



2025 WOMEN OF THE YEAR RECIPIENTS ANNOUNCED AT 50TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

May 23, 2025 – KITCHENER, ON – [Kitchener-Waterloo Oktoberfest](#) is thrilled to announce the 2025 Rogers [Women of the Year](#) award recipients.

Another SOLD OUT celebration was held last night to honour the 12 individuals, chosen by a group of adjudicators from 140 local nominees – the most nominations every received for the 50-year-old event. The outstanding community leaders were honoured by friends, family, co-workers and dignitaries with the assistance of Masters of Ceremonies, Robin & PJ from Mornings on Country 106.7. Thanks to [Gowling WLG](#), the event also featured dynamic keynote speaker Sarah Prevette, entrepreneur, investor, advisor and Founder & CEO of [Future Design School](#).

"Our warmest congratulations to the 2025 Women of the Year award recipients," shares Tracy Van Kalsbeek, Executive Director of K-W Oktoberfest. "'For fifty years, we have been honoured to shine a light on the remarkable women in our community. By recognizing, celebrating and amplifying their achievements, we continue to foster equality and inspire future generations."

The following leaders were acknowledged for their outstanding contributions to this community:

[2025 Award Categories](#) and [Recipients](#):

- 1. Arts & Culture** recognizes women for enriching the culture of our community through the creation or promotion of the arts on a volunteer or professional basis. **SPONSOR:** [SCOTIABANK](#)
Recipient: Dr. Kathryn Ladano is a visionary Canadian bass clarinetist who has redefined the instrument through a blend of traditional and experimental techniques. With degrees from the University of Waterloo, University of Calgary and York University and mentorship from renowned musicians, Kathryn has captivated audiences worldwide. A dedicated educator, she's served as Artistic Director for NUMUS, taught at Wilfrid Laurier University and currently instructs at the University of Waterloo. Her discography includes three solo albums and one duo release. After a traumatic brain injury in 2020, Kathryn now uses her music to raise awareness about brain injuries and advocate for fellow survivors.
- 2. Community Service** recognizes women for generously volunteering their time to programs and services that make our community a better place. **SPONSOR:** [ROGERS TV](#)
Recipient: Marjorie Knight has dedicated her time as an anti-poverty advocate and community outreach worker for over 24 years. She has represented Cambridge three times as the MPP candidate. In addition to her work as a Family Outreach Worker with the House of Friendship in Cambridge, she serves on the Boards of The Cambridge Shelter Corp and the AIDS Committee of Cambridge, Kitchener, Waterloo and Area (ACCKWA). A collaborator at heart, Marjorie is also the founder of Rhythm and Blues, an organization that advocates for the Black community in Cambridge.
- 3. Educator** (new for 2025!) recognizes empowering individuals who strengthen our community through outstanding contributions to education and lifelong learning.
SPONSOR: [WATERLOO REGION DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD](#)
Recipient: Jan Basso is the Assistant Vice-President: Experiential Learning & Career Development at Wilfrid Laurier University and a nationally recognized leader in the field of career education within the post-secondary sector. Her role focusses on ensuring experiential learning and career development are integral to the student experience through the provision of comprehensive programs and services which enable students and alumni to realize their career goals and which respond to employer recruiting needs. Jan is a Laurier alumnus, holds a master's degree from the University of Toronto and has been actively involved in professional associations and networks throughout her career.

4. **Entrepreneur – 40+ Years Old** recognizes women for initiating and/or administering an enterprise or business. **SPONSOR:** [MIRANDA O’SULLIVAN, CHESTNUT PARK WEST](#)

Recipient: Mary Beth Kennedy is a dynamic entrepreneur, educator and community advocate. As the owner of multiple successful businesses, she is passionate about innovation and mentorship. Mary Beth teaches entrepreneurship at Conestoga College, guiding the next generation of business leaders. Beyond the classroom, she actively supports community initiatives, mentoring students and job seekers, while contributing to fundraisers for local charities. Her dedication to business excellence, education and charitable giving has made a lasting impact in the Region. Whether empowering aspiring entrepreneurs or giving back to the community, Mary Beth’s leadership continues to inspire and drive positive change.

5. **Group Achievement** recognizes achievements by a group of women that impact and/or improve our community or society. **SPONSOR:** [FOX FINANCIAL PLANNING](#)

Recipient: Women in Communications & Technology (WCT) Mentoring Circles is a nine-month program that provides like-minded professionals in any industry the opportunity to form strategic partnerships in a supported group to achieve their personal and professional goals. Since the inception of Mentoring Circles in 2019, after the WCT volunteer team identified a mentorship gap for women in the Region, nearly 500 participants of all career stages have received support through the program. The initiative was scaled nationally by WCT in March 2024 to foster mentoring relationships across Canada.

6. **Health & Wellness** recognizes women for promoting and helping others achieve and promote mental, physical or spiritual well-being in their careers or community involvement.

SPONSOR: [GREATER K-W CHAMBER OF COMMERCE PHYSICIAN RECRUITMENT](#)

Recipient: Melissa Reid is a Registered Social Worker with over 20 years of experience in providing support to those struggling with grief, bereavement and trauma. She is the owner and founder of Calming Tree Counselling in South Kitchener. As the head of Calming Tree, Melissa provides inspiring, compassionate and steadfast leadership to a diverse team of mental health professionals. She works hard to ensure that people in the K-W community have access to mental health support that is compassionate, inclusive and person-centred. Melissa takes pride in fostering a workplace that is supportive and empowering for all.

7. **Lifetime Achievement** recognizes women for being role models, mentors and/or advocates for positive and social change throughout their lifetime. **SPONSOR:** [SCHLEGEL VILLAGES](#)

Recipient: Joan Fisk is a respected community leader and current CEO of United Way Waterloo Region Communities. Her career includes executive roles at Gore Mutual, Greater K-W Chamber of Commerce and Tiger Brand Knitting Company Ltd. Joan has served on numerous boards, including the Waterloo Wellington Local Health Integration Network, Lang School of Business and Economics Dean's Advisory Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, Conestoga College and the College of Physicians and Surgeons. Her many honours include the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Medal, YMCA Woman of Distinction and the 125th Confederation Medal. Joan’s lifelong dedication to public service, equity and community development makes her a truly deserving recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award.

8. **Professional – 40+ Years Old** recognizes women for dedicating themselves to the pursuit of excellence in their chosen careers. **SPONSOR:** [HOME HARDWARE](#)

Recipient: Kim Wilhelm is the CEO of The Food Bank of Waterloo Region. She leads one of Ontario’s largest food banks, which distributes nearly nine million pounds of food annually across the Region. A passionate nonprofit leader, Kim has extensive experience in fundraising, financial management and building strong community partnerships. She works closely with a network of 54 organizations, as well as provincial and national partners, to ensure a collaborative approach to food distribution. Before joining The Food Bank in 2016, Kim spent nearly 20 years as a senior fundraiser in healthcare and has held various Board and committee roles.

9. **Rising Star** (new for 2025!) recognizes exceptional leadership potential and innovation while achieving significant professional and entrepreneurial accomplishments early in their career. **SPONSOR:** [PILLERS](#)

Recipient: Rochelle Williams is a skilled, young pastry chef and the founder of The Dessert Artist. After completing her formal education with Humber college and nearly a decade of experience working for places like the Shangri-La Hotel and Lady Glaze Doughnuts, it was time to start her own thing. Rochelle identified a gap in the industry for Black representation and began to incorporate her Black heritage whenever possible; starting

with a line of Black Excellence Cookies that highlight kinky hairstyles and positive Black messaging, to creating a line of sweet and savoury Jamaican patties called Petite Patties.

- 10. Skilled Trades** recognizes women for exceptional contributions to the advancement and empowerment of women in the trades sector.

SPONSOR: [GRAND VALLEY CONSTRUCTION ASSOCIATION](#)

Recipient: Emily Pyke is a trailblazing automotive technician, educator and advocate for women in skilled trades. A single mother who defied the odds, she fought through adversity to build a thriving career at Heffner Lexus and co-founded AutoCate – an initiative that empowers car owners through education. As Chief of Trades, she leads groundbreaking workshops across Ontario, breaking down barriers in the industry. A mentor with Support Ontario Youth and a Napa Gearhead, Emily is redefining what's possible for women in trades. Her mission: to create a future where no woman has to fight for her place in the industry—she belongs.

- 11. Science, Technology, Engineering & Math** recognizes women for outstanding advancement to the field of STEM. **SPONSOR:** [PROFOUND IMPACT](#)

Recipient: Dr. Charmaine Dean is an acclaimed academic leader, statistician and advocate for equity with 35+ years of impact. As Vice-President, Research and International at the University of Waterloo, she has led nearly \$1B in research funding and forged transformative partnerships. She chaired the President's Anti-Racism Taskforce, embedding systemic change through 88 strategic recommendations. Internationally recognized with honours like the SSC Gold Medal and France's Order of Academic Palms, Dr. Dean's legacy lies in bridging research excellence with bold, inclusive leadership. Her career exemplifies the highest standards of impact, service and lasting contribution to Canadian society and beyond.

- 12. Young Adult (14 to 23)** recognizes women for leading by example and being a role model to their peers.

SPONSORS: [CITY NEWS 570](#), [COUNTRY 106.7](#) AND [CHYM 96.7](#)

Recipient: Jessica Quinn is a dedicated leader, advocate and community builder from Waterloo Region. Through her work, she has demonstrated a deep commitment to improving the lives of others, particularly in the areas of sport development, inclusivity and youth empowerment. After experiencing the devastating loss of her father in 2023, Jessica went on to make the historic, first ever Team Canada Woman's Box Lacrosse team. At the same time, she also managed to maintain exceptional grades in her Honours Legal Studies program at the University of Waterloo. Jessica embodies compassion and resilience, leveraging her personal experiences to inspire and motivate those around her.

For those not able to attend the event in person, the recorded event will be premiered on Rogers TV on May 31 at 7:00 pm and repeated on June 2 at 9:00 pm and June 6 at 8:00 pm.

Thank you to the many event, silent auction, photography and videography sponsors who made this celebration possible! The Kitchener-Waterloo Oktoberfest Rogers Women of the Year Awards are proudly supported by [Rogers](#), [Rogers TV](#), [CHYM 96.7](#), [Country 106.7](#), [CityNews 570](#) and [Sherwood Events](#).

Photos of 2025 Women of the Year recipients enclosed.

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About [Kitchener-Waterloo Oktoberfest](#)

The first Kitchener-Waterloo Oktoberfest was celebrated in 1969 at Concordia Club in Kitchener, organized by a group of dedicated founders. The keg was tapped and history was made. Since then, Kitchener-Waterloo Oktoberfest has developed its own traditions, becoming one of the largest Bavarian Festivals outside of Germany. Tens of thousands of visitors celebrate annually in our Festhallen, at local restaurants and by attending one of our many family and cultural events. More than just Biergartens, Kitchener-Waterloo Oktoberfest is committed to supporting the cultural, economic and social vitality of Waterloo Region, bringing millions of dollars in economic benefit to the Region each year. Oktoberfest Cares provides funding for charitable partners and supports Festival initiatives that enrich our community such as the Onkel Hans Food Drive and keep admission costs low or free for favourites including the Women of the Year celebration and family-friendly events like KIDtoberfest, Thanksgiving Day Parade and the Willkommen Platz. For more information visit www.oktoberfest.ca.

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