

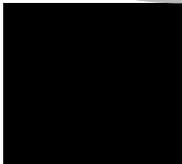
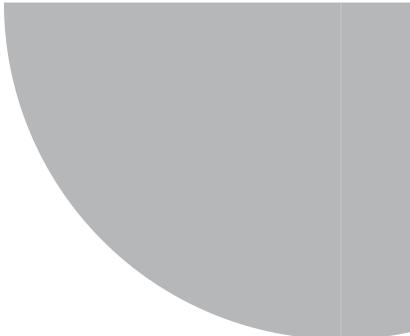
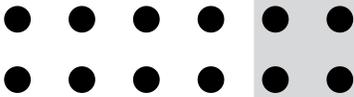


soulfully she shines 2026



commemorative book



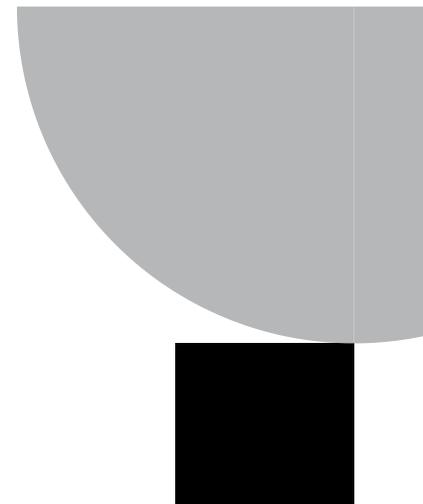


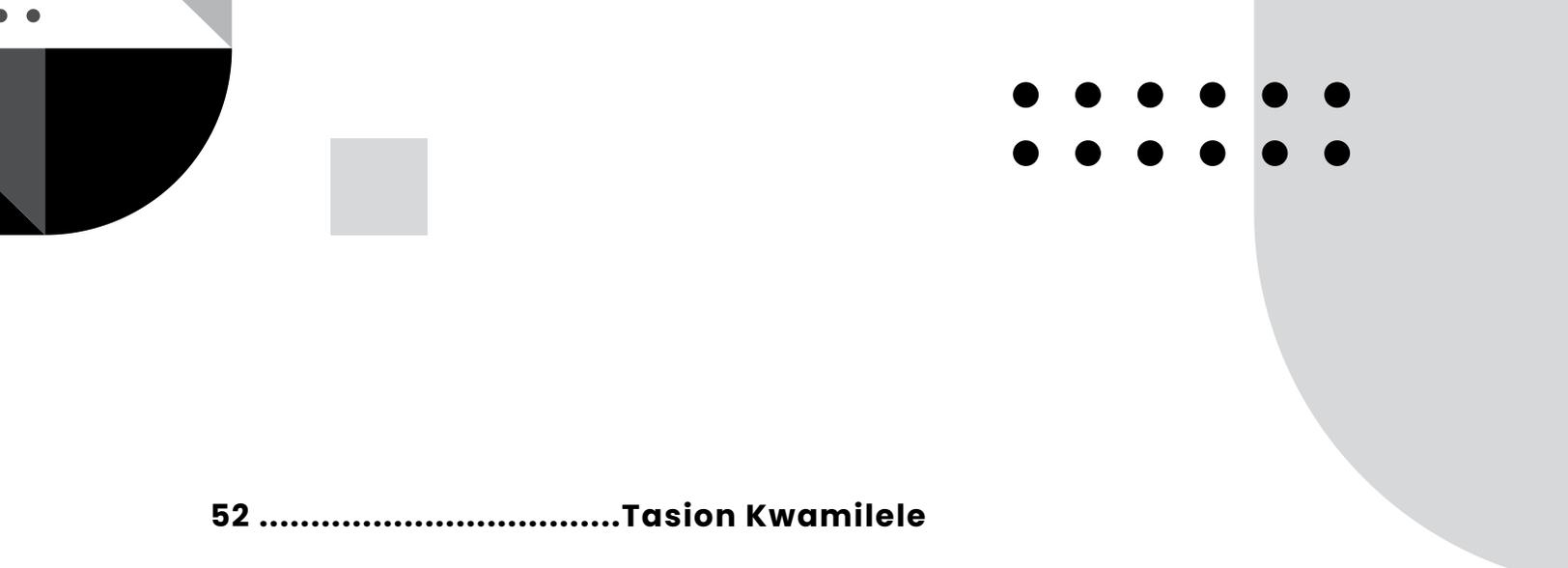
Teach like Matiko.
Develop like Sierah.
Support like Cicelle.
Serve like Rohli.
Honor stories like Crystal.
Connect like Kelly.
Imagine like Kayla.
Empower like Tamesha.
Unlock brilliance like Anjylla.
Deliver like Tiffany.
Create space like Juanita.
Advocate like LeChey.
Show up like Whitney.
Heal like Kimberland.
Build like Tonja.
Strategize like Tasion.
Preserve like Kirstie.
Cultivate like Lea.
Liberate like Jane.
Stay true like Kelsey.
Amplify culture like Kikora.
Educate and legislate like Antonette.
Lead with heart like Aisha.
Anchor like Dawn.
Speak truth like TaNisha.
Move systems like Angela.
Persist like Lakeya.
Activate like Margaret.
Reconnect roots like Shelbi.
Blaze trails like Rosalind.
Transform like Brittny.
Awaken like Erica.



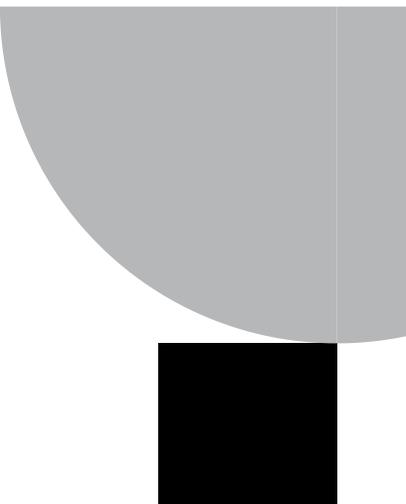
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To Each of You Who Shines,

Before you read another word, I need you to pause. Take a breath. And receive this.

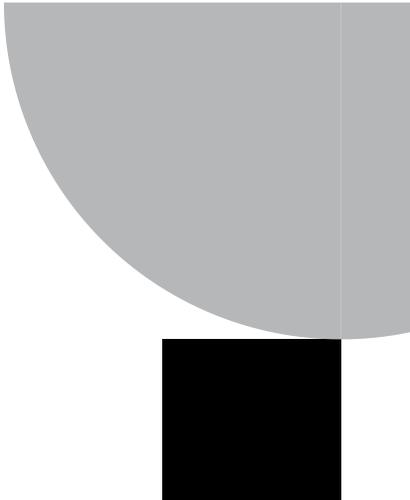
Thank you.

Not just for what you do — though what you do is extraordinary. But for who you are. For the courage it took to say yes. For trusting me with your stories, your wisdom, your journey. For allowing us a glimpse into the beautiful, complex, powerful lives you are living.

You said yes to this spotlight at a time when we need your light more than ever. And in doing so, you have done something you may not even fully realize — you have saved lives. Not metaphorically. Literally. Somewhere, a young Black girl will read your words and decide to keep going. A woman in the middle of her hardest season will see your face and remember that she is not alone. A future leader will find her footing because you were brave enough to share yours. Your stories are woven into something that will outlive this moment. That is legacy. And you did that simply by being willing to be seen.

Not just for your titles, your degrees, your accomplishments, or the mountains you have moved.

You are seen as full human beings. As women who laugh and grieve and rest and doubt and rise and rest again. As women who have had to fight for rooms that should have been open to you all along. As women who showed up anyway — with grace, with fire, with faith, and with an unshakeable commitment to something greater than yourselves.





You are enough. You have always been enough. Not because of what you produce or who you serve or how well you hold it all together. You are enough simply because you exist. Your worth was never up for debate, even when the world tried to convince you otherwise.

And on the days when it gets hard — because it will get hard — I pray you have sisters around you who will hold up a mirror and remind you of your own light. Because that is what sisterhood is for. None of us were meant to carry this alone. You are allowed to need people. You are allowed to be held. You are allowed to have whole days, whole seasons even, where you need someone else to speak life back into you. That is not weakness. That is wisdom. That is the very thing you model for others when you show up honestly.

You are beautiful. Not in spite of your complexity, but because of it. Every scar, every pivot, every moment of doubt that you walked through anyway — it is all part of what makes you luminous. And this book, these pages, this spotlight — it is simply a reflection of what was already true about you long before I ever asked you to participate.

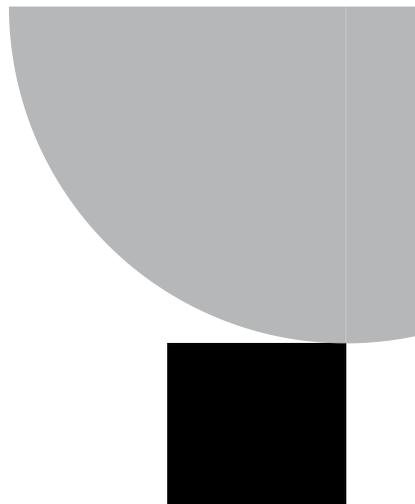
This is the first ever SoulFULLy She Shines Women's History Month Spotlight. But it will not be the last. And it exists because you exist. Because your stories matter. Because the next generation deserves to look up and see women like you — real, rooted, radiant, and unapologetically themselves.

I am so deeply grateful for each and every one of you. For your time, your trust, your truth. For letting me celebrate you. For reminding me — and everyone who will read your stories — of what it looks like when a woman walks fully in her purpose.

You shine. Don't ever let anybody dim that.

With so much love and gratitude,

Stephanie





Dr.

MATIKO

AUSTIN

Assistant Professor of Psychology | Chair, Department of Psychology

Walk into rooms knowing you belong there. Your presence is not accidental; it is purposeful. You carry the strength, resilience, and brilliance of those who made a way before you.

Collaboration will carry you further than competition. Guard your well-being. The work is meaningful, but it can also be demanding. Rest is not weakness; it is strategy. Boundaries are not selfish; they are necessary.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My journey to becoming a college professor and department chair began long before I stepped into a classroom professionally. As a child, I would “play school” with my stuffed animals, naturally drawn to teaching and guiding others. Even then, there was something in me that loved explaining, organizing, and helping others understand.

During high school, my role began to shift. I became a friend whom others sought out to talk through their problems, challenges, and life decisions. That experience awakened a deeper calling to help more intentionally. What began as a love for teaching expanded into a passion for supporting and guiding people through meaningful conversations.

As a result, I chose to major in psychology to become a clinical psychologist. I achieved that goal, but in 2020, my path evolved. I sensed that God was redirecting me, not away from helping, but back to my original passion for teaching, training, and mentoring. This time, however, it was on a broader scale. I was called to help not only individuals in clinical settings, but also students in classrooms, future professionals in training, and faculty within an academic department.

Today, as a college professor and department chair, my journey has come full circle. I can teach, mentor, lead, and serve, all rooted in the same childhood passion that first surfaced while playing school. What once felt like separate callings has merged into one purposeful path of educating, empowering, and developing others.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

My leadership and deep commitment to my work have been shaped by powerful examples in my life. My parents were my first models of strength, integrity, and perseverance. Through their everyday actions, I witnessed what it meant to lead with wisdom, make thoughtful decisions, and remain steadfast in responsibility. Their consistency and quiet sacrifice instilled in me a strong work ethic and a sense of accountability.

My mentor, Dr. Sandra Rouse, further refined my understanding of leadership. Through her guidance, experience, and professional excellence, I observed what compassionate and principled leadership looks like in practice. She demonstrated that true leadership is not only about competence, but about investing in others, extending grace, and making decisions with both clarity and care.

As I matured in my faith as a young adult, I came to recognize that my ultimate influence is Christ. Through studying and applying God's Word, I developed a desire to reflect His character in my leadership. He embodies what I strive to practice daily: servant leadership, wisdom, patience, and compassion. He leads, teaches, and comforts, and those qualities continue to shape how I guide others and remain committed to the work I have been called to do.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

If you feel called to become both a psychologist and a college professor, I would encourage you to first honor that calling with seriousness and humility. This path is not simply a career choice; it is a commitment to stewarding people's stories, shaping minds, and influencing futures.

1. Clarify Your Why. Be certain about your motivation. Psychology requires emotional endurance, ethical integrity, and lifelong learning. Academia requires patience, resilience, and a heart for mentorship. When challenges arise, and they will, your "why" will sustain you.

2. Commit to Academic and Clinical Excellence. Pursue strong academic preparation and high-quality training. Seek rigorous supervision, welcome feedback, and continuously sharpen your skills. Competence builds credibility, and credibility expands your influence.

3. Find Mentors Early. Identify professors and licensed psychologists who exemplify the type of professional and leader you aspire to be. Observe how they teach, lead, conduct research, and care for clients. Mentorship shortens learning curves and protects you from avoidable mistakes.

4. Develop Both Head and Heart. As a psychologist, you must think critically and clinically. As a professor, you must communicate clearly and inspire growth. But in both roles, your character matters just as much as your knowledge. Cultivate empathy, emotional intelligence, and integrity.

5. Prepare for Leadership. Many who enter academia eventually influence programs, departments, and institutional culture. Develop leadership skills early, focusing on decision-making, conflict resolution, strategic thinking, and collaboration. Leadership in higher education requires vision and diplomacy.

6. Guard Your Well-Being. You cannot pour into clients and students from an empty vessel. Prioritize spiritual, emotional, and physical health. Sustainable impact requires sustainable habits.

7. Embrace the Dual Calling. Being both a psychologist and a professor allows you to heal and to multiply healing through the students you train. Your work extends beyond the therapy room into classrooms, research, supervision, and institutional leadership. If you have truly been called to this work, approach it with excellence, humility, and service. The influence of a psychologist-professor reaches far beyond a single generation. You are not only shaping individual lives, but you are also shaping the future of the profession.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

To the next generation of Black women leaders entering psychology and higher education: Walk into rooms knowing you belong there. Your presence is not accidental; it is purposeful. You carry the strength, resilience, and brilliance of those who made a way before you. Pursue excellence, not perfection.

Let your preparation speak for you. Master your craft, protect your integrity, and never underestimate the power of your voice. You do not have to shrink to lead. Seek mentors, but also prepare to become one.

Leadership in this space is not only about titles, but it is also about influence, access, and opening doors for others. Collaboration will carry you further than competition. Guard your well-being. The work is meaningful, but it can also be demanding. Rest is not weakness; it is strategy. Boundaries are not selfish; they are necessary.

Most importantly, lead authentically. Your cultural insight, lived experience, and spiritual grounding are assets, not liabilities. The academy needs your scholarship, your compassion, your innovation, and your courage. You are not just entering the field, but you are shaping its future.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

I can be reached at maustin@hc.edu



SIERAH

BARNHART

Community Development Coordinator

You have something to offer, even if you aren't quite sure what that is yet. Your time, your talents, and your lived experiences carry more weight than you realize.

Community work rarely comes with perfect conditions or ready-made solutions. So much of it depends on resourcefulness and creative problem solving. More often, it asks you to look at what you have, imagine what's possible, and piece together a path forward with care and intention.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

I didn't step into this work so much as I was carried to it by life itself. I grew up in Fort Wayne's public housing program (Miami Homes and Brookmill Court Apartments) and later a single family house on Chestnut Street made possible by my mom's Housing Choice Voucher. One afternoon, a Sheriff came to our door with an eviction notice. Our landlord had been taking our rent but not paying the mortgage. That moment didn't just change our address—it changed my understanding of how systems can steady a family or pull the ground out from under them.

My first job after college was with the Fort Wayne Housing Authority, the same agency that once supported my family. My mother built her career there, and her example helped guide me into a life of public service. From there, my path led me into nearly a decade of civil rights work, investigating discrimination in housing and employment. I learned how systems fail people, how they can protect people, and how much difference it makes when someone is willing to listen and act. Later, joining the federal workforce with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development was a full circle moment.

Today, in my role as Community Development Coordinator at Midwest America Federal Credit Union, I continue to help connect people to tools and resources that strengthen our community.

But the work that feels closest to my heart is the work I do right outside my front door. My neighborhood journey began with a small job posted on our Facebook page, a call to revive a handful of pocket gardens that had grown wild and weary. I spent that season on my hands and knees, clearing weeds and bringing neglected beds back to life. What began as paid work became something deeper; the gardens flourished again, and so did my sense of belonging. From there, those small acts of care slowly unfolded into a deeper rhythm of service.

My guiding belief has stayed the same through all of it: Work hard. Do the most good.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

My mother was my first teacher in public service. She began her career at the Fort Wayne Housing Authority picking up trash as a Maintenance Tech and retired as a Property Manager responsible for hundreds of units.

Even now, former tenants see her out in public and tell her how much they miss her and the way she led. Watching her move through those roles with steadiness and humility showed me what it looks like to care for people, with dignity, through your work.

As a bi-racial woman, racism shaped my identity in quiet but powerful ways. It influenced how I understood belonging, how I read a room, and how I learned to move through the world. Those experiences deepened my commitment to creating spaces where people are respected and valued.

The work being done in my neighborhood has strengthened my commitment to service. For years, I lived there without slowing down enough to notice where I could contribute. From that first thistle-ridden garden bed, the work expanded. Planting trees. Installing benches. Throwing block parties. Updating bylaws. Helping build programs.

Stepping into leadership roles. Your neighborhood is part of the social fabric of your life, and caring for it with intention strengthens both you and the people around you. These efforts make a real difference in how connected and supported a community feels.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

If you feel called to this work, start by following your curiosity and show up even if you're scared. Most of us step into new spaces without knowing anyone or knowing exactly where we will fit in. That uncertainty is normal. You have something to offer, even if you aren't quite sure what that is yet. Your time, your talents, and your lived experiences carry more weight than you realize. If your passion is pulling you to enter a space, you can be confident that it will sustain you once you step inside. Service is love in action. And when you start showing up, you'll find exactly where your love is needed.

If you're looking for reassurance along the way, two books that shaped me are *Dare to Lead* and *The Gifts of Imperfection* by Brené Brown. They reminded me that courage isn't the absence of fear; it's choosing to keep showing up with honesty and intention.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

To the next generation of Black women stepping into this work: you've got what it takes. Even if you feel unsure or are still finding your footing, trust that what you bring is needed. Your perspective, your lived experience, and the way you see the world all hold value.

Community work rarely comes with perfect conditions or ready-made solutions. So much of it depends on resourcefulness and creative problem solving. More often, it asks you to look at what you have, imagine what's possible, and piece together a path forward with care and intention.

Leadership grows each time you show up and engage with intention. There will be moments when you feel out of place or wonder if you belong. You do. You belong in conversations where decisions are made. You belong in the work of shaping stronger, healthier communities. Lead in a way that feels true to you. You don't have to imitate someone else's style to be effective. Quiet leadership is still leadership. Gentle leadership is still leadership. Show up, stay curious, and take your time.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

If there is one thing I hope people take from my journey, it's this: your community needs you. Strong communities are built by people who notice what's around them and choose to take part in its care.

There is work to do on every block, gardens to restore, trees to plant, neighbors to check on, meetings to attend, decisions to shape and sidewalks to fix. You don't need a title or even a plan to begin. Wherever you live, there is something within reach that you can help nurture.

If you'd like to stay connected with me, you can find me on LinkedIn:
www.linkedin.com/in/sierah-barnhart



CICELLE BEEMON

Women's Intervention for the Center for NonViolence

Be clear about your goals and confident in who you are. There will be obstacles—some will strengthen you, and some may bring you to tears—but every experience will shape your growth. Lead with grace, integrity, and respect for yourself and the work you carry. Understand that people are always watching, so be strategic, build meaningful connections, and hold your head high. When your intentions are pure and your purpose is clear, you are already walking in your blessing.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My journey into this work began during my college years, when I was balancing young adulthood with major responsibilities and in need of stable income. I was blessed with the opportunity to serve as a Support Specialist for the 21st Century Scholars Program through AmeriCorps, and that experience shaped my purpose. Working with diverse, low-income, and first-generation students showed me how overwhelming college can be without guidance. I saw how powerful it is to have someone who leads with patience, understanding, and lived experience. That realization sparked my passion for mentorship and advocacy. Serving as an AmeriCorps member deepened my commitment to volunteerism and community impact. The skills and values I gained during that time continue to guide my work today, as I remain dedicated to helping individuals feel supported, empowered, and never alone in their journey.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

My mother has been the greatest influence on my leadership and commitment to this work. Watching her raise a family, earn her college degree, overcome countless obstacles, and battle breast cancer showed me what true strength and resilience look like. Her example inspires me daily and motivates me to lead with perseverance and grace. Throughout my college career, I was also incredibly blessed to be mentored by some of the most inspiring leaders I have ever met. I had the opportunity to work, learn, collaborate, and grow alongside passionate professionals in higher education and community work who poured into me both personally and professionally. Their guidance, wisdom, and belief in my potential helped shape the leader I am today. Because of their investment in me, I am committed to doing the same for others.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

For those who feel called to this work, I would suggest beginning with volunteerism. There is something powerful about giving your time and talents to serve others who truly need support. Through volunteering, you gain not only practical skills but also meaningful connections and a deeper understanding of the world around you.

I believe the lessons learned and relationships built through service are far more valuable than any paycheck.

Volunteering allows you to see the world through a different lens—it builds empathy, strengthens character, and creates impact that lasts a lifetime.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

My wisdom for the next generation of Black women leaders would be to do your research and remain rooted in your convictions. Be clear about your goals and confident in who you are. There will be obstacles—some will strengthen you, and some may bring you to tears—but every experience will shape your growth. Lead with grace, integrity, and respect for yourself and the work you carry. Understand that people are always watching, so be strategic, build meaningful connections, and hold your head high. When your intentions are pure and your purpose is clear, you are already walking in your blessing.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

You can stay connected to and support my work by following and engaging with me on social media:

- Facebook: Cicelle Beemon
- LinkedIn: Cicelle Beemon, M.S.
- Instagram: @Delawn429

I also encourage you to support The Center for NonViolence in any way you can—whether through volunteering, donating, attending events, or spreading awareness about the vital services they provide to individuals impacted by trauma and abuse.



ROHLI BOOKER

Fort Wayne City Councilwoman, 6th District

Your lived experience is powerful and valuable. Sometimes it is exactly what is needed in leadership spaces. At the same time, preparation is always a good idea. Some opportunities will require you to learn as you go, but when you have the chance to prepare, take it.

Find something you are passionate about and begin by serving there. Passion and purpose will often open doors to leadership.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

Service has always been a natural part of my life. Growing up, I watched my grandmother, my Granny, help everyone she encountered. She believed in showing up for people, whether that meant offering encouragement, sharing what she had, or simply being present when someone needed support.

Watching her taught me that service is a blessing for both the person receiving help and the person giving it.

Because of her example, I have always looked for ways to serve through volunteering and community work. I simply wanted to help wherever I could. At one point, however, a Soror encouraged me to think about service in a different way. She challenged me to move beyond volunteering and become part of the decision making in the spaces where I was already serving so I could help create even greater impact.

That encouragement led me into public service. I first stepped into leadership by serving on the school board, and that experience deepened my commitment to advocating for our community. It eventually led me to serve in elected office. No matter the role, my motivation remains the same. I want to serve people, strengthen community, and help create opportunities that allow others to thrive.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

My grandmother, my Granny, has had the greatest influence on my leadership. She was always helping someone and never hesitated to give her time, care, or support to others. She showed me that leadership starts with compassion and a willingness to serve. Watching her taught me that caring for people and community is both a responsibility and a blessing.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

My leadership journey grew when I joined Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Incorporated, where I became more involved in organized service and leadership. Organizations like AVOW are also great pathways for women interested in civic leadership.

I always encourage people to start by volunteering with an organization doing work they care about. Serving alongside others is one of the best ways to learn about community needs, build relationships, and discover where your voice and leadership can make the most impact.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

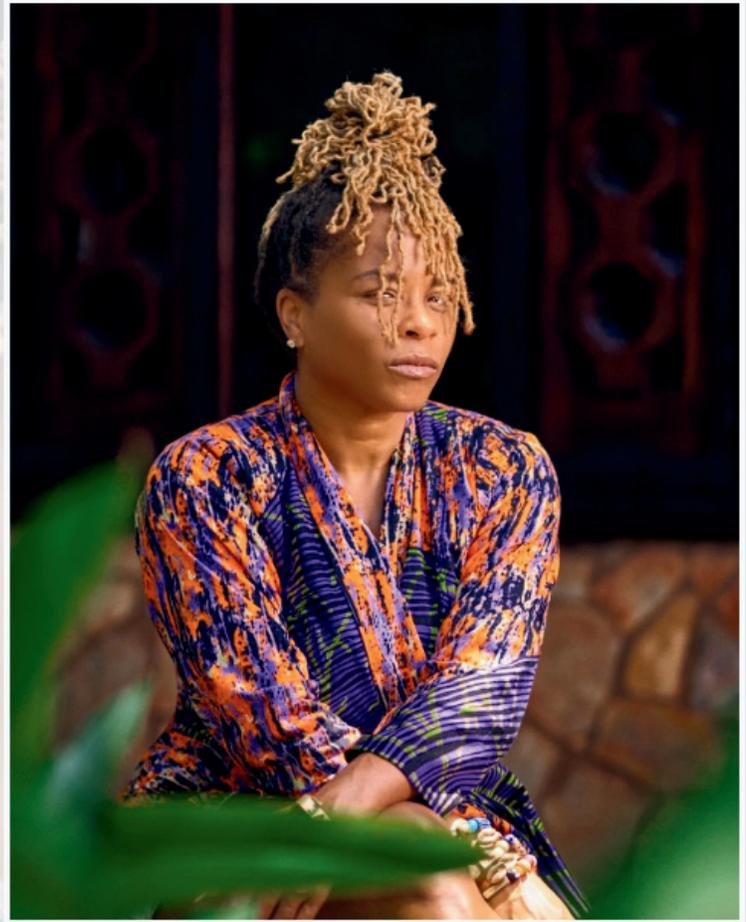
Your lived experience is powerful and valuable. Sometimes it is exactly what is needed in leadership spaces. At the same time, preparation is always a good idea. Some opportunities will require you to learn as you go, but when you have the chance to prepare, take it.

Find something you are passionate about and begin by serving there. Passion and purpose will often open doors to leadership.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

You can stay connected by following and engaging with my work online and by participating in community events and conversations.

Instagram: @CouncilwomanBooker &
Facebook: [Rohli Booker - 6th District Councilwoman](#)



Dr.

CRYSTAL

DE GREGORY

Thought Leader, Historian, Storyteller

To the next generation of Black women leaders: keep your circle of women friends close. You will need them in every season—when you are rising, when you are rebuilding, when you are simply tired. Sisterhood is not ornamental. It is infrastructure. Protect it. Invest in it. Be honest within it.

But do not hold so tightly that you cannot release what no longer serves you. Not every friendship is meant for every chapter. Growth sometimes requires distance. Bless people and keep moving. Your peace is part of your assignment.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My journey into the work I do began in childhood, sitting at the feet of women—especially Black women—who understood that stories are a form of inheritance. My grandmother was my first archive. I loved to ask her for stories: about family, about struggle, about joy, about the quiet triumphs that never made headlines but shaped our lives. In listening to her, I began to understand that memory is not passive—it is powerful.

That early love of stories grew into a love of social studies in grade school and high school, and eventually into a major in history in college. But it was never history as a distant or abstract subject. It was history as lived experience. History as responsibility. History as a way to honor the people whose labor and faith built the worlds we now inhabit.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

The values that guide my work—hard work, respect for everyone, and deep regard for the people and institutions we love—were formed first by my grandmother and then by my mother.

They modeled discipline, dignity, and devotion. Along the way, I have been mentored, molded, and sometimes scolded by women who expected me to carry those values forward with integrity.

Today, whether I am teaching, writing, or building public-facing projects, I am still doing what I did as a child: listening carefully, honoring stories, and working to ensure that the lives and contributions of others are remembered with care and clarity.

Beyond my grandmother and the women in my family, my leadership has been profoundly shaped by the Black women I watched, studied, and eventually came to know.

As a little girl growing up in The Bahamas, figures like Rosa Parks and Mary McLeod Bethune lived in my imagination not as distant icons, but as moral anchors. They taught me that leadership can be disciplined and deliberate. That courage is often quiet. That institution-building is sacred work.

As I grew into my own calling, that early influence deepened through the example of Fisk alumnae and my sorors of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated—women who fused scholarship, service, and strategy.

Chief among them are Johnnetta B. Cole, whose intellectual rigor and institutional leadership demonstrated what it means to think expansively while leading responsibly, and the late Jayme Coleman Williams, the first woman general officer elected in the history of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Dr. Williams embodied theological depth, administrative excellence, and spiritual courage. She did not separate faith from intellect or conviction from compassion.

From these women, I learned that leadership is stewardship. It is not about visibility alone; it is about tending people, protecting legacy, and expanding possibility. My commitment to this work—centering Black women’s histories, strengthening Black institutions, and building public scholarship—flows directly from standing in that lineage. They did not simply hold titles. They transformed spaces. That is the standard I carry forward.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

If someone feels called to this work, I would tell them to begin with themselves.

Before you try to save an institution, document a community, or lead a movement, tend to your own story. Much of the work we feel called to is rooted in something personal—sometimes purpose, sometimes pain. For me, that meant reading self-care and healing-centered books that addressed fatherlessness, including *Whatever Happened to Daddy's Little Girl?* and *Longing for Dad: Father Loss and Its Impact*. Those texts helped me name what I carried and understand how loss shapes ambition, attachment, and drive. You cannot lead well if you are unaware of the wounds steering you.

From there, I would suggest immersing yourself in the lives of Black women—through biographies, autobiographies, and, most importantly, their own words and archives. Read letters. Read speeches. Read diaries. Study how they thought, how they built, how they rested, how they endured. Let them speak for themselves. The archive is not just research; it is mentorship across time.

And then: practice. Join formal organizations aligned with your values. Build and keep your circle of friends. Volunteer. Teach. Write. Build something small and tend it faithfully. Leadership and institution-building are muscles—you strengthen them through use.

Begin inward. Move outward. Stay rooted in both care and rigor. That balance will sustain you far longer than passion alone.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

To the next generation of Black women leaders: keep your circle of women friends close. You will need them in every season—when you are rising, when you are rebuilding, when you are simply tired. Sisterhood is not ornamental. It is infrastructure. Protect it. Invest in it. Be honest within it.

But do not hold so tightly that you cannot release what no longer serves you. Not every friendship is meant for every chapter. Growth sometimes requires distance. Bless people and keep moving. Your peace is part of your assignment.

Stay your course. The road will rise to meet you. There will be moments when doors seem closed, rooms feel hostile, or timelines stretch longer than you expected. Do not confuse delay with denial. There is no scarcity of what is meant for you—no shortage of opportunity, provision, brilliance, or impact. What you need will come as you become ready to steward it.

Trust God. Trust the process. Trust yourself. And trust others as they deserve to be trusted—wisely, not blindly. Discernment is a leadership skill.

Lead with rigor. Rest without guilt. Love without shrinking. Build what you were born to build.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

You can stay connected to and support my work in several ways.

Follow me on social media at @hbcustorian (Instagram, X, and LinkedIn), where I share reflections on HBCU history, Black institutional life, women and girls, diaspora, and the ongoing work of building and preserving legacy in real time.

Visit crystaldegregory.com for speaking inquiries, writing, media features, and updates on current projects. The site serves as the central hub for my scholarship and public-facing work. I am currently leading the Bethune at 150 Syllabus, a public digital monument honoring the life and intellectual legacy of Mary McLeod Bethune. You can support this initiative by sharing the syllabus, assigning it in classrooms, and engaging the materials in community spaces.

I am also preparing to launch HerDue, a forthcoming podcast and storytelling platform centered on women whose contributions deserve deeper recognition. Following, subscribing, and sharing when it launches will help expand its reach.

The most meaningful ways to support the work are simple: read, share, invite, collaborate, and build alongside me. Public scholarship thrives in community.



KELLY

DOUCET

**Community Engagement Strategist, Network Architect
Senior Community Leadership Officer, Women's Fund of Central Indiana**

[And] protect your joy. Leadership can be heavy, especially when you care deeply. Build community around you. Seek mentors and cultivate peers who understand the weight and the beauty of this work.

And remember, you can do hard things. You can walk into rooms that weren't designed with you in mind and still move them. Lead before the title arrives, and trust that your consistency will create its own momentum.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My journey into advocacy and community leadership has been less about chasing titles and more about building spaces where people can thrive. I started by getting involved locally, serving on boards, volunteering, and learning how decisions were made in my city. Over time, I became deeply invested in civic engagement, leadership development, and advancing causes that impact women and girls because I saw how access, information, and relationships shape opportunity.

Community work is what motivates me. Helping others in multiple ways, whether through developing emerging leaders, strengthening organizations, or advocating for policies that affect families, is what keeps me grounded. I look for ways to be a light in systems that can often feel complex or inaccessible.

I've helped create leadership pipelines for young professionals and participated in policy conversations that shape local impact. Through it all, I've learned that meaningful change requires patience, preparation, and strong relationships. Community engagement isn't just programming. It's trust, consistency, and staying committed to the long game.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

Community has shaped me most. Mentors who opened doors and corrected me when needed. Peers who challenged my thinking and held me accountable. Elders who modeled what steady, values-driven leadership looks like over decades, not just seasons.

I'm especially influenced by Black women who lead with both excellence and resilience. Watching women navigate systems that were not designed for them, yet still build power, influence, and opportunity for others, has deeply shaped how I move.

Faith and a sense of stewardship also guide me. I believe leadership is not ownership. It is responsibility. Whatever access, influence, or opportunity I have is something I am called to use wisely and expand for others. That belief keeps me grounded and focused on impact beyond myself.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

Start local and start small, but start intentionally.

Learn how your city works. Who sits on boards and commissions? What community conversations are already happening? Attend meetings. Volunteer. Join a nonprofit board or committee that aligns with your values.

Equally important, develop discipline. Study governance. Understand timelines. Learn how policy decisions are made and implemented. Build relationships before you need them. Follow up. Stay consistent.

There isn't a shortcut to meaningful impact. The practice of preparation, listening, and showing up repeatedly will shape you more than any title ever could.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

Do not shrink yourself to make others comfortable. Your brilliance, your voice, and your perspective are necessary.

Pair your passion with structure. Learn the systems. Understand strategy. Know how to read a budget. Know how to frame an idea so it can move forward. When your vision is supported by preparation, it becomes powerful.

Also, protect your joy. Leadership can be heavy, especially when you care deeply.

Build community around you. Seek mentors and cultivate peers who understand the weight and the beauty of this work.

And remember, you can do hard things. You can walk into rooms that weren't designed with you in mind and still move them. Lead before the title arrives, and trust that your consistency will create its own momentum.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

Stay engaged locally. Support organizations advancing leadership and opportunity. Mentor someone who is coming behind you. Join a board. Attend a forum. Be an active participant in your community.

You can connect with me on LinkedIn and through the organizations I serve. I'm always open to thoughtful collaboration, coalition building, and creating spaces where more voices are equipped and prepared to lead.

The work is collective. The impact is shared. And there is room for all of us to contribute meaningfully.



Dr.

KAYLA C. ELLIOTT

Writer, Higher Education and Workforce Policy Expert

In the words of Toni Morrison: "You are your own best thing". Act like you know that. Imagine what your best should feel like financially, spiritually, emotionally, and socially, and plan out what you need to create that reality. Request the raise. Ask for the promotion. See if the school has some funding sitting around somewhere. Pitch the speaking engagement. Submit the story. Send the email. Apply for the program. Apply, apply, apply. The worst you can hear is no.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

I am a writer, womanist, wonderer, and wanderer. I am a speculative fiction writer, higher education and workforce policy expert, bookworm, girl's girl, and third generation Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) graduate. All of these identities led me here.

My career has been incubated by scholarships, internship programs, networking, and mentoring. I attended Fisk University on a full ride. As a business major, I participated in INROADS and interned at Lockheed Martin. When the company defunded for the independent research program I worked on, the INROADS staff encouraged me to network. I wrote a few articles in the company newsletter for the Communications department and they hired me for the next two summers. There, I learned about corporate philanthropy and corporate social responsibility. I knew then I wanted to make an impact through funding and philanthropy. The summer after my junior year, the Community Relations manager encouraged me to apply for the masters program in the School of Philanthropy at Indiana University.

My senior year, I sat on the university board of trustees as student body vice president and got to see some behind-the-scenes discussions while we were going through accreditation and being sued by the state. The media narratives and accreditor decisions based on Fisk's financial insecurity were such a major disconnect from the support and rigor and legacy I felt on campus. I knew then I wanted to have a career making an impact on higher education funding and HBCUs. I applied for the SEO-Career program summer philanthropy cohort in New York City and a scholarship for the Masters in Philanthropy program at IUPUI and received both. SEO placed me at Teach For America. I was initially disappointed I wasn't at a foundation, but soon realized I was at a fundraising behemoth where individual offices were raising more money than my whole university. I knew then I wanted to move funding to education organizations serving Black students.

As part of my scholarship, I was given a paid graduate assistantship. During my first year, I worked on campus in fundraising and communications. Looking for summer employment, I reached out to the HR manager at TFA's national office for an introduction to the Indianapolis team.

That conversation led to a summer internship in fundraising and eventually a job offer before I graduated. During my second year, I did my graduate assistantship at Lumina Foundation, a multibillion dollar higher education philanthropy. There, I learned about the influence of philanthropy on policy and that most higher education funding comes from public sources. I knew then I wanted to impact public funding and higher education policy. Determined to gain fundraising and grant writing skills, I worked fulltime at TFA in Indianapolis for a few years then took a promotion in the Jacksonville office.

When I realized my GRE scores were expiring, I applied for doctoral programs and received funding from Florida Atlantic University in 2015. My first semester, I met two staff of the Southern Education Foundation at a conference who encouraged me to apply for their Southern Educational Leadership Initiative program. I was hired as a summer doctoral intern at SEF and researched higher education funding policy for HBCUs which we published in a book and a blog. I knew then I wanted to reimagine higher education. My manager at SEF moved on to Education Trust in DC the next year and hired me in 2019. She trained me to take on her role when she moved to another organization in 2020.

In my research roles, I publish academic and policy pieces like technical reports, briefs, journal articles, and op-eds. The current administration has kept the federal policy space in a near constant state of fear and defense with an onslaught of executive orders, rapid layoffs, and attacks on DEI. I've found a lot of solace reading fantasy and science fiction. I know now that I not only want to reimagine this world, but imagine new ones. I was recently selected for the fiction cohort of Center for Black Literature's Wild Seeds retreat. My first novel is a multigenerational story of HBCU magic, history, and futures.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

My work is inspired by mother and my paternal grandmother, both lifelong educators. I see my work as a result and extension of theirs. My grandmother was also a four time HBCU alum. My book is a love letter to her and the institutions that molded our family. As a Florida woman, I like to say my professional and creative work exist at the intersecting legacies of college founder and civil rights leader Mary McLeod Bethune, and author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, and rapper and baddest bitch Trina.

My work as an author and as an advocate are deeply rooted in Black history, Afrofuturism, and liberation theology.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

None of us get here alone. I named many of the development programs I've participated in to underscore the importance of connection, development, and endorsement. Having these recognized organization on my resume signifies that I've been developed and vetted. They are also built in networks I can rely on for introductions and resources. These programs are where I've found mentors, recommenders, employers, co-authors, and even friends. At every turn, Black women have hired, mentored, guided, and supported me.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

In the words of Toni Morrison: "You are your own best thing". Act like you know that. Imagine what your best should feel like financially, spiritually, emotionally, and socially, and plan our what you need to create that reality. Request the raise.

Ask for the promotion. See if the school has some funding sitting around somewhere. Pitch the speaking engagement. Submit the story. Send the email. Apply for the program. Apply, apply, apply. The worst you can hear is no.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

I am kaylaCelliott everywhere: IG, FB, Threads, Substack, and .com. Always happy to be part of the village!



TAMESHA

FIKES

**Community Development Manager- MidWest America Federal Credit Union
Vice Chair of Allen County Democratic Party**

To the next generation of Black women leaders entering this work: your voice is needed exactly as it is. Don't wait to feel ready or credentialed enough to lead. Your lived experience is part of the leadership toolkit. Lead with integrity and humility, learn the systems, ask questions, and challenge decisions that don't sit right with you. Stay grounded in service. We are here to walk beside them, share tools, and help remove barriers.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My journey into financial empowerment wasn't something I planned—it grew out of curiosity and care. My first job out of college was at a financial institution, and early on I found myself questioning underwriters when loans were declined. I wanted to understand the “why,” not just deliver a no. That curiosity, paired with a genuine desire to see people in better financial positions, is what led me into community advocacy for financial empowerment.

After more than 21 years in the financial services industry, I've learned—both professionally and personally—that financial freedom isn't about perfection. It's built through dedication, determination, and discipline. I've lived the lessons I now teach, and that's what makes this work meaningful to me.

Advocacy has always been part of who I am. Even as far back as middle school, I stood up for others when they were afraid to speak for themselves. I believe in learning information, understanding systems, and bringing that knowledge back to my community so we can grow together.

Through my civic engagement with the local Democratic Party as a precinct

chair, I learned how to share critical information about our rights, the power of our vote, and the platforms of those running for office. That experience reinforced what I've always believed: access to information is access to power.

Today, I combine financial education and community advocacy because when people understand their finances and their rights, they don't just survive—they begin to see what's possible for themselves.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

The strongest influences on my leadership and commitment to this work are my faith, my family, my lived experiences, and the community I serve. My faith grounds me in the belief that helping others and giving back—especially to those who may not have what I have—is not optional, it's a responsibility. That belief shapes how I show up in my work and how I lead.

My parents and grandparents have also been foundational influences in my life. From them, I learned strength in using my voice, humility in how I serve, and the importance of doing what's right even when no one is watching.

Their examples taught me that leadership isn't about position—it's about character. The traits they modeled—integrity, compassion, perseverance, and service—are the same traits that guide how I lead today.

Together, my faith, family, lived experience, and community have shaped the leader I am. They've taught me that leadership is about opening doors, sharing knowledge, and standing in the gap so others can see more for themselves and move toward greater freedom.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

For anyone who feels called to this work, I'd say: start where you are, with what you know—and serve one person well. As Arthur Ashe said, "Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can." Empowerment doesn't begin with having all the answers—it begins with the willingness to show up, share what you've learned, and walk alongside someone as they take their next step.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

To the next generation of Black women leaders entering this work: your voice is needed exactly as it is. Don't wait to feel ready or credentialed enough to lead. Your lived experience is part of the leadership toolkit. Lead with integrity and humility, learn the systems, ask questions, and challenge decisions that don't sit right with you. Stay grounded in service. We are here to walk beside them, share tools, and help remove barriers.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

Follow my work through my employer's socials - MidWest America Federal Credit Union. Check out the Allen County Democratic Party page. Follow me on LinkedIn as I share steps in my journey to create financial empowerment.



Dr.

ANJYLLA

FOSTER

Brilliance Enabler and Operations Leader

You are required to be selfless, but in order to do this, you must maintain care for self. Find a routine or personal ritual that is your non-negotiable. Mine is typically my morning coffee and afternoon/evening workout. Find yours and defend it at all cost.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

I had been working in retail management thinking I was going to pursue a career in retail corporate. A job opportunity opened for a local nonprofit that I believed in. This was the catalyst for my career in nonprofit and people management. I love studying how people lead and engage in team settings. It was while working at a cultural institution in Chicago that I realized my love for the science behind leaders and team development. I was able to shift the culture of the team and nurture innovators, influencers, and leaders to find their own brilliance.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

I've had many supervisors in my career. There was one in particular who I didn't align well with. It was the most helpless and demoralizing experience. I made a promise to myself I would be her antidote in the world of leaders and honor all that my good supervisors instilled in me.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team by Patrick Lencioni really shaped how I help teams build better habits to navigate toward better behaviors. The Joy Manifesto: Detach from the Corporate Mindset. Access Your Heart. Lead with Wisdom. by Jax Black reaffirmed my passion and need to be in spaces where I can engage as my preferred self in the workplace. The Four Agreements by Miguel Ruiz is probably the book that has helped me in the current era of my career. Those agreements push me through the tough days and grounds me in a foundation that is simple to remember.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

You are required to be selfless, but in order to do this, you must maintain care for self. Find a routine or personal ritual that is your non-negotiable. Mine is typically my morning coffee and afternoon/evening workout. Find yours and defend it at all cost.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

Right now, it's best to find me on LinkedIn and include a note that you saw this post. Eventually, I'll have a place where I will be for those who need me.



TIFFANY

GORMAN

**Doula, Evidence Based Birth Instructor,
Early Childhood Developmentalist**

Birth work is social justice work. Birth work is sacred work. Birth work needs Black hands. Your desire to make a difference is great. Put it with action and change happens.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

I've been taking care of babies since I was 10 or 11. I started babysitting for my cousin, people in the neighborhood, and by high school a few teachers' kids. I also have been teaching since I was a child. I had all sorts of plans with my life! I went to culinary school to become a chef. I moved to Chicago to become a chef, and then I had a baby. I knew that restaurant life and hours were no longer for me. I didn't know what I was going to do. I was fired one early morning at Jamba Juice after a very meaningful "God I don't wanna work here anymore" prayer before my manager came in. LOL! Well, I was put into gear. I taught a cooking class at my daughter's preschool. Which led me to working there while taking early childhood education classes at Olive Harvey College in Chicago. Over the next 7 years, I worked as an infant teacher and nanny. It was during my graduate work at Erikson Institute for early childhood development, that I took a Doula training. It was at the suggestion of a fellow Fiskite friend and midwife Jeanine Logan. Here I am 6 years later, a full-time doula and birth educator and board chair of the Chicago South Side Birth Center, a center focused on culturally competent women's health services, for black women and birthing people that was founded by that same Fiskite friend, Jeanine.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

Working on the Chicago South Side Birth Center with Jeanine and her encouragement to even get into the field has been a huge blessing to me. Listening to the birth trauma stories of my friends and families disturbed me into action.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

There are lots of doula trainings, find one that will align with your values and principles. I am an Evidenced Based Birth Instructor. The Evidence Based Birth Academy, <https://evidencebasedbirth.com/>, is a wonderful organization for parents and birth workers alike. I did my doula training with Shafia Monroe Consulting, SMC Full Circle Doula Training, <https://smcdoulas.com/>. It was a wonderful program.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

Birth work is social justice work.

Birth work is sacred work. Birth work needs Black hands. Your desire to make a difference is great. Put it with action and change happens.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

You can visit my website for more information on classes at www.tiffwellness.com and donate to the Chicago South Side Birth Center at www.chicagosouthsidebirthcenter.org.



JUANITA HENDERSON

Founder, Curator She Is Seen Collective
CEO, Chocolate Kinks & Kurls

Remember that you are a vital part of the community you are building. The same way you show up for others, allow them to show up for you. Lead with a heart that is open to receiving the same care, protection, and grace that you so freely give.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

Moving through the world as a Black woman has deeply shaped my heart and my mission. It has led me to prioritize creating a soft place for us to land. Spaces where we are truly safe, seen, and heard.

While Chocolate Kinks & Kurls focuses on the beauty of our crowns and She Is Seen Collective centers on us taking up space in every area of life, they share the same heartbeat. At their core, both are gentle reminders that we are allowed to show up as our full, authentic selves and simply just be.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

Nikki Porcher, the founder of Buy From a Black Woman. Her dedicated work serves as both an inspiration and a powerful confirmation that the act of building community is a deeply necessary, healing, and impactful journey when it is truly your heartwork.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

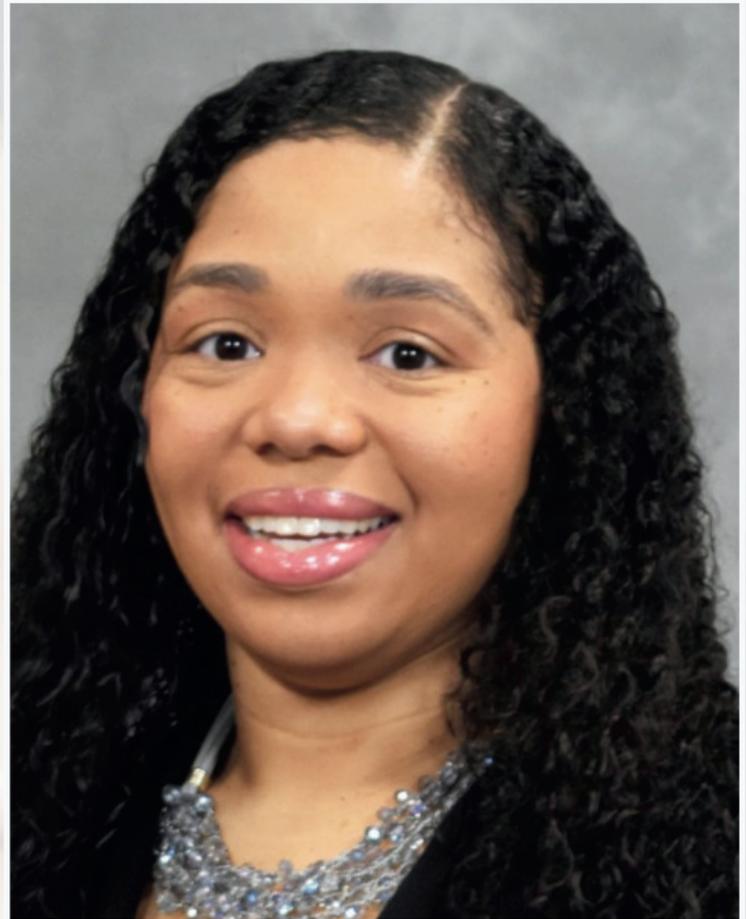
My best advice is to remember to pour into yourself. While you are dedicated to your heartwork, your own soul needs tending too. You can only guide and support others effectively when your own cup is full.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

To the next generation of Black women leaders entering the space of building safe and impactful communities, I'll end with elaborating on something I shared earlier. Remember that you are a vital part of the community you are building. The same way you show up for others, allow them to show up for you. Lead with a heart that is open to receiving the same care, protection, and grace that you so freely give.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

While She is Seen Collective is currently on a social media hiatus, we will be returning soon with details on our first experience of 2026 and more. In the meantime, please connect with us on Instagram @sheisseencollective, follow us on Facebook at She is Seen Collective, and subscribe to our email list at sheisseencollective.com for the latest updates.



Dr.

LECHEY

HIBBLER

**Licensed Clinical Psychologist,
CEO of Hibbler Behavioral Health, LLC**

I would encourage the next generation of Black women health psychologists to be intentional about pouring into themselves. This work is meaningful, but it can also be demanding. Prioritizing self-care, engaging in your own therapy, nurturing healthy friendships and relationships, and setting clear boundaries are essential—not optional.

Putting yourself first is not selfish; it is sustainable. When you are grounded and well-supported, you are better equipped to lead, advocate, and serve others with excellence.

www.soulfullbydesign.com

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

I began my career in public health, where I had the opportunity to help lead a research study examining disparities in cancer treatment outcomes between patients of color and white patients. One of the most significant findings was that patients of color often lacked access to clinical health psychologists—professionals who play a critical role in helping patients process their diagnosis, navigate treatment, and manage the emotional toll of illness.

Recognizing the profound impact that psychological support had on patient outcomes was a turning point for me. It became clear that addressing medical disparities required not only systemic change, but also direct clinical intervention. That realization led me to pursue a doctorate in clinical psychology with a specialization in health psychology.

Today, I work with individuals managing both chronic and acute medical conditions, helping them improve their overall health outcomes while also addressing the stress, anxiety, and emotional challenges that often accompany illness.

It is deeply meaningful to support patients in understanding their diagnoses, strengthening their coping skills, and advocating for themselves within complex healthcare systems.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

Without question, my patients have influenced me the most. Each person I work with reinforces why this work matters. Supporting patients as they gain clarity about their health, find their voice, and advocate for themselves is one of the most fulfilling aspects of my career.

Their resilience has inspired me to step into greater leadership roles within the healthcare community. My commitment to advocacy—particularly for underserved populations—has not only strengthened my leadership skills but has also shaped me into a more thoughtful and effective clinician. My patients continually remind me that this work is both a privilege and a responsibility.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

For those interested in clinical health psychology, I encourage starting with hands-on exposure. Volunteering in hospitals or clinics provides invaluable insight into the patient experience and the realities of navigating the healthcare system. Observing these environments firsthand can help clarify whether this path aligns with your passion and strengths.

I also strongly recommend seeking out clinicians who are already doing the work you aspire to do. Connecting with mentors and asking thoughtful questions about their journey can provide clarity, direction, and inspiration. Understanding what your future role could look like makes the goal feel tangible and attainable.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

I would encourage the next generation of Black women health psychologists to be intentional about pouring into themselves. This work is meaningful, but it can also be demanding. Prioritizing self-care, engaging in your own therapy, nurturing healthy friendships and relationships, and setting clear boundaries are essential—not optional.

Putting yourself first is not selfish; it is sustainable. When you are grounded and well-supported, you are better equipped to lead, advocate, and serve others with excellence.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

You can stay connected by visiting my website:

<https://www.hibblerbehavioralhealth.com/>

Or

Email:

dr.hibbler@hibblerbehavioralhealth.com

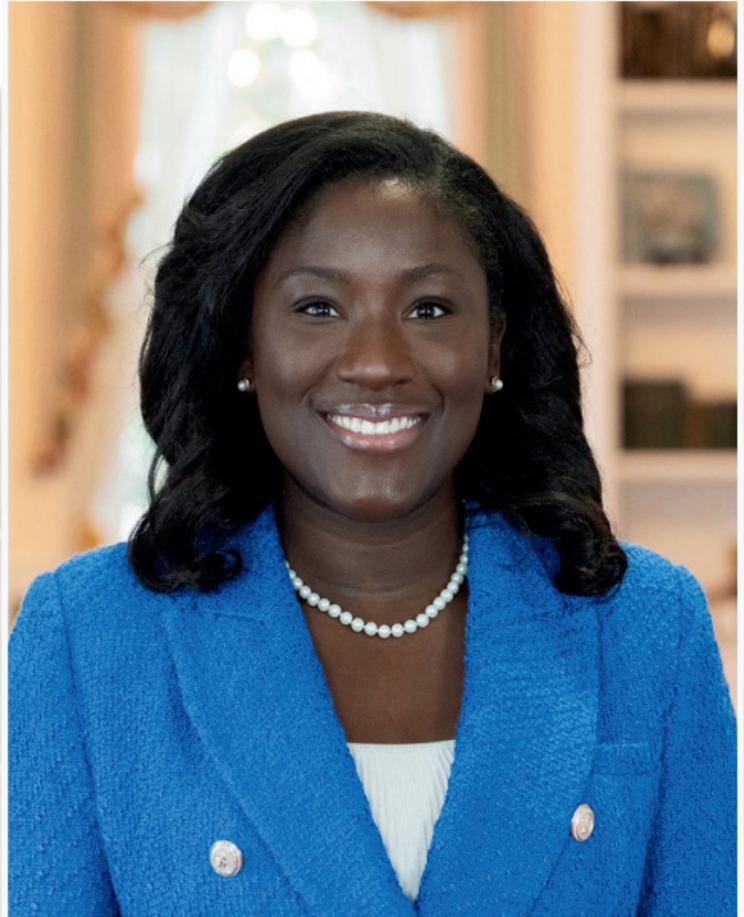
Phone: 615-424-9277

Fax: 877-552-0149

You can also follow me on social media:

Facebook: TheBlackPsychDoc

Instagram: @TheBlackPsychDoc



WHITNEY

HUBBARD

Healthcare Policy and Strategy Leader

To whomever might be reading this, I don't know you, but I know that if you are a Black Woman you are made from resilience, strength, intelligence. You already have everything inside of you to show up in whatever rooms you desire. Don't let imposter syndrome or anyone tell you anything different.

www.soulfullbydesign.com

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

By day, I work in healthcare policy, mostly focused on ensuring access to therapies for Medicare beneficiaries. We all love and know someone who receives Medicare, so this work is particularly meaningful to me and has wide-ranging impact to the community at large, which makes it doubly fulfilling. While I initially planned to be a physician, I had the opportunity to study abroad in Copenhagen, Denmark while I was a student at Vanderbilt University, where I learned about universal healthcare. It became evident to me that access to medicine is such a critical first step in the healthcare continuum, that I needed to focus my energies there versus practicing medicine.

By evening, I am very involved in multiple civic, philanthropic and arts groups in the Washington, DC community. I love the arts as it's my opportunity to engage the cultural/creative side of my brain, after a day full of healthcare policy making!

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

I have been blessed with resources and ability, so who am I to NOT be of service to my community in whatever way that I can. As a black woman descended from slaves, and ancestors of meager beginnings, my parents very much reminded me of the sacrifices of those who came before me. Further, as a legacy, 20-year member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Incorporated, I have been anchored by the motto of my beloved sorority, of being "community conscious and action oriented" as well as a poem that we hold close to our hearts, about being a "house by the side of the road," a support system for our fellow man.

My love for the arts comes from my desire to highlight more young people of color in the patronage/business side of the arts, when it has been more of a older, white dominated space. I particularly like to support institutions that tell diverse stories, as I feel like we learn so much about other cultures and facilitate connection through the arts. During times such as this, where diversity and the arts are being assaulted - that connection and understanding is especially critical.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

For health policy, there are a wealth of resources out there. Search for relevant podcast episodes to learn about the current issues in the space.

I would also suggest seeing what internships are out there. There are so many subdisciplines in health policy - the key is getting exposure to as many as possible to discover where you would like to best plug in.

Regarding greater patronage of the arts and philanthropy - Just start! Show up as authentically as you can. Both Arts board that I serve on came about because I was attending events I was genuinely interested in and people noticed me and offered me a seat at the table.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

To whomever might be reading this, I don't know you, but I know that if you are a Black Woman you are made from resilience, strength, intelligence. You already have everything inside of you to show up in whatever rooms you desire. Don't let imposter syndrome or anyone tell you anything different.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

Follow my [LinkedIn](#) where I update my community on my professional and philanthropic engagements.



KIMBERLAND JACKSON

**Intuitive Melanated Life Coach and
Creator of Discover Your Destiny**

Protect your nervous system and your joy like they are sacred. Because they are.

You do not have to perform strength to be powerful. Regulation is power. Joy is resistance. Rest is strategy.

Interrogate urgency. Systems will try to convince you that exhaustion is proof of commitment. It is not. Sustainable leadership requires honoring your humanity, practicing emotional integrity and inviting community accountability.

www.soulfullbydesign.com

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My work was born at the intersection of burnout, faith, neuroscience, and the lived experience of being a Black woman navigating systems that were never designed for my nervous system to feel safe. I began my career in education and school improvement, believing deeply in equity and the power of Social Emotional Learning.

Over time, I realized that we were asking children and educators to self-regulate inside environments that were dysregulating by design.

At the same time, I was confronting my own late-diagnosed neurodivergence and complex trauma. I had to prioritize learning about my brain. I had to understand what safety, connection, and purpose actually require biologically. That journey changed everything. It shifted my coaching, my leadership, and my theology.

As an Intuitive Melanated Life Coach and creator of Discover Your Destiny, I now help people build deep relationships with God outside of the constructs of religion. I support them in connecting to their bodies and nervous systems, honoring their unique design and purpose.

My work centers on brain research; the more we understand about how our brain and spirit align, the more we create space for healing and for calling.

Ultimately, I do this work because Black women deserve to build lives that bring them joy at a spirit level.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

My leadership is shaped by lived experience first. Surviving burnout. Navigating neurodivergence. Healing complex trauma. Leaving environments that were harming my body and spirit.

Faith has been foundational. Building a deep personal relationship with God that calls me toward truth, disruption, and joy has been the best gift I have given myself. I am influenced by liberation movements led by Black women who refused to separate spirituality from justice such as Assata Shakur, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Nina Simone.

Books on trauma and neuroscience changed how I understand behavior and leadership, especially work by Nedra Twaab, Dr. Mariel Buqué and Dr. Joy Harden-Bradford. Their work affirmed for me that we have what we need to heal ourselves and access the strength of what our grandmothers already knew in their bodies.

Community has also shaped me. Living abroad I have leaned heavily on creating virtual spaces where women can reconnect to themselves and build deep sisterhoods that support transparency, vulnerability and emotional integrity.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

We teach and lead best from the places where we have lived experience. So immerse yourself in your own healing. Don't rush it. Let your nervous system catch up to your vision. Allow your spirit to lead you, not urgency, comparison, or performance.

For me, breathwork has been transformational. It helped me move out of my head and back into my body. So much of my early healing was intellectual. I could explain trauma. I could teach neuroscience. But breathwork forced me to feel.

Working with energy practitioners like Millana Snow helped me move beyond analysis and into integration. I learned how to release stagnant energy and create internal coherence between mind, body, and spirit. That synchronization changed how I lead.

I would also encourage people to study trauma and the body. Books like *The Body Keeps the Score* offer language for what many of us have lived but could not name.

Start with yourself. Heal what you can. Tell the truth about what you are still healing. Then invite others into the journey.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

Protect your nervous system and your joy like they are sacred. Because they are.

You do not have to perform strength to be powerful. Regulation is power. Joy is resistance. Rest is strategy.

Interrogate urgency. Systems will try to convince you that exhaustion is proof of commitment. It is not. Sustainable leadership requires honoring your humanity, practicing emotional integrity and inviting community accountability.

Lastly, find your specific assignment and honor your gifts. Not every leader is called to the front line. Some of us are builders. Some are healers. Some are archivists. Burnout often happens when we abandon our actual calling to meet someone else's expectation.

And remember this. Every experience teaches you something you will need for your purpose journey.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

Discover Your Destiny is my signature curriculum where I take people on a journey to build deep personal relationships with God and align their nervous system, spiritual gifts, and purpose. www.dyd25.com

Join my Patreon, The Archive, our living gathering space where we protect our stories, practices, and wisdom together so that what we carry forward shapes what the future knows about us. www.patreon.com/mindingmyblackassbusiness

I host free monthly healing circles for Black women looking to connect back to their bodies and their breath. tinyurl.com/blackwomenhealingcircle

On my podcast network we have several podcasts where we explore faith, neuroscience, culture, and healing through honest conversation and laughter. You can subscribe on YouTube and join our LIVE conversations. <https://www.youtube.com/@mindingmyblackassbusiness>

Find more information about me and my journey including my first blog posts go to www.kimberlandjackson.com

Social Spaces:

- www.instagram.com/kimberlandj
- www.tiktok.com/@kimberlandj



TONJA KHABIR

**Cultural Planner & Community Strategist;
Owner: Francis and Wade, Consulting**

My advice to the next generation of Black women leaders is to recognize the power you already carry. Your perspective, cultural insight, and lived experience are not soft skills, they are assets that can shape policy, programs, and communities in ways that others cannot. Learn the technical language of your field, whether that's policy, planning, or finance, but never lose sight of the communities and culture that ground you.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

I'm a cultural planner and community strategist from Macon, Georgia, and my work sits at the intersection of community development and urban planning. I have spent over 15 years supporting community and public health initiatives in East and Southern Africa as well as my hometown of Macon, Georgia.

Over the past five years, my focus has been on the historic African American neighborhood of Pleasant Hill, a community deeply affected by the Federal Highway System built in the 1960s. Much of the work has been about reconnecting the neighborhood to the resources, opportunities, and capital it has divested of, and most importantly, to itself. Through fostering strategic partnerships, I helped leverage \$31 million in public and private investments to support equity-driven initiatives in the neighborhood. This work taught me quickly that passion alone does not move systems. You have to understand how policy works, how grants flow, and how to sit at decision-making tables without losing your cultural grounding.

This work is deeply personal. My mother, who passed away in 2011 at 52, inspired my commitment to equity and public service.

Despite her kindness and generosity, structural barriers limited her opportunities. Her experience managing chronic health challenges showed me how social determinants of health like, access to education, healthcare, transportation, and economic stability, shape lives. Her story motivates me to create communities where people can live longer, healthier, and more fulfilled lives.

My approach is people-first and community centric. I center those most impacted by inequity and design systems that restore dignity, stability, and joy through elements of culture. I have lead resident-driven planning processes, managed cross-sector grants and partnerships, created funding opportunities for black led businesses and nonprofits and turned culture - the stories, traditions, and creative energy of a place - into strategies that advance public health, economic opportunity, and neighborhood identity.

At heart, I am an ecosystem builder. I believe neighborhoods are more than buildings; they are networks of people, creativity, and informal leadership. My goal is to ensure Black communities thrive as the authors of their own future.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

The biggest influences on my leadership and commitment come from the communities I serve and the culture that shaped me. Throughout my life, I have witnessed everyday Black leadership, the artists, elders, small business owners, and neighbors who hold communities together without titles or recognition. One of my greatest inspirations is Ruth Hartley Moseley, a Civil Rights activist, businesswoman, and philanthropist from Macon, Georgia. She was the first Black nurse in the state, helped found many historic Black institutions including the Booker T. Washington Community Center and Macon's NAACP chapter, and even left her two-story home to be used as a community space for women. Her resilience, creativity, and deep sense of responsibility taught me that leadership is not about position, it's about impact.

My own lived experiences further shaped my commitment to equity and systems change. Seeing how disinvestment and inequitable policies affected neighborhoods showed me the urgent need for intentional, culturally informed approaches to development.

I am inspired by movements for racial and economic justice, and by women who lead with both strategy and heart, proving that cultural understanding and technical expertise are not mutually exclusive.

Books and research have also guided my work. Authors and activists like Melissa Harris-Perry, Jay Pitter, and Liz Ogbu activated my thinking about community-driven planning, reinforcing that policy and culture must work together and that systemic change requires both vision and actionable strategy.

Ultimately, my leadership reflects the communities that raised me, the cultural knowledge they carry, and a belief that Black communities should not only be included in decision-making, but should be the authors of our own futures.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

For those who feel called to this work, I always say start by going to the community. My own experience in the Master of Public Health program developed by Dr. Patricia Rodney had a profound impact on me as an activist. It taught me the importance of approaching community work with deep empathy and understanding. Before proposing any solutions, you have to understand the community's needs from relevant and diverse perspectives.

That means asking questions at every level. Talk not just to CEOs or leaders, but to patrons, neighbors, staff, and everyone who experiences the space. Listen closely, observe, and learn from the people who live the reality you hope to impact. Once you truly understand the needs, you can begin to see what solutions might be relevant and sustainable.

For me, that approach allowed me to use my skills to support meaningful change. It was exciting to help address needs I had observed, and it was challenging to navigate the complexity of real communities. But those challenges created opportunities to see progress in real time, understand the nuances of systemic issues, and grow as a leader. My advice to anyone entering this field is simple: immerse yourself in the community, stay curious, and let the people you serve guide the work.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

My advice to the next generation of Black women leaders is to recognize the power you already carry. Your perspective, cultural insight, and lived experience are not soft skills, they are assets that can shape policy, programs, and communities in ways that others cannot.

Learn the technical language of your field, whether that's policy, planning, or finance, but never lose sight of the communities and culture that ground you.

Protect your energy and build networks of support, mentorship, and collaboration. Leadership does not mean doing it all alone. Seek out spaces where you can both learn and contribute, and do not be afraid to take up space at decision-making tables. Your voice matters, and the future of neighborhoods, organizations, and systems will be stronger when it reflects your vision.

Finally, remember that impact is often measured in small, consistent actions over time. Celebrate progress, even when it feels incremental, and stay connected to the people and communities that inspire you. You belong in this work, and your leadership is essential to creating equitable, thriving spaces for generations to come.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

People can stay connected to my work by following me on LinkedIn, where I share updates, insights, and opportunities for collaboration. I welcome conversations with anyone interested in advancing equitable development and creative community solutions. You can also learn more about past projects at FrancisandWade.com.



TASION

KWAMILELE

Brand & Reputation Communications Leader

My offering is to "Trust the Process"

Not just in words but in action, which is easier said than done. Lessons aren't always in order so take each on as it comes, but never skip the process of full development no matter how slow it may seem. Later down the road it's those foundational steps that prepare you for greater responsibility, tougher challenges and more success.

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Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My journey into PR & Communications work has been shaped by both professional responsibility and personal conviction. Early in my career, I recognized that leadership is not defined solely by outcomes, but by who has access to opportunity, influence, and the ability to shape and control the narrative. That awareness sharpened my focus on the intersection of power, visibility, and strategic positioning.

Working within complex environments across diverse sectors—and alongside high-profile leaders and talent—I witnessed firsthand how decisions made in executive rooms directly determined the trajectory and success of companies. I saw that access to those rooms, and the perspective carried into them, often made the difference between organizations that merely operated and those that truly led.

These experiences grounded my commitment to operate not just as an executive, but as a strategic bridge—aligning leadership vision with cultural awareness, institutional priorities, and long-term impact. My work has centered on ensuring that leaders and organizations are positioned with intention, credibility, and influence where it matters most.

My values are rooted in integrity, courage, and service. I believe leadership requires proximity—to people, to truth, and to impact. I have been guided by the principle “High-level work for ground level impact”, meaning influence must be used to open doors, not simply occupy rooms. This work is not transactional for me; it is purpose-driven.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

My leadership and commitment to this work have been shaped first by those closest to me—my family, friends, and trusted professional colleagues. They have consistently challenged me to operate at my highest level, to lead with integrity, and to remain grounded in purpose regardless of the environment I am in. Their belief in my capacity and their willingness to hold me accountable have strengthened both my discipline and my clarity.

Equally influential has been my direct exposure to how business and leadership operate at the highest levels. I have observed that many organizations rely on legacy approaches that prioritize maintenance over imagination, and access over intentional strategy.

Witnessing this revealed both the limitations and the opportunity within existing systems. It reinforced my commitment not to simply inherit pathways, but to create new ones—pathways that expand what leadership can look like and how influence can be used.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

I firmly believe that study and application are equally essential to meaningful leadership. Depending on the field, formal education and training can provide critical foundations, but formal practice is indispensable. It is through real-world experience that you develop judgment, resilience, and the ability to navigate complexity—lessons that no book or masterclass can fully replicate. Practice teaches you how to make decisions with imperfect information, how to carry responsibility, and how to lead with both clarity and accountability.

At the same time, I place tremendous value on personal development, particularly the intentional cultivation of emotional intelligence.

Growth requires reflection, discipline, and a sustained commitment to refining who you are as a leader. Early in my career, reading *What I Know For Sure* by Oprah Winfrey was profoundly influential. Her reflections reinforced the importance of self-trust, consistency, and aligning your work with your deeper values. It helped me recognize that leadership is not defined solely by external achievement, but by internal clarity, conviction, and the ability to lead from an anchored sense of purpose.

As a woman of faith, mentorship and spiritual grounding have also played a vital role in my development. I believe mentorship accelerates growth by offering both perspective and accountability. It creates space for honest reflection while reminding you that leadership is not formed in isolation, but through guidance, community, and service.

Ultimately, my preparation has been shaped by a deliberate balance of study, lived experience, mentorship, and personal discipline. These influences continue to guide how I lead—grounded in self-awareness, strengthened by experience, and committed to continuous growth and meaningful impact.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

My offering is to “Trust the Process.”

Not just in words but in action, which is easier said than done. Lessons aren't always in order so take each on as it comes, but never skip the process of full development no matter how slow it may seem. Later down the road it's those foundational steps that prepare you for greater responsibility, tougher challenges and more success.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

Connect with me on IG and TikTok at @iamtasion, or schedule an intro meeting at www.thekwamilelegroup.com,

Tasion Kwamilele, Founder & Principal
The Kwamilele Group |
Strategy in Motion. Storytelling with
Purpose



Dr.

KIRSTIE KWARTENG

Diaspora | Migration | Qualitative Research Expert | Writer | Cultural Heritage

1. Build and maintain a strong network. Many of the work and speaking opportunities I have received have been through my network. I particularly love Issa Rae's advice of networking across. Connecting with people who are at a similar life or career stage as you can be just as helpful as connecting with people who are a few stages ahead of you.

2. Don't be afraid to do something novel or different just because no one has done it before. Someone has to be the first, so why not you?

3. TAKE CARE OF YOUR HEALTH! This is the most important thing you can do for yourself. Do whatever you need to do to make your health a priority because if you are ill, you won't have the capacity to do any of the amazing work you have been called to do.

www.soulfullbydesign.com

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

At my core, I am a storyteller and curator of stories, and I live this out in 3 ways. Firstly, I am a researcher focused on African migration and the African diaspora. My research involves speaking to people of African descent about their lives and experiences. I use the information I receive to create data that supports policies, initiatives, and programs that improve the social, economic and cultural development of people of African descent around the world.

Secondly, I am the founder of The Nana Project, an online platform dedicated to preserving Ghana's history through the voices of Ghanaian elders. The Nana Project was born out of my maternal grandmother's death. She was 96 at the time of her passing and the loss was devastating for me. Ghana celebrated its' 50th independence anniversary the year my grandmother died. As she was 96, I realized that she carried 46 years of history about colonial Ghana that would never be known because no one asked her for her life story. I created The Nana Project so we can learn our history from our elders while they are still here to tell us.

Lastly, I am the co-host of the Too Known Podcast, a limited series that explores the lives of young Africans in the diaspora. This project was created by my friend and I to share information from our PhD work on the lives of children of Ghanaian immigrants in a relevant, fun way.

My work overall is heavily informed by my experience growing up as a child of Ghanaian immigrants in the United States. African immigrant communities were much smaller when I was a child than they are today. Our small size contributed to a lack of visibility, so people did not understand our lived realities. Due to this, there was a lack of clarity about the lives of children born to African immigrant parents. I witnessed the disconnect between how people in academia described us versus how we viewed and described ourselves. I obtained my PhD to create more data on our communities, and it has led me to where I am today.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

I am deeply influenced by the legacy of my maternal grandmother, Hannah.

She did not receive a formal education because her father did not believe in educating his daughters. As a child, she always encouraged my sister and I to excel academically, and by God's grace, we did. Although she is no longer here, her words and encouragement continue to propel me forward. My parents have also influenced me in my journey to becoming who I am. There's a running joke about African parents only allowing their children to be doctors, lawyers, or engineers. Thankfully, my parents weren't like that. They believed my sister and I had God-given gifts and abilities that they needed to help us steward until we were old enough to steward them on our own. This is why I have a PhD in the social sciences and my sister is a professional opera singer!

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

First, I would say begin internally. What excites you? What do you see that upsets you? What do you want to change in the world around you? The things that annoy us may be the things we are called to fix.

After that, I would say look to your community.

Since highlighting the experiences of my community is the foundation of my work, I would encourage people to look to their communities for inspiration. Be curious about the experiences of the people in your life: your elders, your friends, work colleagues, neighbors, and everyone in between.

A book that has heavily influenced my work is *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* by Maya Angelou, which documents her time living in Ghana. I believe it is required reading for anyone interested in the relationship between Africans in the diaspora and Africans on the continent. Many of the themes she wrote about are still incredibly relevant today.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

1. Build and maintain a strong network. Many of the work and speaking opportunities I have received have been through my network. I particularly love Issa Rae's advice of 'networking across.' Connecting with people who are at a similar life or career stage as you can be just as helpful as connecting with people who are a few stages ahead of you.

2. Don't be afraid to do something novel or different just because no one has done it before. Someone has to be the first, so why not you?

3. TAKE CARE OF YOUR HEALTH! This is the most important thing you can do for yourself. Do whatever you need to do to make your health a priority because if you are ill, you won't have the capacity to do any of the amazing work you have been called to do.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

My primary social media platforms are LinkedIn and my Instagram page where I share information related to African migration and the African diaspora. You can also follow The Nana Project's Instagram page to learn more about Ghana's history. You can also visit my personal website:

www.kirstiekwarteng.com and the website for [The Nana Project](#). Lastly, you can listen to [The Too Known Podcast](#) on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Amazon Music.



LEA

LUCAS-JONES, JD, PHR

**Talent Acquisition & HR Leader
Elevating Talent Management and Intelligence Strategies
X/Twitter Alum**

"[Also], remember to show yourself grace and rest when your body and mind need it. Don't allow your quest to be one without time to reset and to experience peace. Protecting your peace is a must!"

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My journey into people operations and talent strategy has been shaped by both my legal education and a deep interest in how organizations create environments where people can thrive. My Juris Doctor degree provided me with a strong foundation in understanding how laws, policies, and systems influence workplace practices and employee protections. It also sharpened my ability to think critically, analyze complex issues, and advocate thoughtfully—skills that have been invaluable throughout my career.

While studying law, I became increasingly interested in how policies and systems impact people's everyday experiences. That curiosity, plus some serendipity happenings, led me toward human resources and organizational strategy, where I could apply my legal and analytical background in a way that directly supports both employees and business goals.

For almost 15 years, I've worked across HR operations, talent acquisition, and strategic program management, partnering with leaders to develop equitable hiring strategies, strengthening the businesses through my consulting, and designing programs that support employee growth.

My legal background continues to inform how I approach areas like employment law, recruiting compliance, and organizational policy—ensuring that systems are both compliant and thoughtfully designed.

At the core of my work is the belief that strong organizations are built through intentional leadership, inclusive practices, and opportunities for people to grow. That belief continues to guide the work I do today.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

My leadership and commitment to this work was influenced by a group of incredible mentors supported me throughout my journey. I was fortunate to learn from a diverse group of individuals—including several Black women leaders—who modeled excellence, resilience, and integrity in the spaces they occupied. Seeing how they led with confidence, wisdom, and purpose helped me understand what was possible and encouraged me to pursue leadership with intention.

One of my earliest and most meaningful mentors was my grandmother, Lee. She instilled in me the importance of education, faith, and perseverance.

She constantly encouraged me to pursue my education and to never stop growing intellectually and personally. Her guidance went beyond academics—she reminded me to stay grounded in my faith, to trust in God’s presence, and to remain prayerful in all things. Those values continue to guide how I approach both my career and leadership.

Professionally, mentors and colleagues from different backgrounds and industries also played a significant role in shaping my perspective. They challenged me to think strategically, to lead with empathy, and to recognize the responsibility that comes with helping shape workplace culture and opportunity for others.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

For anyone who feels called to work, no matter the path, you should commit to a lifetime of continuous learning and reflection. For me, investing in learning, seeking mentorship, and being intentional about learning from the communities and those around me. While I love researching and providing solutions that I developed, listening to people’s lived experiences and being able to learn from those experiences, has been one of the most meaningful ways I’ve grown in my career.

Personally, my faith and the values instilled in me by my family have also shaped how I approach this work. Staying prayerful, grounded, and committed to service helps me maintain perspective and purpose, especially when navigating complex challenges.

Ultimately, I encourage people to stay curious, seek mentors, and remain open to the many paths that can lead into this work. Purpose-driven leadership is often built through both professional experience and personal growth over time.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

My encouragement to the next generation of Black women leaders is to recognize that your voice, perspective, presence, and leadership in multiple settings are deeply valuable. Your lived experiences and insights bring an important perspective that can help shape more thoughtful and inclusive workplaces. Even in spaces where you may feel underrepresented, know that your presence and contributions matter.

I would also encourage you to stay committed to your growth—Continue investing in your education, seek mentors who will challenge and support you, and remain curious about how systems and organizations work.

Each experience along the way helps shape the leader you are becoming.

Most importantly, stay grounded in your values and build community. Community and connection are key part of growth.

Also, remember to show yourself grace and rest when your body and mind need it. Don't allow your quest to be one without time to reset and to experience peace. Protecting your peace is a must!

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

You can find me on LinkedIn at www.linkedin.com/lealucasjones1



Dr.

JANE AMA MANTEY

**Director, Narrative Strategy and Capacity Building
for Black Liberation Indigenous Sovereignty (BLIS) Collective**

Be brave. Many of the institutions and systems we are inheriting are irredeemable to be blunt. While it may seem like the path of least resistance, don't get caught up in the myth that you can tinker around the edges and make them better once you break the glass ceiling. While we all got bills to pay, use the position and power you have been granted to disrupt these systems. To borrow from Andrea Ritchie, to confront, challenge, refuse, and uproot them. To help us devise new practices, institutions, and systems to replace them that are life-affirming and rooted in love and care for humanity.

www.soulfullbydesign.com

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

Narratives shape and reshape the parameters of what is possible, which can then manifest as our lived experience. I didn't understand this at the time, but when I was a kid, I thought that one day I would be a cartoonist or an animator because I loved stories, from my mom's favorite soap operas on television, my older brother's comic books, my dad's coveted record albums and CDs, to my YA novels and more. I would make little drawings about what life was like for the random people I'd see walking around my neighborhood once they went into their homes. I'd wonder how life in adjacent neighborhoods could be so different once you crossed a single road. And, why some people were poor, locked up, or died young, and why, despite all our Black brilliance, so many of those people happened to look like me. I wanted to see and tell the stories of my life — my family and friends, the streets I ran, my community — so we (or maybe just me) could make more sense of why the world was the way that it was and make different choices.

My Ghanaian parents, though? They wanted a doctor. So, of course, I became a doctor.

I ultimately earned my PhD in Biomedical Sciences from Meharry Medical College, thinking I would go on to be a professor at an HBCU teaching about and researching health disparities. A lot of my personal time throughout college, though, was spent advocating for my fellow students against jacked up power dynamics and repressive institutional culture; eventually being drawn into community organizing, which led me to an early career in public policy and administration somehow. But, regardless of whether I was working in the lab or in the legislature, a constant was the allure and power of stories — the power of narrative — and who gets to set the narrative about everything we accept as real, true, normal. I witnessed how the narratives of our beautiful struggles could be co-opted and used against us. And one day, I decided that I was going to take a leap of faith and spend the remainder of my career shaping and reverberating narratives for repair, justice, and liberation.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

Questions like this give me so much anxiety, lol; they make me feel like the winners on syndicated award shows, who start rattling off as many people and organizations as they can before the music drowns them out.

I don't want to leave anyone out.

So, what I will say is that first and foremost, I try to live my life with the hopes that if anyone ever comes across my name or life's work generations from now that I will be remembered as someone who tried to contribute to the Black Radical Tradition and helped us get closer to real freedom. That's what keeps me going. In turn, I have been inspired and influenced by the many great minds and brave souls, whose bodies of work have shaped what the Black Radical Tradition is and will become. (If this is your first time hearing about the Black Radical Tradition, please let this serve as your invitation to follow the breadcrumbs and learn more about it.)

Bonus: Whenever I need to assess and reset how I am showing up as a leader, I refer back to the 1991 Principles of Environmental Justice created at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. It's 17 principles in total, and each one serves as a guide for how I want to treat other people and communities (and the planet), the types of recommendations and decisions I make, and the future world I am helping to co-create regardless of my position at the time. If you've never read the principles, you should and then commit to applying them in your professional and personal life.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

Your guess is as good as mine; I think it's more important that you just begin. Begin wherever you're at and be in an unrelenting, unapologetic pursuit of what is fair, just, caring, and healing for the collective, even when it is deemed inconvenient or impractical. Because if you're in a constant pursuit of what is fair, just, caring, and healing, you will inevitably run head-first into the contradictions of the United States and Western world at large, which is crucial. That's where your personal transformation will happen and you can decide if you're really cut out to be a leader. Because at that point, when those contradictions are glaring, you can either decide to remain complicit in upholding some really sinister oppressive practices and systems – OR – you can begin a journey of learning how those oppressive practices and systems truly came about, what we need to do to abolish and liberate each other from them, and how you can contribute to that shared mission regardless of your profession or geography. I hope you choose to join the legions of freedom fighters before you, with you now, and those to come.

A few books I would recommend as you embark on this journey are:

- Assata: An Autobiography by Assata Shakur
- The Black Antifascist Tradition: Fighting Back from Anti-Lynching to Abolition by Jeanelle Hope and Bill Mullen
- We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice by Mariame Kaba
- Parable of the Sower by Octavia Butler

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

Be brave. Many of the institutions and systems we are inheriting are irredeemable to be blunt. While it may seem like the path of least resistance, don't get caught up in the myth that you can tinker around the edges and make them better once you break the glass ceiling. While we all got bills to pay, use the position and power you have been granted to disrupt these systems. To borrow from Andrea Ritchie, to confront, challenge, refuse, and uproot them. To help us devise new practices, institutions, and systems to replace them that are life-affirming and rooted in love and care for humanity.

This future world can be more than a wild dream. It can become our present reality if we speak it into existence and push together.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

I write from time to time, but you can follow me personally on Threads at @The_Black_Jane.

I also work for BLIS Collective, a solidarity and action hub braiding narratives and growing movements for Reparations, Land Back, and economic justice nationwide. Follow us on Instagram at @blis_collective and consider becoming a sustainer.



KELSEY

MARTIN

Artist

Block out the noise and thrive in your true, authentic self. I've accomplished so much simply by being Kelsey or, as my community knows me as, OG. Yes, we often have to work three times as hard while carrying the weight of the world. We are mothers, wives, caregivers, and so much more, and too often we forget that we are human too. Take care of yourself, your physical and mental health.

Art is subjective and can be whatever you set your mind to create. Whether you're a nail tech, painter, photographer, content creator, or something else entirely...fully immerse yourself in your craft. Knowledge is power and will get you into doors that those who do not have it won't.

www.soulfullbydesign.com

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

I've experienced a lot in my time here on Earth including moments of joy, loss, change, and growth that have shaped the way I see people and the world around me. Those experiences taught me early on to value people and memories deeply, to pay attention to what often goes unnoticed, and to hold space for stories that deserve to be remembered.

I didn't begin photography with any intention of making it a career—it was a part of my college curriculum. But as time went on, the camera became more than a tool. The more people I met and the more stories I heard, the more I gravitated towards documenting them. I found myself inspired by conversations, by lived experiences, by fleeting moments that carried meaning far beyond what could be said out loud. That shaped me into being a portrait photographer.

That inspiration slowly turned into purpose, and I realized I wasn't just taking photos. I was telling stories, making memories, and creating something that allowed people to see themselves reflected honestly and intentionally. Art became my way of honoring those moments, with photography as the medium that felt most natural to me.

Over the past 12 years of shooting, I've learned to fully throw myself into my work. I show up with my whole self; especially when I'm feeling deeply, grieving quietly, experiencing change, or reflecting on the past. Photography has become a space where I process life, where emotion meets intention, and where memory becomes something tangible. Through my work, I aim to create images that don't just capture how things looked, but how they felt.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

I've had many mentors who have invested in me and shared their wisdom, and I'm indebted to them every day. My true friends, family, and community are the ones who have cheered me on and encouraged me to stay committed to my work. When it's hard for me to see my own progress, growth, and change, they help me see what they see in me.

More recently, lived experiences have deepened that commitment. I lost my mom and my aunt in early October, and for a moment, I almost walked away from everything I had worked so hard to build. But I know they wouldn't want that for me. Instead, I now move through life with a new lens and a deeper awareness of the world around me.

Their passing has pushed me into new creative avenues I hadn't previously considered. Genres like grief-centered and documentary-style photography; allowing me to honor their memory while continuing to evolve as an artist.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

Crazy as it may sound, social media has inspired me in the right ways. Having healthy habits around it is important... trust me, I know. But the creatives I've connected with, built alongside, and drawn inspiration from have played a major role in shaping my journey.

I grew up in a generation that experienced life both with and without social media, and I've seen it work in my favor as well as against me. What matters most is how you use it. Get connected to communities that share your mindset, drive, and values. Surround yourself with people who understand the bigger picture; that it's not just about the betterment of ourselves, but the betterment of everyone.

Through social media, I've connected with people who have pushed me to evolve, shaping my style, refining my techniques, redefining my image, and even shifting my perspective on life.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

Block out the noise and thrive in your true, authentic self. I've accomplished so much simply by being Kelsey or, as my community knows me as, OG. Yes, we often have to work three times as hard while carrying the weight of the world. We are mothers, wives, caregivers, and so much more, and too often we forget that we are human too.

Take care of yourself, your physical and mental health.

Art is subjective and can be whatever you set your mind to create. Whether you're a nail tech, painter, photographer, content creator, or something else entirely...fully immerse yourself in your craft.

Knowledge is power and will get you into doors that those who do not have it won't.

Be self-aware. Set boundaries. And most importantly, truly enjoy what you do.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

I'm currently in the process of rebranding my website, but for now you can view selected work at ogkillakels.pixieset.com.

P A G E 7 1

To keep up with me and my latest projects, follow me on Instagram and TikTok: ogkillakels. If you'd like to connect, chat, or book a shoot, my inbox is always open at ogkillakels@gmail.com. I'd genuinely love to grab coffee and talk.



KIKORA N.

MASON

Vice President, Social Media JPMorganChase

Your emotional intelligence is not accidental, it's strategic. Your discernment is not overthinking, it's pattern recognition. And your desire for both excellence and peace is not unrealistic.

Build skill. Build community. Build boundaries.

Do not confuse access with alignment. And don't let urgency rush you into spaces that don't honor your fullness.

You are allowed to be ambitious and protected. Repeat: you are allowed to be ambitious and protected.

www.soulfullbydesign.com

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My work currently sits at the intersection of culture, community and corporate strategy. I currently serve as a Vice President on the social media team at JPMorganChase, where I focus on community engagement and culture-forward brand experiences. But I didn't arrive here accidentally.

I've always been deeply attuned to how culture shapes opportunity — who gets visibility, who gets resources, who gets to tell the story. Growing up and moving through predominantly white institutions, I learned early how much emotional intelligence and translation Black women often carry. To be honest, this probably had a hand in my decision to attend an HBCU! Over time, I realized that what I instinctively did, reading rooms, building bridges, shaping narrative was strategy.

My career in communications/public relations (specifically social media) gave me a front-row seat to how power moves through storytelling. I saw how brands could either extract from culture or invest in it meaningfully. That tension led me to focus my work on building spaces, campaigns and partnerships that feel culturally intelligent and rooted in real community, not performance.

At its core, my journey has been about expanding what leadership looks like. I'm committed to ensuring that culture isn't an afterthought in corporate spaces and that Black women's insight, labor and creativity are recognized as strategic assets, not invisible contributions.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

My leadership has been shaped by Black women — in my family, in my community and in professional spaces. Watching the women in my life navigate work, faith and family with strength and complexity taught me that leadership is both visible and invisible. I think of my grandmothers, Estelle Hicks Green and Mary Rollins Mason. I think of my mother, Winifred Green Mason. It's not just what you accomplish publicly, but how you steward people privately.

I'm also deeply influenced by my father, Dr. Patrick Leon Mason, an economist and historian who has dedicated years to documenting our family's journey from enslavement to land ownership and civic leadership. Growing up in a household where the presence of God, history, political economy and legacy were dinner table conversations shaped how I see the world.

He taught me to think structurally — to understand that outcomes are rarely random, and that systems, policy and ownership matter. That lens informs how I approach corporate strategy and community work today.

Mentors who model clarity over performance have also shaped me. The leaders who demonstrate that you don't have to dominate a room to move it — you just need to understand it.

Books like *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde and *The Memo* by Minda Harts gave language to experiences I had long felt but couldn't articulate. Faith has anchored me in the belief that leadership should be rooted in service, integrity and stewardship and not ego.

Ultimately, my lived experience as a Black woman navigating corporate America has been my greatest teacher. It sharpened my awareness of psychological safety, representation and the cost of invisibility...and it fuels my commitment to building better environments.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

Start with clarity.

Ask yourself:

- What problem am I actually trying to solve?
- Who does this work benefit?
- Am I building for visibility or sustainability?

I would recommend reading *The Memo* by Minda Harts for practical navigation insights, and *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown for thinking about systems and collective power.

Beyond books, find community. Join organizations or spaces where you can be honest about what you're navigating. Mentorship, both formal and informal, is essential. I have complex thoughts about mentorship I'd be happy to discuss further offline, ha!

Most importantly, begin where you are. You don't have to have a title to lead. Leadership is influence, not position.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

You do not have to shrink to survive.

Your emotional intelligence is not accidental, it's strategic. Your discernment is not overthinking, it's pattern recognition. And your desire for both excellence and peace is not unrealistic.

Build skill. Build community. Build boundaries.

Do not confuse access with alignment.
And don't let urgency rush you into
spaces that don't honor your fullness.

You are allowed to be ambitious and
protected. Repeat: you are allowed to be
ambitious and protected.

***How can people stay connected to and
support your work? Please share your
website, social media, current campaigns,
or other ways to get involved.***

I'm around lol. You can stay connected
with me on:

LinkedIn:

[https://www.linkedin.com/in/kikora-n-
mason/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/kikora-n-mason/)

I'm currently focused on culture-forward
community engagement. In my spare
time, I enjoy building spaces that center
psychological safety and sustainable
leadership for Black women, cooking,
traveling and reading. If you're interested
in collaborating, mentorship or just
chatting, I'd love to connect.

Want to learn more about humanizing
leaders on social media? Check out my
interview in the [Chicago Tribune](#).



Dr.

ANTONETTE

PAYNE, JD

**Program Chair for Legal Studies,
Attorney and Trustee for the Fort Wayne Community Schools Board of Trustees**

You are enough, and you are needed. Often, people second-guess whether they are ready, capable, or smart enough. You are. Continue to grow the knowledge and passion that you have. Surround yourself with individuals who also want to lead. Get involved with organizations and causes that align with what you want to do. Seek out mentors who can guide you to where you want to be.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

It's hard to describe my journey into what I do because I wear several hats with different paths. At the center of all of it is education. I started my undergraduate studies as an elementary education major but switched in my last semester to Sociology, focusing on the correlation between race and educational attainment. Even though I did not graduate with a degree in education, I was still drawn to the field and spent my first year after college as a long-term substitute teacher with Fort Wayne Community Schools. I worked in a Title I middle school and saw the many challenges my students faced. That experience, along with a prior desire to study law, led me to law school. There, I was actively engaged in efforts to recruit and retain more underrepresented students and faculty and to use my education to help others. I participated in legal clinics focused on anti-discrimination and assisted special education students in obtaining the services they needed. After law school, I continued to volunteer and participate in civic activities. Years later, I found myself back in Fort Wayne and back in education—first as a substitute teacher again with Fort Wayne Community Schools and then in higher education at various colleges in the city.

Working with students again reignited my passion for education, and I returned to school to get my master's in Adult Education and later my doctorate in the same field. I now split my time as a program chair for Legal Studies, a practicing attorney, a trustee for the Fort Wayne Community Schools Board of Trustees, and as a member of various non-profits and civic boards. My passion for education, equity, and justice has remained at the center of all that I do.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

I was most influenced by my grandmother, Bonnie Andrews. From a very young age, she instilled in me the values of community, education, and equity. She worked tirelessly for her community as president of the East Central Neighborhood Association and participated in many community boards. She never backed down when she believed injustice was occurring. You could find her at public hearings, protests, and community events. She showed me that a leader isn't just about a title, but what you do.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

I suggest they begin with education. If there is an area that interests you, learn about it. Understand what it is and how it works. Talk to people in the field you want to pursue. Volunteer with organizations that align with your passions and beliefs. Ask questions. Never stop learning and try to improve your understanding. If you are considering serving on a board or being elected to public office, I suggest participating in AVOW. AVOW has a nonpartisan institute that prepares women to lead campaigns, pursue public office, or seek appointments.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

You are enough, and you are needed. Often, people second-guess whether they are ready, capable, or smart enough. You are. Continue to grow the knowledge and passion that you have. Surround yourself with individuals who also want to lead. Get involved with organizations and causes that align with what you want to do. Seek out mentors who can guide you to where you want to be.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

I am running for re-election for FWCS School Board, and I would love your support to continue in this work. Contact me on LinkedIn or send me an email at alpayne@alpaynelaw.net.



Dr.

AISHA-AMINA SMILEY

**Clinical Associate Professor | Campus Director BSW & MSW Programs
IU School of Social Work – Fort Wayne**

Do the ongoing work of learning and healing YOU. Look at the woman in the mirror. Do you know her, do you like/love her? We don't always recognize the harm within us, that we cause, and have the unintended consequence of projecting onto others. Know yourself and trust yourself. Develop unshakeable faith and character. Your name, your tone, your look, your presence may always make someone uncomfortable; learn to be ok with that and trust that is not your problem. Find who you are authentically and be her. Love and support other Black and Brown women. Don't be envious, don't be a hater. Celebrate her publicly and give loving correction privately.

www.soulfullbydesign.com

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

Fortunately, or unfortunately, what led me to a life of compassionate service and social work was and continues to be my own experiences and the ability to resonate with and see others in similar situations. I first experienced trauma as a child and through much resilience, and the love of my family; that experience left me with a soft heart to keep falling and getting up, and to see strength in the vulnerability in others.

I take my assignment as a social worker and educator very seriously. It is a privilege for people to let you into their lives. It requires non-judgement, patience, honesty, moral character, and the ability to sit in the depth of dark with and for people, to love those deemed unworthy or helpless; to encourage, coach, and support others to get to a place where we aren't always in survival mode.

I've continued to endure physical, emotional, physiological and racial pain throughout my life. While I have often wondered "why me?", it is these growing pains that have contributed to how I continue to learn, evolve, heal, and teach cultural resilience to others.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

I learned a long time ago that my soft heart is a strength that has, at times, in my life been perceived as fragility. I learned that it requires great strength to lead with heart and at a beat and pace that is not always the norm.

What has most influenced my understanding of commitment has been watching my parents commit to one another for nearly 50 years until the unexpected death of my father last May. My father's death and my own physical and mental health over the past few years have challenged my commitment to God, if I were to be completely honest. I know the Lord is committed to me and has been all of my life. I am regularly reminded of His love and faithfulness. This keeps me going.

Being a mother is a true test of leadership. Sometimes I teach, hold accountable, love, discipline, model, give some rope, and redirect. I learn who they are individually, and at times allow my children to lead. I have had a few mentors over time pour into me, encourage me, and remind me to go for what seems impossible.

It is these experiences coupled with those with all the bad managers (not leaders) who have shown me what NOT to do that have contributed to my leadership and commitment to the work of wellbeing and social justice. I am most inspired by the work and efforts of those individuals, groups, and movements that start from nothing and are propelled by their purpose, from the work of their heart and hands.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

First, determine your why/purpose/calling. There is very little that can deter you from your true calling. It may evolve over time, but the foundation of your why never changes. You don't need an education to be empathetic, culturally aware and responsible, kind, and loving. A good education is one that challenges your values, character, ways of thinking, and allows recovery from mistakes. The reality is that sometimes educational degrees are necessary to obtain the required license to substantiate or endorse the work that you are doing. To be a social worker you do have to have a degree and a license. To provide counseling/therapy you do have to have a master's degree and a license.

I am available to talk with anyone wanting to explore into their purpose, those interested in pursuing a career in social work or who wants to know what advantages are available with a social work degree.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

Do the ongoing work of learning and healing YOU. Look at woman in the mirror. Do you know her, do you like/love her? We don't always recognize the harm within us, that we cause, and have the unintended consequence of projecting onto others. Know yourself and trust yourself. Develop unshakeable faith and character. Your name, your tone, your look, your presence may always make someone uncomfortable; learn to be ok with that and trust that is not your problem. Find who you are authentically and be her. Love and support other Black and Brown women. Don't be envious, don't be a hater. Celebrate her publicly and give loving correction privately.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

I am an open book and do not mind sharing the knowledge and wisdom I have learned over time. I don't have a website currently, but you can find me on FB, Instagram, LinkedIn or likely at a basketball game!



DAWN SMITH

Strategy Integrator and Mental Health Therapist

Sustainability has to be part of your definition of success. Be intentional about how you lead. You will be placed in spaces where you are one of the few, and at times, you may feel pressure to carry more than your share. It is important to know your capacity and to honor it. Boundaries are not a limitation; they are a form of leadership. Stay connected to who you are outside of your work. Your identity cannot be rooted only in what you produce or who you serve. Protect your relationships, your rest, and your sense of self. Also, allow yourself to grow. You will evolve as a leader, and that is a good thing. Give yourself permission to learn, to adjust, and to take up space in ways that feel authentic to you.

www.soulfullbydesign.com

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My journey into this work is both personal and professional. I hold a bachelor's degree in Organizational Leadership and a master's degree in Counseling Education, and my career has been shaped by both. For over a decade, I worked in roles centered on building systems, strengthening operations, and supporting organizational growth. I have always been drawn to structure. I enjoy developing policies, refining procedures, and finding ways to make organizations run effectively and efficiently, in alignment with standards of care and compliance. What I had not yet fully explored was how to apply that same level of care and intention to myself. A major turning point was my own therapy journey. I was a single mother for many years before my daughter was born, raising a son eleven years older than her. During that time, survival was the focus. Providing, protecting, and pushing forward. There wasn't much space to consider my own needs, even though I knew I was tired. When I became a mother to a girl, something shifted. I wanted something different for her, not just materially, but emotionally. I wanted her to inherit wholeness, not just strength.

Beginning therapy became a way to interrupt patterns and model healing in real time. That experience led me to integrate my leadership background with my clinical training. Today, I serve in leadership within a mental health organization, contributing to both clinical care and the development of sustainable, compliant, and people-centered systems. My work lives at the intersection of structure and care. I build environments that support people, while remaining committed to doing the internal work required to lead with integrity.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

A combination of lived experience, faith, and community has shaped my leadership. I come from a lineage of Black women who were deeply determined and resilient. They showed up, held families together, and navigated challenges with a level of endurance that I deeply respect. At the same time, witnessing that also helped me understand the cost of constantly carrying without space to process or be supported. My faith has been a steady anchor. It continues to guide how I lead, make decisions, and remain grounded in purpose, even when navigating complex systems.

It reminds me that leadership is not just about visibility, but about alignment and responsibility. Professionally, my background in organizational leadership has influenced how I approach this work. I naturally think in terms of systems, sustainability, and long-term impact. Serving in community spaces, including civic roles and nonprofit leadership, has also shaped me. Being in rooms where representation is limited has reinforced my commitment to ensuring that our voices are included in both care and decision-making. I have also been deeply influenced by the people I serve. Listening to clients, families, and community members has refined my understanding of what support truly looks like. Their experiences continue to inform how I show up, not just as a clinician, but as a leader committed to meaningful change.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

I would encourage anyone who feels called to this work to begin with their own healing and self-awareness. Before stepping into service, it is important to understand your own patterns, triggers, and motivations. Therapy, supervision, and intentional reflection are not extras in this field, they are essential.

From there, build a strong foundation in both clinical knowledge and systems awareness. Understanding trauma-informed care, cultural responsiveness, and ethical practice is critical, but so is understanding how systems operate. Policy, access, and infrastructure all shape how care is delivered and sustained. Get connected to your local community. Volunteer, observe, and listen. There is a difference between wanting to help and understanding what is needed. Seek mentorship from people who are doing the work with integrity. Not just people who are visible, but those who are consistent, ethical, and grounded. Finally, pace yourself. This work requires both compassion and discipline. If you want to remain in it long term, you have to build a way of working that is sustainable, not just impactful in the moment.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

You do not have to overextend yourself to prove your value. Many of us were taught that being dependable, capable, and strong was the way to earn respect. While those qualities matter, they should not come at the expense of your well-being.

Sustainability has to be part of your definition of success. Be intentional about how you lead. You will be placed in spaces where you are one of the few, and at times, you may feel pressure to carry more than your share. It is important to know your capacity and to honor it. Boundaries are not a limitation; they are a form of leadership. Stay connected to who you are outside of your work. Your identity cannot be rooted only in what you produce or who you serve. Protect your relationships, your rest, and your sense of self. Also, allow yourself to grow. You will evolve as a leader, and that is a good thing. Give yourself permission to learn, to adjust, and to take up space in ways that feel authentic to you.

You are not here to do everything. You are here to do your part well and to do it in a way that lasts.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

You can stay connected to my work through my leadership and involvement with Courageous Healing, Inc., where I support the development of culturally responsive mental health services, operational systems, and community-based initiatives.

I am also engaged in community leadership and youth-focused programming, working to create spaces that support growth, development, and access for the next generation. In addition, I am continuing to develop a body of work centered on the emotional well-being and sustainability of Black women, building on themes I explored in my earlier work, [Enough to Uplift and Inspire Those Who Have Forgotten Their Value](#). This evolving work includes writing, guided resources, and future experiences that explore healing, boundaries, and aligned leadership. Those interested in supporting can do so by engaging with and sharing mental health initiatives, supporting community-based programming, and creating space for honest conversations around emotional health and leadership within their own networks.



TANISHA SMITH

IT Business Partner

Show women how to thrive instead of survive. That's my advice. Labels, vacations, and new businesses are nice but don't equal a soft life. Self-care, self-reflection, the courage to identify and separate from what no longer serves you... The truly difficult things that make us question our programming lead to soft living. Unlearning...shedding. Not a hashtag.

How do you decompress? How do you rest? How do you take care of you? How are you navigating your competing priorities and relationship demands? What is your biggest failure and how are you healing from it? How are you nurturing your inner child? When is the last time you cried?

www.soulfullbydesign.com

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My journey into this work did not begin with ambition. It began with survival. I know what it feels like to lose yourself after tragedy. To question your worth so deeply that you begin sabotaging the very happiness you once prayed for. I know what it is like to live in a season of pain so overwhelming that you reach for comfort in relationships, friendships, and environments never meant for you that ultimately deepen the wound. Not because you lack strength or intelligence but because you are carrying shame that was never yours to carry.

There was a time when I believed joy belonged to other people. Abuse, betrayal, and character assassination have a way of distorting your reflection. They convince you that you are too much, not enough, or somehow responsible for the harm done to you. When shame settles in, it quietly rewrites your story. It teaches you to shrink. To overperform. To accept less. To sabotage opportunities before someone else can take them away.

Healing required radical honesty. It required acknowledging the ways pain shaped my choices and deciding it would not shape my future. I realized that shame only holds us hostage when we protect it. When we stay silent. When we believe we are alone.

That realization changed everything.

The work I do now, whether in leadership, technology, or in spaces that center women's growth, is rooted in that truth. I am committed to building environments where women feel seen, respected, and capable of reclaiming their power. I want women to know they are not broken. They are not disqualified by what they have endured.

Every day, I choose to shed shame. Every day, I choose truth. And every day, I work so other women know they can choose it too.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

I've always gravitated towards wisdom, the Black women elders who speak to your soul kind of wisdom.

I've found some of my most freeing and affirming moments in the midst of a women who have lived, loved, failed, broken, and emerged unapologetically and imperfectly whole. Co-workers, a couple of seasoned Sorors, friends I've met along my travel journeys...amazing Black women who defy societal limitations and expectations to arrive at a place of freedom and acceptance. These are my inspirations.

Audre Lorde has a quote I return to in seasons of doubt and have committed to memory: "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive."

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

Therapy and coaching have worked wonders for me. I thrive when I'm working with a competent therapist. This world is not friendly to Black women. Hell, Black women aren't friendly to Black women. Someone helping to navigate the myriad of expectations placed upon us and societal and cultural pressure to have it (or appear to have it) "together" has a cumulative tax we pay with our bodies and our peace. Releasing and unlearning takes a team of emotionally intelligent support.

A book that is changing my life that I recommend for all over givers is *Set Boundaries, Find Peace: a guide to reclaiming yourself* by Nedra Glover Tawwab. It's slowly helping me give less of a damn.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

F&&* *Black Girl Magic* or the internalized the concept. It causes judgement, shame, and delusion that harms and divides leaving little room for radical honesty which is the only path to true healing. Shed that weight from your neck. You aren't magic. You are human. Period.

Be authentic and by authentic I mean okay looking messy. Glossy is nice. Real is kind. Don't mistake thriving for survival mode. Thriving isn't the ability to keep going through unimaginable circumstances. It's having the ability to see you deserve rest, support, and to move beyond "getting through the day". That's thriving. It's speaking the truth even if your voice shakes (another nod to Audre Lorde). It's saying this no longer serves me and walking away. It's standing up for yourself emotionally.

Show women how to thrive instead of survive.

That's my advice. Labels, vacations, and new businesses are nice but don't equal a soft life. Self-care, self-reflection, the courage to identify and separate from what no longer serves you... The truly difficult things that make us question our programming lead to soft living. Unlearning...shedding. Not a hashtag.

How do you decompress? How do you rest? How do you take care of you? How are you navigating your competing priorities and relationship demands? What is your biggest failure and how are you healing from it? How are you nurturing your inner child? When is the last time you cried?

Be authentic. Your mess and message make way more of a measurable impact than your gloss and floss.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

Check out my Substack at: [Nisha Chantel | Substack](#)

For Black women ready to rebuild without shame. I write about aligned relationships, healing through travel, growth through stillness, faith, boundaries, and choosing yourself. Self-love. Sharp mind. Whole on purpose. Please subscribe, share, and engage.



ANGELA STANLEY

Director of Impact, Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne

Be open to opportunities because you never know what can come from them. Introduce yourself to and network with other Black women in the field. As with most things, our experiences are unique to us, and other Black women can be your best resources and allies.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My career has been nonlinear. I like to say I've always been in the same neighborhood, just on different streets.

It started with politics. I knew voting was my responsibility, but I wanted to understand how the system actually worked and how it impacted my life and the lives of people I cared about. I studied political science at Purdue University, where a professor recognized my curiosity and nudged me toward graduate school instead of law school. I took her advice and entered a PhD program at Ohio State University, focusing on American politics, political behavior, and Black, urban, and gender politics.

I thought I wanted to be a professor. I did research, I taught, and then I realized academia wasn't for me. I wanted to impact people beyond the campus, so I moved into an applied research role at a social and racial justice institute at OSU. There, I worked on projects that influenced public policy and started writing for mainstream publications, blending research with popular culture to reach a wider audience.

That role introduced me to philanthropy. I worked with community groups on grant-funded projects, which meant interacting with foundation program officers. I had no idea that kind of work existed before then, but it immediately appealed to me as another way to help people navigate systems.

When I returned to Fort Wayne, I began writing about local issues. As a result, I connected with the former executive director of the St. Joseph Community Health Foundation. That relationship led to contract work and, eventually, to a full-time position as a program officer. After a few years there, I began working for the Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne.

Different streets, same neighborhood: understanding systems, helping people, and finding ways to make research and resources work for communities.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

I come from a civic-minded family. I had a great-grandfather who was a Justice of the Peace, an uncle who was a city councilman, and parents who took me with them to vote in every election.

I grew up seeing older family members volunteer for organizations that help people in need. Voting and volunteerism were role modeled for me. I also grew up being very aware of racial issues, from hearing stories from great-grandparents born in the 1800s to my own experiences as one of the very few Black kids in the private schools I attended. My commitment to helping others, especially marginalized people, was instilled in me early on.

One of the biggest influences, however, was reading Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* in college. That book showed me a world full of systemic injustice that was unimaginable to me and my sheltered life. Segregation, underfunded and overcrowded schools, whole communities intentionally being left off of maps, neighborhoods being physically blocked off from accessing opportunities available to the rest of the city, and people in power unapologetically turning a blind eye. That's when I knew I had to do something to help people navigate systems designed to ensure certain people fail.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

I think you have to have a passion to serve and patience, because change isn't going to happen overnight. I also think it's helpful to understand systems and how they operate. Nothing truly happens in silos. Much like gears in a machine, everything is a moving part that affects the other parts around it. Where can you intervene to stop what's happening or change the direction? You don't want to just patch problems; you also want to address the root causes. Philanthropy can't and shouldn't solve everything, but it can be part of the solution.

Having experience working with or for nonprofits is also helpful. That way, you understand both community needs and what organizations need to successfully serve people.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

Be open to opportunities because you never know what can come from them. Introduce yourself to and network with other Black women in the field. As with most things, our experiences are unique to us, and other Black women can be your best resources and allies.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

You can find me on [LinkedIn](#) or look me up on the [Community Foundation's website](#) and send me an email. I'm happy to connect.



Rev. Dr.
LAKEYA
STEWART

Minister | Therapist | Executive Director, Renaissance Pointe YMCA

The wisdom I would offer is to lead with integrity. Those I serve know that I will do the right thing even if it causes me to "take a hit". If I lose everything and die today, I want others to know that I was a person of faith who was honest, fair and a person of integrity.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My journey into the work I do starts with my grandmother. My grandmother sacrificed time, money and energy to care for me and my twin sister after our parents divorced. Those years were some of the sweetest years for me. As a Black woman in America, I have had to navigate systems that were not meant for me to enter, yet alone succeed in. Statistically speaking, I should not have accomplished what God has allowed. I have a family history of addiction, have divorced parents and therefore I was raised by a single mom.

My mother never let me settle. When I played Clarinet as a child, she made me and my sister practice 30 minutes every day. My twin sister plays the saxophone professionally now. My mother instilled in me the importance of having a good work ethic. She taught us that we can attain anything we want in life as long as we work for it. One of my proudest moments is graduating with the earned Doctor of Ministry degree in 2017 from Regent University while my triplets were 13 months old. By the grace of God, I was able to write and complete my dissertation/ministry project through the challenges and difficulties I experienced carrying those sweet babies 31 weeks.

These experiences and people in my life have shaped who I have become today. As a therapist, a community leader, a minister, and an adjunct professor, I am able to take my experiences and advocate for others. The discipline I learned from practicing everyday showed me that my skill level in various areas of my life can increase if I “put in the work”. Essentially, all that I have learned, gained and accomplished in this world has led me to the work that I do now.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

My faith in God has been the largest influencer in my leadership and commitment to the work I do. I am called to be the hands and feet of Jesus on earth. I do this by advocating for the defenseless, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and offering counsel to those seeking support. My faith informs how I lead others as I understand that Jesus was a servant leader. I am called to serve others and to lead by example.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

For those who feel called to doing this work, I would suggest they find a person who is doing what they want to be doing. This person can be an informal or formal mentor and can offer insight not the path one might consider taking to reach their anticipated goal.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

The wisdom I would offer is to lead with integrity. Those I serve know that I will do the right thing even if it causes me to “take a hit”. If I lose everything and die today, I want others to know that I was a person of faith who was honest, fair and a person of integrity.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

People can stay connected with me through my Social Media pages on Facebook and LinkedIn. People can also volunteer at the Renaissance Pointe YMCA if they meet the guidelines for those volunteer positions.



MARGARET

SULLIVAN

Activist, Author, Filmmaker, Educator, Mother

I think my biggest piece of advice is not necessarily how to get into this work—it's about how to survive in this work. I was fortunate to be chosen for the We Vote MN fellowship in 2018. This fellowship showed me not only the key foundations and tools to being an activist, it also taught me the importance of not burning out along the way. Most people jump in head first to this work and have no idea how to truly manage it. I tell people pick a lane, and stay in it. You don't have to take on every issue. You don't have to be at every march. Pick a lane, stay in it. And don't let people pressure you to do otherwise.

www.soulfullbydesign.com

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

I have always been someone who strived to represent the underdogs as in many ways I have felt like the underdog in various phases of my life. When I first started in radio in 2015, and just a few months before the murder of George Floyd (just 10 minutes away from my home), the lack of conversations being had about issues that impacted my community-many of which were considered taboo at the time like mental health and police brutality-I wanted to create a platform where those on the menu had a seat at the table but in a way that didn't leave us feeling depressed and hopeless in the end.

Radio is what truly got me into activism. Radio is what inspired me to leave my corporate job (which I sometimes still question that decision cause babbyyyy the bonus checks were sweet) and enter the crazy world of non-profit because I wanted to serve my community full-time. It is how I met so many of the activists I now work with, have become friends with, and who I proudly march alongside of.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

Honestly, my first influence came from my church, St. Peter Claver in St. Paul, MN. That was where I learned the true meaning of doing God's work which, to me, is serving my community. This is why til this day, community is what keeps me going. They are who value my service and impact. They are the ones who lift me up especially when I feel very unappreciated by some of the people who receive credit for the work that I do.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

I think my biggest piece of advice is not necessarily how to get into this work-it's about how to survive in this work. I was fortunate to be chosen for the We Vote MN fellowship in 2018. This fellowship showed me not only the key foundations and tools to being an activist, it also taught me the importance of not burning out along the way. Most people jump in head first to this work and have no idea how to truly manage it. I tell people pick a lane, and stay in it. You don't have to take on every issue. You don't have to be at every march. Pick a lane, stay in it. And don't let people pressure you to do otherwise.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

Boundaries, boundaries, boundaries. I cannot stress that enough. Do not try to be everything for everybody. You don't owe people sh*t. Self awareness is key and so is self-care. Remember your purpose does not come from man, it comes from God. Lead by faith, not by ego.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

I'm mainly active on Facebook and TikTok, but you can also find me on Instagram. All of it is under MsMargaretLive in some way shape or form.



SHELBI

M. TITUS-WALKER, JD, MS

**CEO, GRAITH Foundation
Host, TLC's My DNA Mystery**

To the next generation of Black women leaders: your voice matters. Your perspective matters. Your lived experience is not a limitation — it is your power.

We stand in a space where our histories have often been fragmented or erased. When you enter this work, you are not just building charts; you are restoring narratives. Lead boldly, but stay grounded. Excellence and integrity will always speak for you.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

From a young age, I was captivated by stories — especially the ones that history often overlooks. In Miss Martin's fifth grade class, while watching Civil Rights films, I found myself deeply curious not only about the famous leaders, but about the everyday people behind the movement. I wanted to know who they were, where they came from, and how their lives connected to something bigger. That curiosity became a lifelong calling.

Professionally, I trained as a genealogist and have dedicated my career to helping people discover their roots and reclaim their identities. Over the years, I began working with adult adoptees who were searching for their biological families. What started as research became restoration work. To date, I have helped solve over 1,700 cases, reconnecting individuals with parents, siblings, and extended relatives.

In 2017, I founded the GRAITH Foundation, a nonprofit organization committed to helping individuals uncover their ancestry, understand their DNA results, and preserve their family stories.

I also serve as the host of TLC's My DNA Mystery, where I use DNA technology and genealogical research to help individuals answer life-changing questions about their identity.

For me, genealogy is not just about names on a chart — it is about healing, belonging, and restoring legacy.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

My leadership has been shaped by faith, lived experience, and the stories of the people I serve. From childhood, I was drawn to understanding identity and history. As I grew into this work professionally, I realized that genealogy is sacred work. You are often entering the most vulnerable chapters of someone's life.

My faith has grounded me in the belief that every life has value and every story deserves dignity. Working with adoptees and families navigating loss, separation, and unanswered questions has strengthened my commitment to lead with compassion, integrity, and excellence.

Community has also influenced me. I have been blessed with mentors, colleagues, and clients who trusted me with their stories. Their courage fuels my leadership. This work is not about recognition; it is about impact — restoring identity, truth, and connection for generations.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

If you feel called to this work, begin with listening. Genealogy is not just research — it is relationship. Start by learning your own family history. Talk to elders. Record stories. Preserve what you can.

Then, pursue formal education and ethical training. Join professional genealogy organizations, study genetic genealogy, and commit to understanding both the science and the emotional responsibility of this work. Develop patience, curiosity, and strong research skills.

Most importantly, cultivate empathy. Technical skill will open records, but compassion opens doors to trust. This work requires both.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

To the next generation of Black women leaders: your voice matters. Your perspective matters. Your lived experience is not a limitation — it is your power.

We stand in a space where our histories have often been fragmented or erased. When you enter this work, you are not just building charts; you are restoring narratives. Lead boldly, but stay grounded. Excellence and integrity will always speak for you.

Do not wait for permission to lead. Prepare yourself, trust your calling, and remain rooted in community. Lift others as you rise. And remember — you belong in every room you enter. One of my favorite quotes is, "I come as one, but I stand with 10,000."

Learn about your ancestors, and take them with you wherever you go.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

People can stay connected to and support our work through the GRAITH Foundation at www.graithfoundation.org or www.shelbiwalker.com. We welcome partnerships, donations, and opportunities to collaborate in restoring and telling family stories and preserving identity.

You can also follow my work as host of TLC's My DNA Mystery, where we explore how DNA and genealogy change lives.

Together, we can continue reconnecting families, preserving legacy, and ensuring that every story is honored.



ROSALIND

WALKER-LEWIS

Engineer
CEO, R2D2 Enterprises LLC (Consulting) and
Dream Innovation and Technology Center (Youth S.T.E.M.)

Believe in the gifts God has placed in you! Know that, although hard, life challenges help you learn and grow. Recognize collaborating with other like-minded individuals/groups keeps you from being overwhelmed and enables greater impact and outreach. Be open to learning new things and willing to grow! Seek broader opportunities to apply what you have learned and don't allow yourself to become stagnant.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

Reflection of my journey begins with the expectations of high achievement from my mother, Georgia Ann Walker. A high school graduate with some college, her children WOULD achieve. She understood the importance of education to give me and my sister a chance to make a way in this society to ensure we had what we needed to thrive. College attendance was expected! In high school, I was one of three girls of color who excelled academically in science and math. We often competed against one another to push higher. For college, my career choice started as chemical engineering with a transition to industrial engineering. "Chemical" didn't settle well with who I was at that time. As I researched further into "Industrial", I found my home... People, Process, Improvement for the better. I further developed my leadership skills and joined Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.

Corporate America and various defense businesses became my work home and development platform for the next 38 years. I sought to learn every day with a focus to positively impact the businesses and help others find their way. Throughout much of this time, I represented 1 of a handful of women / women of color.

With my daily work, I offered my continuous classroom teaching sessions to show those wondering 'What does she have to offer?'. It was tiring!

Through years of engagement, I worked with and trained teams throughout the US. Led teams up to 130 members strong across 3 states. Facilitated small and large teams of individual contributors to management executives for business improvement projects. These efforts developed team members. I have used these skills beyond my corporate experience. In retirement, R2D2 Enterprises LLC (Consulting) and Dream Innovation and Technology Center (Youth S.T.E.M.) will allow us to reach many with these skills.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

"To whom much is given, much is required". My mother worked HARD to make ends meet. She and my sister, Crystal, sacrificed to allow me to chase my dreams. I felt a commitment to give them a return on their investments in me. From college and beyond, I tutored youth and other college students to help as I could. God gave me a partner in and for life with my husband Rudy. We know that the paths we have walked through school and careers have "Blessed us to be a blessing!" to others.

He has supported my desires and I have supported his. Through church, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc and other community organizations, I have been able to serve and increase impact in the lives of others. For this I am truly grateful!

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

Figure out your area of passion. Think about who you want to serve and why. Do some research to get insight into how your passion can be helpful. Talk to someone who does similar activities to understand how they have connected the dots. Check with your church to determine possible ministry events to start the journey. If you are a member of a sorority or other community organization, decide how can you engage others in this service?

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

Believe in the gifts God has placed in you! Know that, although hard, life challenges help you learn and grow.

Recognize collaborating with other like-minded individuals/groups keeps you from being overwhelmed and enables greater impact and outreach.

Be open to learning new things and willing to grow! Seek broader opportunities to apply what you have learned and don't allow yourself to become stagnant.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

The property at 1130 E. Pontiac, Fort Wayne, Indiana is being renovated and will house both businesses. Direct follow-up questions to rosalind@r2d2enterprise.com.



Dr.

BRITTNY

WELLS

Business Executive and Higher Education Leader

You do not have to shrink to lead. Your intellect, your lived experience, your softness, your discipline - all of it belongs in the room. Build excellence, yes; but also build boundaries. Protect your joy and peace. Invest in your health. Leadership that is not sustainable is not transformative. You are allowed to disrupt outdated systems. You are allowed to innovate. You are allowed to redefine what success looks like. In short - lead boldly and rest intentionally.

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My journey into this work began long before I held titles. I grew up understanding that health, opportunity, and access were not distributed equally, and that the conditions shaping communities often go unseen. That awareness evolved into a calling.

I pursued public health because I wanted to address systems, not just symptoms. Over the past 15+ years, I have worked across higher education, healthcare, and government sectors to design programs that improve health equity, expand workforce pathways, and strengthen community-centered innovation. Whether leading rural health transformation initiatives, mentoring future researchers, or building academic pipelines, my work centers one question: How do we create systems that truly serve people?

As a Black woman in leadership, I've also become deeply invested in disrupting inequities within academia itself, particularly in how we evaluate excellence, research, and impact. I believe leadership must be both strategic and human. It must honor data and lived experience.

At its core, my journey has been about alignment and doing work that is rigorous, justice-centered, and rooted in purpose. I am committed to building structures where future generations of Black women don't just survive, but that they lead, innovate, and thrive.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

My leadership has been shaped by a combination of mentorship, faith, and community. As a proud two-time HBCU alumna, I was raised in an HBCU environment that normalized excellence and collective responsibility. Seeing Black scholars, administrators, and community leaders operate with brilliance and integrity profoundly shaped my expectations of what was possible.

I am also influenced by women who lead quietly but powerfully. These are women in my life who create change through consistency, discipline, and care - from my closest circle of girlfriends to former bosses like Drs. LaToya Owens, Melva Thompson-Robinson, and Nadrea Njoku. Movements centering Black women's wellness and mental health have also expanded my understanding that sustainability requires boundaries, rest, and healing - not just achievement.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

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How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

You can stay connected with my work through:

LinkedIn:
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/bjamesdrph/>

I regularly share insights on public health leadership, equity-driven systems change, and workforce development. I also mentor emerging leaders and collaborate on initiatives focused on rural health transformation and academic innovation.



ERICA WOODWARD

Clinical Supervisor | Alliance Health Centers - Turnstone

You do not have to shrink to fit into spaces that were not built with you in mind. Your perspective is not a limitation. It is an asset. There will be moments where your voice is questioned or overlooked. Stay anchored in your clarity. You are allowed to take up space, to ask different questions, and to challenge systems that do not serve your community well. Protect your capacity. Leadership does not require constant sacrifice.

Sustainability matters. Rest, boundaries, and community are not optional. They are part of the work. Also, do not wait for permission. Much of the change needed in this field comes from people who decided to build something different instead of waiting for existing systems to evolve.

www.soulfullbydesign.com

Can you share your journey into the work you do? What experiences, moments, or values led you here?

My path into this work is both professional and deeply personal. As an autistic and ADHD clinician, I came into this field trying to make sense of systems that often felt misaligned with how I and many others actually experience the world. Early in my career, I noticed how frequently neurodivergent individuals, especially Black women, were misunderstood, overlooked, or misdiagnosed. Those patterns were not abstract. They were familiar.

My own lived experience shaped how I began to question traditional approaches to mental health care. I saw how often behaviors were labeled without context, and how little space there was for understanding sensory needs, executive functioning differences, or the impact of chronic stress and trauma. That realization shifted my work.

I now focus on neurodiversity-affirming and whole health care, integrating mental health with the body, environment, and lived experience. My goal is to create spaces where people do not have to mask, over-explain, or prove their needs to receive support.

Who or what has most influenced your leadership and commitment to this work? This could include mentors, community, lived experience, books, faith, or movements.

My leadership is most influenced by lived experience, both my own and that of the people I serve. There is no substitute for listening to real stories and recognizing patterns that systems often overlook. That has shaped my commitment to doing this work differently.

I am also influenced by frameworks rooted in trauma-informed care, neurodiversity-affirming practice, and whole health perspectives. These approaches challenge traditional models that prioritize compliance over understanding. Instead, they center autonomy, context, and the nervous system.

Mentorship has played a role, but equally important has been community. Conversations with other clinicians, advocates, and clients have pushed me to think critically and stay grounded. I have also been shaped by ongoing unlearning. Recognizing bias in healthcare, including racial bias, has been a significant part of my development as both a clinician and a leader.

Ultimately, my leadership is guided by a simple principle: people deserve to be understood before they are treated. That standard informs how I approach clinical work, supervision, and program development.

For those who feel called to doing this work, where would you suggest they begin? Is there a book, organization, practice, or resource that helped shape you?

Start with learning and unlearning at the same time. Foundational knowledge matters, but so does questioning what you were taught. Begin by exploring trauma-informed care and neurodiversity-affirming frameworks, and pay attention to voices with lived experience.

Practical steps include seeking supervision or consultation, engaging in reflective practice, and building cultural humility. Spend time understanding how systems impact the people you serve, not just at the individual level but structurally.

Some useful starting points include books like *My Grandmother's Hands* by Resmaa Menakem and *Unmasking Autism* by Devon Price. Organizations and communities that center neurodiversity and equity in healthcare are also valuable spaces for growth.

Most importantly, stay curious. This work is not about having all the answers. It is about being willing to listen, adapt, and remain accountable.

What wisdom or encouragement would you offer to the next generation of Black women leaders entering this space?

You do not have to shrink to fit into spaces that were not built with you in mind. Your perspective is not a limitation. It is an asset.

There will be moments where your voice is questioned or overlooked. Stay anchored in your clarity. You are allowed to take up space, to ask different questions, and to challenge systems that do not serve your community well.

Protect your capacity. Leadership does not require constant sacrifice. Sustainability matters. Rest, boundaries, and community are not optional. They are part of the work.

Also, do not wait for permission. Much of the change needed in this field comes from people who decided to build something different instead of waiting for existing systems to evolve.

How can people stay connected to and support your work? Please share your website, social media, current campaigns, or other ways to get involved.

You can stay connected through my practice, Pure Intention Services, where I provide therapy, assessment, and consultation. I also offer trainings focused on ADHD, autism, and co-occurring conditions through a neurodiversity-affirming and whole health lens.

Website:

www.pureintentionservices.com

Email: erica@pureintentionservices.com

soul
by design
ful
STEPHANIE C. BURTON®