



EMPower Strategy Group Announces The 2025 Greater Golden Horseshoe Diversity Award Winners

Hamilton, ON (Wednesday, October 29, 2025): EMpower Strategy Group presented the 2025 Greater Golden Horseshoe Diversity Awards at a Luncheon Ceremony held at Carmens Event Centre in Hamilton, Ontario on Wednesday, October 29, 2025. The Honourable Dr. Jean Augustine was the ceremony's distinguished guest speaker. Journalist Linda Rourke was Master of Ceremonies. Mustafa Jarra provided musical entertainment.

Exemplary leaders who have created impact through action, and inspired others to build respectful and empowering communities were honoured in four different categories at the 2025 Greater Golden Horseshoe Diversity Awards. Each winner received a beautiful glass trophy.

Youth Diversity Champion Award Winner: Daunte Hillen

- *This award celebrates young individuals (16-24 years) who have shown outstanding commitment to advancing diversity, equity and inclusion. These young champions embody the future of leadership and activism, working to create inclusive spaces within their communities and workplaces.*

Community Diversity Champion Award Winners (Tie): Jessica Bonilla Dampney and Gennile Thomas-Smith

- *This award honours individuals who extend their diversity, equity and inclusion efforts beyond the workplace, actively supporting and engaging with marginalized communities to foster equity and inclusion in the broader society.*

Senior Leader Diversity Champion Award Winner: Dr. Leanne Taylor

- *This award recognizes senior leaders who have been pivotal in driving diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, and influencing organizational culture, policies, and practices towards greater inclusivity.*

Organizational Diversity and Inclusion Leadership Award Winner: STAC Hamilton (Steel Town Athletic Club Hamilton) – accepted by Executive Director Vincent Kuber

- *This award celebrates organizations or businesses that have demonstrated exceptional leadership and dedication to promoting diversity, equity and inclusion within their workplaces.*



Daunte Hillen is an inspiring young leader whose work embodies the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and reconciliation in education and community life. As the Shakowennakarátats (Indigenous Student Trustee) for the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB), Daunte represents more than 50,000 students, ensuring that Indigenous, racialized, and marginalized youth voices are not only heard but valued in decision-making spaces.

In 2025, Daunte made history as the Chair of the Indigenous Student Trustees' Council under the Ontario Student Trustees Association (OSTA-AECO)—becoming only the third person ever to hold this provincial role. Through this position, he connects Indigenous student leaders across Ontario to advance conversations on reconciliation, representation, and educational equity. His leadership has driven meaningful collaboration between school boards, increased cultural awareness in classrooms, and greater recognition of Indigenous contributions to education.

At Sherwood Secondary School, Daunte leads by example—as a student leader, musician, and advocate with CC:ROSE (Cultivating Community, Reclaiming Spaces in Education)—using art, dialogue, and mentorship to bridge divides and foster belonging.

With both African and Indigenous heritage, Daunte embodies the power of intersectionality and unity. His leadership inspires his peers to celebrate identity, challenge inequities, and create learning spaces where every student feels seen, heard, and empowered to lead with purpose and pride.



Jessica Bonilla Dampley is a passionate advocate for equity, inclusion, and social justice whose leadership has reshaped how Hamilton responds to gender based violence. As the first racialized Executive Director of the Sexual Assault Centre Hamilton and Area (SACHA) in its 49 year history, she has brought a decolonial and intersectional feminist approach that centers the experiences of Indigenous, Muslim, Latina, newcomer, and gender diverse survivors.

Under Jessica's leadership, SACHA's long standing Take Back the Night march was reimaged to include all survivors, including women, trans

women, gender diverse people and men, reflecting her belief that healing and justice must be inclusive. Provincially, she serves as an executive member of the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres, working to strengthen policy, dispel victim blaming myths and improve survivor supports across Ontario.

Her dedication has earned widespread recognition. She has been named a feminist advocate by Hear My Voice Women's Network and one of Rabble's Rabble Rousers to Watch in 2023. Jessica's impact also extends into research and policy. She has coauthored academic publications exploring anti oppression practices and racialized women's experiences in the gender based violence sector.

In Hamilton, Jessica continues to drive systemic change through groups such as the Woman Abuse Working Group, Sisters in Spirit Committee and Just Recovery Hamilton, helping to shape policies that promote justice, inclusion and dignity. Guided by her conviction that this work is for those who came before us and those yet to come, Jessica remains a force for collective healing and empowerment across communities.



Gennile Thomas-Smith is a transformational community leader whose vision and commitment to equity have reshaped the social fabric of Halton. As the Founder and Executive Director of Halton Black Voices (HBV), she has built a vibrant, multi-program organization that dismantles anti-Black racism while creating spaces of belonging, learning and empowerment for Black residents.

Under her leadership, HBV has grown into a trusted hub offering more than 40 programs that have served over 500 students through partnerships with schools, municipalities, and community organizations. Her programs span four core pillars—Wellness, Education,

Leadership, and Community—each addressing systemic barriers while celebrating Black culture and excellence.

Flagship initiatives like the Equity Learning Space and Anti-Racism Literacy Program bring inclusive storytelling into classrooms, transforming how students and educators engage with race and identity. The Halton Black Student Union (HBSU) develops young leaders who advocate for equity in their schools, while Deep Roots Basketball Leadership combines mentorship, athletics, and civic engagement.

Beyond education, Gennile has created community-building events such as the Healing Cookout and Black Campout Weekend, which bring families together to celebrate joy, culture, and unity. Through partnerships with Conservation Halton, she has expanded access to outdoor spaces for Black families—an important step toward environmental inclusion.

Gennile's approach is rooted in collaboration and respect across cultures. She forges meaningful partnerships with organizations like Dare To Be Youth (DTBY), local school boards, and municipal inclusion offices to advance systemic change.

Her work has elevated representation, deepened understanding, and fostered genuine inclusion across Halton. Through vision, courage, and community care, Gennile Thomas-Smith continues to redefine what it means to lead with equity, transforming lives and institutions alike.



Dr. Leanne Taylor exemplifies transformative leadership in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in education. A 2025 3M National Teaching Fellow and Chancellor's Chair for Teaching Excellence (2024–2027), she has dedicated her career to dismantling systemic inequities and cultivating inclusive learning environments that empower students and educators alike.

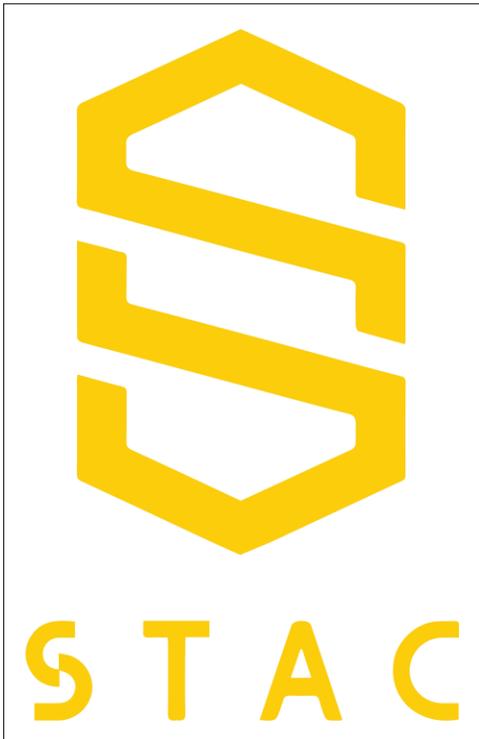
At Brock University, Dr. Taylor chairs the Faculty of Education's Equity and Social Justice Committee, where she leads initiatives that embed inclusive principles into teaching, policy, and institutional culture. Her justice-oriented pedagogy, grounded in Richard Milner's call to "start where you are, but don't stay there,"

challenges learners to confront bias and engage in meaningful dialogue. Through multimedia teaching methods and innovative classroom practices, she inspires critical reflection and fosters a culture of belonging and respect.

Beyond the classroom, Dr. Taylor mentors emerging scholars from diverse backgrounds, helping to build equitable pathways in academia. Her advocacy extends nationally and globally through her editorial leadership with the *Journal of the International Society for Teacher Education* and her co-authored book *First Generation Student Experiences in Higher Education: Counterstories*, which amplifies the voices of marginalized youth navigating systemic barriers.

Dr. Taylor's leadership has reshaped institutional norms, influenced equitable policy development, and advanced anti-racism education across sectors. Her community workshops for school boards in Niagara and Toronto have had a tangible impact on inclusive education practices from K–12 to postsecondary settings.

Recognized as both a scholar and an activist, Dr. Taylor embodies what it means to teach with courage and purpose. Her work continues to transform classrooms, empower communities, and redefine academic excellence through the lens of equity, justice, and humanity.



STAC Hamilton (Steel Town Athletic Club Hamilton) is a nonprofit organization transforming access to sports, mentorship, and academic opportunity for youth from equity-deserving communities. Founded in July 2021 by Executive Director Vincent Kuber, a proud East Hamilton resident and former athlete, STAC was born from a vision to eliminate the financial and systemic barriers that too often exclude racialized, newcomer, and low-income youth from participating in organized sports.

What began with basketball and track programs has grown into a city-wide movement, now serving over 550 youth across multiple initiatives, including an innovative digital arts program that introduces young people to creative careers in media and marketing. STAC's mission is to develop the whole person—supporting physical wellness, academic growth, and leadership—while ensuring every participant feels a sense of belonging and pride in their identity.

STAC's impact reaches far beyond the playing field. To date, 17 athletes have advanced to postsecondary sports through scholarships in Canada and the United States, many as first-generation university students. Alumni often return as mentors and coaches, reinforcing STAC's community-driven cycle of empowerment.

Through partnerships with local schools, the City of Hamilton, the Afro-Canadian Caribbean Association, the YMCA, and newcomer organizations, STAC has built a network that celebrates diversity and inclusion as essential to youth success. Families report improved confidence, academic engagement, and mental wellbeing among participants—a testament to STAC's belief that sport is not only play, but a pathway to equity, opportunity, and community connection.

<https://www.empowerstrategygroup.com/diversity-awards>

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