hiring initiatives, supporting government, healthcare, and education institutions. His work focuses on building inclusive, high-performing technology workforces that reflect the diversity and evolving needs of modern organizations.

He is also the founder of GenAI.jobs, an initiative dedicated to creating equitable pathways into the artificial intelligence economy. Through training, mentorship, and employment support, the platform aims to empower underrepresented communities and ensure they are not left behind in the rapidly advancing digital landscape.

Mengistu’s commitment to community impact is reflected in his partnerships with organizations such as YES Toronto, Sheridan College, Ontario Tech University, Algoma University, and Seneca College.

Through these collaborations, he has supported job fairs, delivered mentorship, provided resume and interview coaching, and led sessions on resilience and personal development to help youth and students navigate competitive job markets.

His journey to success has been marked by resilience and determination. From studying earthquake engineering in Japan to becoming a refugee in Norway, where he later earned an MBA, Mengistu’s path eventually led him to Canada. There, he faced significant challenges, including unemployment and years of working in entry-level roles before rebuilding his career and rising to executive leadership. He credits these experiences with shaping his purpose: opening doors for others facing similar barriers.

Mengistu describes his journey as forging an “unbreakable black diamond”—a symbol of strength formed under pressure. Having experienced firsthand the struggles of unemployment, rejection, and starting over, he is deeply committed to “paying it forward” by supporting individuals who feel overlooked or excluded from opportunities.

Looking ahead, Mengistu aims to scale GenAI.jobs into a nationally recognized platform with a growing global footprint, including expansion into GenAI.health to advance inclusive access to AI opportunities in healthcare. Through strategic partnerships, training programs, and advocacy, he is dedicated to building sustainable pathways into the future of work—both in Canada and globally.

Guided by faith, humility, and a strong sense of purpose, Mengistu views his achievements not as personal accolades, but as reflections of the lives impacted and opportunities created. His work continues to inspire others to pursue paths of service, resilience, and meaningful impact.

Nicholas Marcus Thompson

BDA recipient

Resilience, Achievement & Commitment to Social Justice & Systemic Change

*“When the system failed, I built one
that would fight back.”*



Nicholas is a transformative leader, advocate, and changemaker whose life's work has been dedicated to advancing equity and justice for Black communities in Canada and beyond. Born in Trinidad and Tobago, Nicholas' early experiences were shaped by persistent racism, navigating life as the child of a Black mother and mixed father. These formative challenges ignited in him a deep sense of purpose and a commitment to challenge inequality at its roots.

As a teenager, Nicholas immigrated to Canada with a vision of building a better future—not only for himself, but for others facing similar barriers. In his twenties, he joined Canada's public service, determined to contribute meaningfully to the country he now called home. It was there that he witnessed systemic discrimination firsthand, particularly against Black employees who were disproportionately confined to entry-level roles, underpaid, and often forced to retire in poverty despite years of service. Recognizing that thousands of others shared these same experiences, Nicholas made the decision to act.

Driven by courage and conviction, Nicholas stepped into leadership, running for union office and ultimately becoming a union president. However, when existing systems proved insufficient in addressing the scale of injustice, he took a bold and unprecedented step—organizing and launching the largest class action lawsuit against systemic discrimination in employment in Canadian history. The case represented approximately 45,000 Black workers across 99 federal departments and agencies.

With little institutional support and minimal resources, Nicholas founded the Black Class Action Secretariat, creating a platform to advocate for justice and accountability. He also brought together organizations through the Coalition Against Workplace Discrimination, amplifying awareness and pushing for structural reform across institutions.

His advocacy extended beyond Canada, as he founded the Global Litigation and Advocacy Network for People of African Descent at the United Nations in Geneva, working to advance rights and equity for Black communities on a global scale.

Nicholas also played a key role in establishing the National Employment Equity Council, now Canada's national body focused on advancing employment equity. His efforts have resulted in tangible, lasting impact: increased Black representation in leadership within the federal government, the hiring of over 5,000 Black employees, the creation of a \$50 million mental health and career development program, and the implementation of Black employee networks and a federal Black Action Plan.

Among his most significant achievements is Canada's agreement to formally recognize Black workers as a distinct employment equity group—an historic milestone that will shape policy and opportunity for generations to come.

Behind these accomplishments is a journey marked by resilience, sacrifice, and unwavering determination. Nicholas has consistently demonstrated the courage to challenge powerful systems, often at personal and professional cost, in pursuit of justice and equality.

At his core, Nicholas is also a devoted father to three children—Abigail, Nicholas, and Gabriella—who remain his greatest inspiration. His work is deeply rooted in the legacy he hopes to leave for them: one of courage, purpose, and possibility. Nicholas' story is a powerful testament to what can be achieved when resilience meets action. Through his leadership, he has not only challenged systems of inequality but has helped reshape them—creating pathways for others to rise, succeed, and thrive.



Janelle L. Benjamin

BDA recipient

Resilience, Achievements & Commitment to Equity, Leadership & Social Impact

*“My work is about turning adversity into impact— and
using business as a force for good.”*

Janelle Benjamin is a dynamic leader, equity strategist, and entrepreneur dedicated to advancing justice, inclusion, and accountability across workplaces and communities. As the Founder of All Things Equitable Inc., a Certified B Corporation, and Manager of Equity, Diversity & Inclusion at North York General Hospital, Janelle brings nearly two decades of experience shaping organizational culture within healthcare and the public sector. A trained lawyer and Certified Global DEIB Benchmarks Practitioner, she is widely recognized for her ability to transform systems through intentional, people-centered approaches.

Janelle’s career reflects both excellence and resilience. She previously served as an Investigator with the Ontario Human Rights Commission and as a Senior Policy Advisor to the Honourable Jean Augustine, P.C., C.M., where she contributed to advancing equity at the highest levels. Her thought leadership has earned national and global recognition—she is a LinkedIn Top Voice, named one of Canada’s Top 100 Black Women to Watch, and has been featured in Forbes, The Globe and Mail, and the Toronto Star.

Her greatest achievement lies not only in her professional accomplishments, but in her perseverance through adversity. In the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, while navigating job loss, a rescinded offer, and the transition to single parenthood, Janelle took a bold leap of faith and founded her company. With limited resources and immense uncertainty, she built a thriving business rooted in purpose—proving her commitment to betting on herself and creating opportunities on her own terms. Today, her children are thriving alongside her growing enterprise, a testament to her strength and determination.

Throughout her career, Janelle has confronted workplace inequities, including layoffs tied to life transitions, and environments marked by marginalization and exclusion. Rather than allowing these experiences to define her, she transformed them into fuel for advocacy. Through storytelling and her professional work, she continues to shed light on workplace mistreatment and champions change so others do not have to endure the same challenges.

As the daughter of immigrant parents and raised primarily by a single parent, Janelle developed early lessons in discipline, faith, and the value of education. Those foundations shaped her belief in possibility, even in the absence of resources. Today, she credits her success to a combination of faith, resilience, and an unwavering work ethic—anchored in the belief that every experience, even the most difficult, serves a greater purpose. Janelle continues to grow both personally and professionally.

From achieving B Corp certification—demonstrating her commitment to using business as a force for good—to expanding her company’s reach and influence, she remains focused on impact. She is also deeply committed to modeling excellence for her children, instilling in them the values of hard work, integrity, and striving for their best in all areas of life. Grounded in gratitude and driven by purpose, Janelle is a powerful example of what it means to rise, rebuild, and lead with intention. Her journey continues to inspire others to believe in themselves, push beyond limitations, and create meaningful change in their own lives and communities.

Rudolf-Ray Kwaku

BDA recipient

Resilience, Commitment & Achievement in Music & Community Impact

*“I am passionate about using creativity to connect, uplift,
and create spaces where people feel seen.”*

Rudolf-Ray is a Ghanaian-Canadian trumpeter, actor, curator, and community leader whose work bridges artistic excellence with cultural expression and community impact. Based in Toronto, he has built a dynamic multidisciplinary career that spans music performance, arts leadership, and social engagement. Known for his distinctive sound and creative vision, Rudolf-Ray has performed at major festivals, concerts, and civic events, collaborating with a wide range of respected artists and institutions while amplifying Black artistry and African diasporic culture.

He is the founder of Rudy Ray & Co., an innovative artist collective that brings together musicians, poets, producers, and visual artists to create meaningful, collaborative work. Through this platform, Rudolf-Ray has cultivated spaces where creativity thrives and underrepresented voices are elevated, fostering both artistic growth and community connection.

Beyond the stage, Rudolf-Ray is deeply committed to mentorship, youth engagement, and mental health advocacy. His training in addictions and community support has allowed him to integrate wellness and healing into his work, using the arts as a vehicle for empowerment and cultural grounding. His approach reflects a belief that creativity is not only a form of expression, but also a powerful tool for connection, identity, and transformation.

Like many artists working at the intersection of art and community, Rudolf-Ray has faced challenges including financial uncertainty, limited institutional support, and barriers to recognition. However, these experiences have strengthened his resilience, sharpened his purpose, and reinforced his commitment to building opportunities—not only for himself, but for others. Through persistence, adaptability, and a strong sense of vision, he has continued to grow while creating pathways for emerging artists.

Rudolf-Ray’s greatest achievement lies in the life he has built—one that seamlessly blends artistic passion with meaningful service. Whether performing, curating, or mentoring, his work is rooted in representation, collaboration, and impact. He has remained consistent in his mission to uplift others while continuing to evolve both personally and professionally.

Looking ahead, Rudolf-Ray is focused on expanding his work on a national and international scale, deepening his impact at the intersection of music, culture, and community wellness. His journey reflects resilience, determination, and a steadfast commitment to using his gifts to inspire, connect, and create lasting change.

George Sully

BDA recipient

Resilience, Commitment & Achievement As A Designer, Author & Entrepreneur

“I chose to build instead of wait—and in doing so, I created opportunities beyond myself.”



George Sully is a Canadian designer, entrepreneur, and cultural architect whose career has been defined by vision, persistence, and an unwavering refusal to wait for permission. As a self-taught creative, he has built an influential presence across fashion, footwear, accessories, and product design, co-founding brands such as Sully Wong, Sully & Son Co., and House of Hayla. His work has been carried by some of North America’s leading retailers, including Saks Fifth Avenue, Harry Rosen, Holt Renfrew, and Hudson’s Bay, solidifying his reputation as a force in contemporary design.

George’s multidisciplinary practice extends beyond traditional fashion. Notably, he designed the Starfleet boot for Star Trek: Discovery, blending storytelling with functional design on a global stage. His contributions to the industry have earned him prestigious recognition, including the CAFA Changemaker Award, the FGI Visionary Award, an honorary degree from George Brown College, and induction into the Bata Shoe Museum.

Beyond his personal achievements, George is deeply committed to community impact and cultural representation. He is the founder of Black Designers of Canada (BDC), the first national platform dedicated to identifying, documenting, and amplifying Black design talent across the country. What began as a response to systemic gaps in visibility has evolved into a transformative initiative that has created lasting opportunities, recognition, and a permanent record of excellence for Black creatives in Canada. Through BDC and initiatives like BDC Magazine, Sully continues to shape the narrative around design, equity, and legacy.

His commitment to giving back extends into mentorship and philanthropy, including the donation of more than 800 pairs of shoes through Dress for Success. These efforts reflect a broader purpose that has guided his career—building not only brands, but pathways for others.

Sully’s journey has been marked by resilience. Entering the industry without traditional training or networks, he navigated financial barriers, skepticism, and systemic challenges by creating his own opportunities and remaining steadfast in his vision. These experiences have informed his leadership philosophy—one rooted in innovation, patience, and the belief that lasting impact comes from building something larger than oneself.

A significant milestone in his career is the publication of his memoir, *Designing in the Dark*, to be released by ECW Press in Canada with Simon & Schuster distributing in the United States. The book captures his journey, lessons, and the realities of building within spaces not always designed for inclusion—serving as both a personal reflection and a source of inspiration for future generations.

Today, George Sully continues to expand his influence through design, storytelling, and platform-building. While his body of work spans industries and accolades, he considers his most meaningful achievement to be the creation of Black Designers of Canada—an enduring initiative that has redefined representation and continues to open doors for others.

Brenda Okorogba C.M

BDA recipient

Resilience, Leadership & Impact As A Champion For Equity, Diversity & Inclusion

*“I turn barriers into bridges, ensuring that others don’t
just survive the system—they thrive beyond it.”*



Born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria, Brenda Okorogba’s journey is a powerful testament to resilience, purpose, and transformative leadership. From an early age, she demonstrated a passion for excellence and service, serving as both class prefect and head girl—roles that reflected the strong leadership foundation intentionally nurtured by her parents. They instilled in her the values of adaptability, continuous learning, and the courage to both acquire and share knowledge.

In December 2012, Brenda embarked on a life-changing journey to Canada as an international student on a full-ride scholarship at the University of Manitoba. Navigating a new cultural environment and academic rigor, she quickly distinguished herself as a campus leader. She served as a Student Orientation Leader, participated in the University’s inaugural Student Leadership Summit in 2014, and won the UofM Toastmasters International Speech Contest. Her outstanding contributions earned her the prestigious University of Manitoba Emerging Leader Award and the Congress of Black Women of Manitoba Scholarship in 2014. She was also selected for the first cohort of the British Council and United Nations Association in Canada’s Active Citizens Social Enterprise Programme.

Brenda’s lived experiences as a newcomer navigating systemic barriers sparked her commitment to servant leadership. Recognizing the challenges faced by immigrants—particularly women, youth, and persons with disabilities—she turned her own struggles into a mission to empower others. Her advocacy work is rooted in equity, inclusion, and access to opportunity for marginalized communities.

Driven by vision and entrepreneurial spirit, Brenda founded Momentwithbren Consulting, a platform dedicated to career development, resource mobilization, and community building. Through her leadership, the organization has reached over 200,000 individuals globally, helping clients secure more than \$40 million in grants and over \$5 billion in scholarships and financial aid.

Her work has consistently empowered individuals and organizations to unlock opportunities and create sustainable impact.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Brenda demonstrated exceptional resilience and adaptability by pivoting her efforts to support vulnerable populations. She raised \$13,000 for YWCA Canada and developed innovative digital solutions to maintain community connection and support women facing heightened challenges.

Brenda’s impact spans globally and locally. In Ghana and Eswatini, she led gender-inclusive economic empowerment initiatives with Crossroads International and Global Affairs Canada, advancing women’s financial independence, land rights, and access to education. In Canada, her leadership at World Skills Employment Centre Ottawa supported over 400 newcomer women, helping them secure employment while contributing to \$2.1 million in program funding.

Nationally, she advocated with YWCA Canada, helping lobby for \$75 million in gender-equity funding and amplifying key issues to over 3.5 million people. Expanding her influence, she also directed a Netflix-funded short film through the Being Black in Canada program, showcasing her commitment to storytelling and representation.

Her work has earned numerous accolades, including the 2024 Crossroads International Resource Mobilization Award, 2024 Inclusive Leadership Award, and 2023 DMZ Women of the Year Award. She currently serves on multiple boards, continuing to shape policy and advance equity.

From Lagos to global leadership, Brenda’s journey reflects resilience in action—transforming barriers into bridges and creating lasting impact for communities worldwide.

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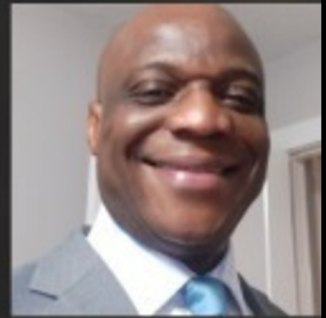
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What sets Folu apart is his long term approach. He believes real estate is more than just buying and selling homes, it's about making smart decisions that can positively impact a family for generations. Whether he's working with a first-time buyer, a growing family, or an investor, his focus is always on education, honesty, and helping clients make informed decisions at their own pace.

Over the years, Folu has hosted seminars and educational events to help people better understand the market, financing, investing, and the opportunities available in real estate today. As an investor himself, he understands the importance of buying wisely and thinking long-term. One principle he stands by is simple: he would never encourage a client to buy something he would not personally invest in himself.

Known for his calm and approachable personality, Folu takes pride in building genuine relationships with his clients and being someone they can continue to rely on long after the transaction is complete.

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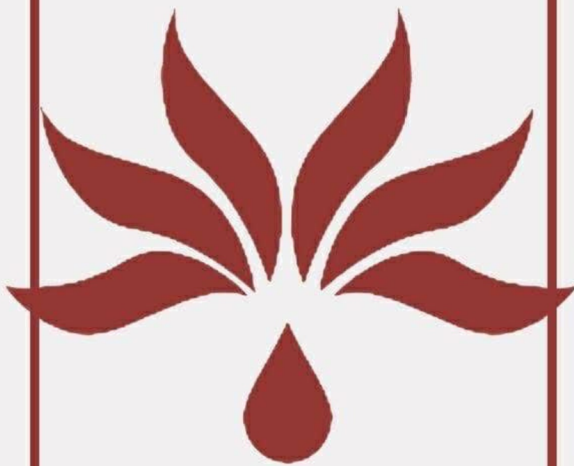
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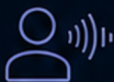
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