

## ANNUAL 51<sup>ST</sup> WOMEN OF THE YEAR RECIPIENTS ANNOUNCED

**May 21, 2026 – KITCHENER, ON** – Kitchener-Waterloo Oktoberfest is thrilled to announce the 2026 BMO Financial Group Women of the Year award recipients.

Another inspiring celebration took place tonight to honour 12 individuals selected by a panel of adjudicators from 99 outstanding nominations. These exceptional community leaders were celebrated by friends, family, colleagues and dignitaries, with Robin and PJ from *Mornings on Country 106.7* serving as Masters of Ceremonies. Thanks to Gowling WLG, the evening also featured a casual conversation with previous award recipients Joan Fisk and Rochelle Williams.

“Congratulations to the 2026 Women of the Year award recipients,” says Tracy Van Kalsbeek, Executive Director of K-W Oktoberfest. “For 51 years, we have been proud to recognize the extraordinary women who help shape our community. By celebrating their achievements and sharing their stories, we continue to inspire future generations and advance equality.”

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

### **2026 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: Onward Media**

**Recipient: Amanda Amaral** is a publisher and children’s author. Her work has focused on helping children (and people of all ages) understand neurodiversity, foster a sense of belonging and build confidence and self-acceptance from an early age. Amanda has donated copies of her book “My Invisible Friend ADHD” to every elementary school in the Waterloo Catholic District School Board, as well as to local children’s therapy offices. She regularly donates her time to participate in school author visits, book readings, read-a-thons and literary events. Amanda speaks openly about neurodiversity at events across Waterloo and Toronto and volunteers as a facilitator with Junior Achievement and at University of Waterloo and Laurier career and networking events, including Hack The North, to offer guidance to students in career conversations.

2. **Community Service** recognizes women for generously volunteering their time to programs and services that make our community a better place. **SPONSOR: Reis Informatica**

**Recipient: Lucia Harrison** is a long-serving leader at the K-W Multicultural Centre who has dedicated 36 years to community service advancing immigrant inclusion, settlement and community belonging in Waterloo Region. Through her leadership, she has helped tens of thousands of newcomers successfully integrate, while building strong cross-sector partnerships that strengthen social cohesion, support the development of grassroots organizations and celebrate cultures. Lucia’s work has shaped local approaches to community and health services, multiculturalism, equity and inclusion, leaving a legacy that will continue to influence how Waterloo Region welcomes, supports and honours diverse communities well into the future.

3. **Educator** recognizes empowering individuals who strengthen our community through outstanding contributions to education and lifelong learning.

**SPONSOR: Kitchener-Waterloo Oktoberfest**

**Recipient: Mary Robinson** is an Associate Professor, Teaching Stream in the department of Mechanical & Mechatronics Engineering and was the inaugural Associate Dean of Outreach, Equity and Diversity (2021-2025) in the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Waterloo (UofW). A chemical engineer by education with nearly two decades at UofW, she has shaped the undergraduate student experience from first-year advising to convocation, created STEM outreach programs reaching over 30,000 youth annually, championed the decolonization of engineering and built lasting traditions like the Waterloo Engineering Pin Ceremony. She is a

Fellow of the Canadian Engineering Education Association (CEEA-ACEG), a licensed Professional Engineer and a former University of Waterloo Senator.

4. **Entrepreneur – 40+ Years Old** recognizes women for initiating and/or administering an enterprise or business. **SPONSOR: Miranda O’Sullivan, Real Estate**

**Recipient: Kristy Miller**, founder of The Scented Market, is an entrepreneur who has built a thriving, award winning Canadian home fragrance brand rooted in purpose, community and education. What began in her kitchen has grown into a recognized business creating phthalate free scented soy candles that bring comfort into people’s homes. Beyond building her company, Kristy is deeply committed to giving back through community initiatives, mentorship and sharing her entrepreneurial journey to help others succeed. She believes knowledge should be shared, not guarded and is passionate about empowering fellow entrepreneurs, especially women, to believe in their ideas and build businesses that thrive.

5. **Group Achievement** recognizes achievements by a group of women that impact and/or improve our community or society. **SPONSOR: Kitchener-Waterloo Oktoberfest**

**Recipient:** Courtney and Ashley are the leadership team of **Shelter Movers Southwestern Ontario** and are dedicated to making the community a safer place. With diverse backgrounds and experiences, they lead a team of over 120 volunteers who have completed over 1,075 moves in Southwestern Ontario since December 2020, helping survivors of intimate partner and gender-based violence relocate to safety. Over the past year, they have also taken on leadership of the Greater Toronto team and 250 dedicated volunteers who have completed over 500 moves in the past year alone. Together, they coordinate logistics, provide support and ensure each move is carried out with dignity and care. Their commitment to safety, empowerment and community collaboration drives their mission to create a future free of violence, one move at a time.

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 Healthcare & Physician Recruitment**

**Recipient: Nadine Quehl** is a mindfulness and yoga practitioner, educator and community volunteer based in Waterloo Region. Since 2018, she has used yoga, meditation and mindful movement to support mental health and community well-being in diverse settings, including hospitals, correctional institutions, community centres and the University of Waterloo. Nadine leads trauma-informed yoga and meditation sessions for youth in the Child and Adolescent Inpatient Program (CAIP) at Waterloo Regional Health Network and volunteers regularly teaching yoga to incarcerated women at Grand Valley Institution for Women. Through her compassionate, inclusive approach, she creates accessible spaces for healing, connection, and resilience.

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: Judy Nairn** is lifelong resident of Waterloo Region; she has over 35 years' experience in the non-profit and business sectors. Since 2012, she has served as Executive Director of Hospice Waterloo Region. Prior to this, she held the position of Director of Business at Mosaic Counselling and Family Services. Her earlier experiences include Owner of the Canadian Automotive & Trucking Institute and IT specialist. Judy also has served on several volunteer Boards, including 16 years on the Waterloo Catholic District School Board, nine years on the Board of the United Way of Cambridge & North Dumfries and six years on the Board of Governors of St Jerome's University. She is also a longtime member of the Kitchener Westmount Rotary Club.

- 8. Professional – 40+ Years Old** recognizes women for dedicating themselves to the pursuit of excellence in their chosen careers. **SPONSOR: Home Hardware**

**Recipient: Aislinn Clancy** is Deputy Leader of the Green Party of Ontario and MPP for Kitchener Centre. Her commitment to public service began from her days as a settlement worker and school social worker, where she supported refugee youth and their families and provided mental health support to vulnerable students. Motivated by the need for systemic change, Aislinn entered politics at the municipal level as a city councillor before being elected to Queen’s Park. As an MPP, she has introduced legislation focused on ending homelessness, improved support for people with disabilities and helped shape policies that focus on democracy, environmental and economic justice.

- 9. Skilled Trades** recognizes women for exceptional contributions to the advancement and empowerment of women in the trades sector. **SPONSOR: Grand Valley Construction Association**

**Recipient: Jessica Gemmell** is a 309A Red Seal Electrician and a recognized leader in the unionized building trades. After earning an honour’s degree in Political Science, she transitioned into the trades in 2012, advancing into supervision roles across major projects. Now a dedicated skills instructor and Executive Board member with IBEW Local 804, Jessica is a strong advocate for inclusion and equity. She also holds leadership roles with the Ontario Building & Construction Tradeswomen, IBEW Canada Women’s Committee and chairs IBEW 804’s Women’s Committee, advocating for women in the trades at every level. Through ongoing outreach, mentorship, and advocacy, she continues to inspire the next generation while helping shape a more inclusive and equitable future for the skilled trades.

- 10. Science, Technology, Engineering & Math** recognizes women for outstanding advancement to the field of STEM. **SPONSOR: Perimeter Institute**

**Recipient: Donna Strickland** is a professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Waterloo and is one of the recipients of the 2018 Nobel Prize in Physics for developing chirped pulse amplification with Gérard Mourou, her PhD supervisor at the time. They published this Nobel-winning research in 1985 when Strickland was a PhD student at the University of Rochester in New York state. In 1997, she joined the University of Waterloo, where her ultrafast laser group develops high-intensity laser systems for nonlinear optics investigations.

- 11. Vanguard** recognizes exceptional leadership potential and innovation while achieving significant professional and entrepreneurial accomplishments early in their career. **SPONSOR: Pillers**

**Recipient: Sirisha Rambhatla** has already transformed how hospitals in Waterloo Region adopt Artificial Intelligence (AI), pioneered research making AI greener and more accessible and built a world-class research program at the University of Waterloo. An Assistant Professor, Val O'Donovan Endowed Chair and 2025 Engineering Research Excellence Award recipient, she holds a PhD in Electrical Engineering and directs the Critical Machine Learning Lab, securing \$3.6M+ in funding, including \$2.1M as sole PI. Her research has sparked conversations coast to coast, from local hospitals to CBC Radio stations nationwide. She has mentored 21 graduate students and 40+ undergraduates, championing women and diverse innovators across Waterloo Region and beyond.

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

**Recipient: Ayona Jaswal** is a 15-year-old powerhouse and the founder of The Kindness and Smile Zone, a global youth-led organization. Turning her own journey as a pediatric patient into a platform for change, Ayona has built a movement that has reached 3,000+ views and impacted 400+ children across 10+ countries in less than one year. A Grade 10 high achieving, honours student and published author of Colors of Courage, she leads a global team of 25 international volunteers. Ayona is a CBC-featured visionary who proves that age is truly no barrier to creating and leading massive and measurable social impact worldwide.

For those who were not able to attend the event in person, the recorded event will be premiered on Rogers TV on Saturday, May 23<sup>rd</sup> at 9:00 p.m., Sunday, May 24<sup>th</sup> at 10:00 p.m., Tuesday, May 25<sup>th</sup> at 1:00 p.m. and Saturday, June 6<sup>th</sup> at 10:00 p.m.

Adds Van Kalsbeek, “A heartfelt thank you to everyone who attended tonight and to the many event, silent auction, photography and videography sponsors who made this celebration possible – especially Women of the Year’s new title sponsor BMO Financial Group.” The awards were also proudly supported by Gowling WLG, Harp & Fin Co., Conestoga Mall, TD Commercial Banking, Govan Brown, Bondy & Associates, Thunderstorm Productions, Rogers TV, Rogers Radio and Sherwood Events.

*Photos of 2026 Women of the Year recipients to follow in the morning.*

-30-

### **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 Waterloo Region Women’s Expo and Women of the Year celebration and family-friendly events like KIDtoberfest, Oktoberfest Thanksgiving Day Parade and the Willkommen Platz. For more information visit [www.oktoberfest.ca](http://www.oktoberfest.ca).

### **Media Contact:**

Tracy Van Kalsbeek, Executive Director  
Kitchener-Waterloo Oktoberfest  
519-616-0793 or [tracy@oktoberfest.ca](mailto:tracy@oktoberfest.ca)