

2018 Women Business Champion



Eshonda Blue and her sister Jessica Wright founded their company, Innovative Senior Solutions in a cubicle at a South Georgia business incubator in 2007. Through hard work and their passion for providing the best care possible for the patients, they grew the company out of the cubicle into a thriving business that employs more than 100 people and services 36 counties.

Eshonda and Jessica are consummate advocates for volunteering and giving back to the community. They work as mentors for several local professional women organizations such as the Future Business Leaders of America, the 20/40 club and the Sumter County Development Initiative. They enjoy working with not only high school and college students; they also mentor and provide career development for their staff that is comprised nearly 100 women.

Eshonda and Jessica's drive to improve their community has not only propelled them to grow the business to provide quality jobs for the local economy, but also to share their knowledge and passion with the next generation of leaders and entrepreneurs.

Small Business People of the Year



Tonya and Peter Dugas opened TSAV, a woman-owned audio visual design, staffing and installation company in Athens, Georgia. With the guidance and support from the Athens, office of the SBDC, they have grown the business from a local sound design and installation firm to an internationally—recognized leader in the AV industry. The TSAV employs more than 60 people.

Peter is a former professor and serial entrepreneur that has launched several technology and entertainment startups in the Athens area. Tonya's background consists of experience in accounting, at large and small firms, corporate governance and human services. Together they have the perfect combined skillsets and experiences to be successful entrepreneurs.

Along the way they have received immeasurable support from the local SBDC office, ranging from basic business development counseling, to completing the Georgia Mentor Protégé Connection Program. They credit the SBDC for much of the company's success.

One of the greatest benefits of working with the SBDC, learning how to diversify customers, was put to good use during the economic downturn. Many of TSAV's projects were funded with construction bonds, when the construction sector slowed down, that severely impacted TSAV's revenue. Luckily, they had learned to not rely on just one industry and had begun doing other jobs that weren't tied to large construction bonds.

Today, the firm does work with convention centers, government facilities, churches, athletic stadiums and various other venues. In fact they even designed and installed the AV system for the University of Georgia football stadium.

The Dugas' have received numerous awards and recognition from the local city government and the chamber of commerce for their meteoric growth and positive impact on the local economy in Athens.

2018 Small Business Media Advocate



Crystal Edmonson keeps her finger on the pulse of business in metropolitan Atlanta. As Atlanta Business Chronicle's Broadcast Editor, she serves as a liaison to the Chronicle's radio and television partners. She is the host of the weekly television program, *Atlanta Business Chronicle's BIZ* which airs Sundays at 11AM on 11Alive. Crystal also contributes local, in-depth stories about business and the economy on WABE 90.1 FM, a local NPR affiliate.

During the course of her career, Crystal has covered everything from Washington politics, to corporate mergers. She has received several journalism and community honors over the years including the National Association of Black Journalists Chuck Stone Salute to Excellence Awards for investigative reporting.

When she's not in front of a television camera or behind a radio microphone, she enjoys mentoring college students and young professionals across the country. In 2005 Crystal joined a group of professionals from the American City Business Journals (ACBJ) whose aim was to prioritize diversity and inclusion at the company's 41 business journals. She was awarded the Eagle Award, ACBJ's highest honor given to an employee, for her leadership and dedication towards diversity in journalism.

2018 LGBT Business Champion



Gabrielle Claiborne has been an out and active trans-woman since 2010. She is a consummate advocate for the LGBT community and has won numerous awards and honors for her efforts to advance LGBT businesses. She currently serves on the executive board of Atlanta Pride and was honored as Atlanta's Best Trans Activist in 2015. The native Atlantan and proud parent of three continues to work tirelessly to advance the efforts of LGBT businesses.

In 2017 she was nominated by the Atlanta Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce as their Business Woman of the Year. This year, the Emory University Alumni Association honored Gabrielle with a Pride Award in recognition of her commitment to and support of the LGBT+ community.

Gabrielle co-founded Transformation Journeys Worldwide, a diversity consulting firm with a transgender focus. She travels internationally providing trainings, consultations and presentations for companies, civic, religious and educational institutions and medical and mental healthcare providers. Her company helps business owners create an environment and culture that is supportive and nurturing for trans-employees. Just recently, Gabrielle and her co-founder Linda were honored to have their firm nominated as the Atlanta Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce's Small Business of the Year.

2018 Financial Services Champion



Tamika Stafford has worked in various positions in banking for the last seventeen years, the last ten of which have been spent at BB&T (Branch Banking & Trust) as a Market Leader, Small Business and Consumer Lender. She currently serves as the Atlanta BB&T Community Business Development Officer. In this role, she supports micro and small businesses in the community by demystifying the banking relationship and shows how to access capital with traditional banks or alternative sources.

Empowering others to be self-sufficient and well-informed is a passion of Tamika's. She's facilitated financial wellness seminars educating business owners about credit, borrowing and access to capital. She has participated in numerous business events held by organizations such as: Greater Atlanta Economic Alliance, ATLNext, Georgia Minority Supplier Diversity Council, START:ME (Micro Entrepreneur) Business Accelerator Programs in East Lake and Clarkston, Operation Hope, Kennesaw State University, Piedmont College, Best Academy, Marietta City Housing Authority, Marietta High School, Cobb Works, COGIC,; Delta Sigma Theta, Delta Sigma Pi and many others.

In her off-time she serves on the Advisory Board for the Cobb Literacy Council and the WorkSource Georgia Workforce Development Board. Tamika is a member of the BB&T Corporate Women's Information Network and Co-Chair for the Atlanta Chapter.

2018 Family-Owned Business



Kimble Carter was taught the value of hard work at an early age, entering the workforce at age 15. It was then that he discovered his love of business. He founded a Vending business with his employer at the time. This led him to create Kimble's Food by design in 1985 in Lagrange, Georgia.

Kimble's Food is a contract food service provider that specializes in catering, industrial vending and inmate correctional provisions. One of Kimble's motivations for creating the company was to create a welcoming, loving environment for their family and employees. He wanted a company that his employees could have life-long careers and stability.

With assistance from the SBA, Kimble was able to secure a guaranteed loan to purchase a facility large enough to house all of the company's operations and employees. This has greatly added to the "one big happy family" plan that he desired. Kimble's son, C.J., now works in the business as the vice president, making this truly a family-owned business.

Entrepreneurial Success Award



Syed Ahmed founded VDART Inc. in 2007, in Alpharetta, Georgia. What began as a small, local IT staffing firm has rapidly grown into a full service global IT corporation that employs nearly 2000 people and has operations in Europe, India, Brazil, Mexico, Canada and throughout the U.S.

This meteoric growth wasn't achieved without help. Early on, Syed sought help from the Small Business Development Center. The SBDC helped him with strategic planning, financial projections and business development training. The training has been so invaluable that every year, VDART sends several employees from the company to the SBDC's training classes and seminars.

Combining innovative product offerings with great customer service and strategic planning has allowed VDART to achieve continued success. This success has not only provided great jobs but also has had a positive impact on the local economy.

Syed and VDART have received numerous awards and recognition for not only their success, but also an example of how using the SBA's resources can help a business grow.

2018 Champion of Excellence



Nakia Melecio is a serial entrepreneur and has worked in various positions in the tech and entrepreneurial space for the last twenty years, the last year and a half of which have been spent with SCORE as a Chapter Chair and the assistant District Director of Georgia. In this role, he supports entrepreneurs and small businesses by demystifying the process to start and grow a business. He is known for his outgoing personality, impressive intuition, and positive attitude, all of which facilitate building sustainable relationships with clients, partners, and vendors alike.

Empowering others to be successful and well-informed is a passion of his. He's facilitated financial literacy seminars, strategic planning sessions and other entrepreneurial classes that have educated 1000's of business owners and entrepreneurs.

Nakia is dedicated to helping individuals and organizations that want to learn how to align strategy with performance to produce positive business results. He spends nights, weekends and any spare time he has working with and helping others. His intensity and willingness to help is unmatched. Nakia is the Swiss Army Knife of the office, because he is always sharp, reliable and can do just about anything.