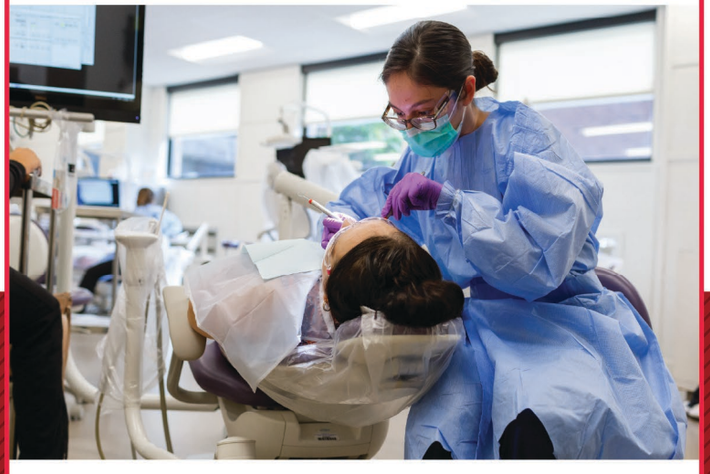
Influential WOMEN 2026

Greater Fort Wayne Business Weekly,
The Journal Gazette & KPC Media

FROM EDUCATION TO CARE



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Business Weekly

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Making a difference

BY LISA ESQUIVEL LONG
Business Weekly Editor

Greater Fort Wayne Business Weekly created Influential Women to recognize those women who are making Northeast Indiana a better place to live and work.

Each year we ask for your suggestions on who deserves the honor. The women chosen have led citywide initiatives, improved life for marginalized groups, led efforts to attract economic drivers and responded to the community's needs.

Not always have they had an easy road. Whether it's standing up for an unpopular opinion or asking for more to help those often ignored or who are in need, they have persevered.

Each year we bring these women together to share some of the highlights and barriers they have faced, so that other women may be inspired to succeed.

Never understate the power of a woman.

Influential WOMEN 2026
Greater Fort Wayne Business Weekly, The Journal Gazette & KPC Media

Lyndsey Williams

Lyndsey Williams serves as senior director of business development at Select Medical Rehabilitation Hospital at Lutheran, where she leads strategic growth, referral development, and community partnership initiatives.

A licensed practical nurse with an MBA, Williams combines her clinical foundation with extensive experience in healthcare leadership, marketing, and business development. She is also an adjunct professor at Indiana Tech, teaching graduate-level courses in leadership, marketing, and innovation.

Williams is deeply committed to serving the Fort Wayne community. She currently chairs the American Cancer Society's Making Strides Against Breast Cancer event and previously served as chair of the American Heart Association's Go Red for Women initiative. She is also an Allen County Rotarian and a member of the Greater Fort Wayne Women's Network. Through her professional and community involvement, Williams is passionate about developing leaders, strengthening partnerships, and advancing the health and well-being of others.

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Michelle Chambers

Michelle Chambers serves as the director of community engagement for Junction 36, powered by Indiana Tech, where she leads strategic partnerships connecting education, industry, philanthropy, and community to expand workforce opportunities across Northeast Indiana.

With more than 35 years of executive leadership spanning local government, higher education, nonprofit leadership, and workforce development, Chambers is known for turning innovative ideas into sustainable initiatives that strengthen communities. A Fort Wayne city councilwoman at-large, she is also the founder of Fort Wayne Women on the Move, a board member of the Indiana Breast Cancer Awareness Trust, and a former owner of two downtown Fort Wayne businesses — Signing Closers LLC, a mobile real estate loan closing company, and YVH, a human hair boutique.

A longtime servant leader, Chambers believes the strongest communities are built when opportunity is accessible to everyone.

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Brenda Gerber Vincent

Brenda Gerber Vincent serves as chief growth officer at Greater Fort Wayne Inc. In her role, she is dedicated to advancing quality of place through economic development, leadership programming and meaningful community engagement.

Deeply rooted in her community, she serves on numerous boards and committees, working alongside others who share her commitment to building a stronger, more connected Fort Wayne and Allen County. She is especially proud to be a co-founding board member of the Carriage House — a nationally recognized rehabilitation facility for individuals with serious mental illness, and of her work to help launch and champion the United Front initiative.

Vincent has been recognized with several honors, including Indiana's highest civilian honor — the Sagamore of the Wabash; the Heart of Indiana Torchbearer Award; the Dr. Daryl Yost Community Impact Award; the Boys & Girls Club 2025 "Woman of the Year," and most recently, the Arvis Boone Award, in recognition of women who embody joy, strength, and resilience.

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READERS' CHOICE 1ST PLACE

Deborah R. Garrison

Deborah R. Garrison is the inaugural vice chancellor and dean of Indiana University Fort Wayne, where she leads the university's efforts to educate the next generation of health professionals and expand the institution's impact across Northeast Indiana. Appointed in 2022 following a national search, she brings more than two decades of executive leadership experience in higher education, having served as a dean, vice president, provost, senior vice chancellor, and interim president at institutions across Texas, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Illinois, New York, and Indiana.

A first-generation college student from West Texas, Garrison began her career in healthcare before transitioning into higher education. She earned bachelor's and master's degrees in nursing and a Ph.D. in Health Studies from Texas Woman's University. Her professional journey has been guided by a belief in the transformative power of education to improve lives, strengthen communities, and drive economic opportunity.

Since arriving in Fort Wayne, Garrison has championed strategic growth, student success, and community partnership. With her leadership, the IU Fort Wayne team has advanced Vision 2030, strengthened healthcare workforce development initiatives, expanded regional partnerships, and increased opportunities for students pursuing careers in nursing, dentistry, social work, medical imaging, health sciences, and related fields. She has also fostered the development of a stellar advisory board comprised of outstanding leaders in the community to provide valuable input as IU Fort Wayne — in its ninth year — continues to achieve its mission and meet workforce needs.

Known for her collaborative leadership style, Garrison is deeply engaged in civic and community life. She serves on and works closely with numerous boards, advisory councils, and regional initiatives that support education, workforce development, healthcare advancement, the arts, and economic growth throughout Fort Wayne and Northeast Indiana. Through these roles, she helps strengthen connections among higher education, business, healthcare, philanthropy, and community organizations.

As leader, Garrison combines strategic thinking with a commitment to service and student opportunity. Her work continues to focus on expanding access to higher education, preparing graduates for high-demand careers, and ensuring that universities serve as catalysts for community prosperity and regional vitality.

Personally, Garrison is thankful for her husband, Tom, who has been an amazing partner for four decades. Together, they celebrate the birth of their new granddaughter, Jocelyn, who was born to their beloved daughter, Meredith, and son (in love) Jared in July this year.

Jama Ross

A passionate advocate for the marginalized, Ross has served the nonprofit community for over 20 years. Currently serving as the executive director for Blessings in a Backpack, her focus is community collaboration to end food insecurity in Allen County.

Ross is also an award-winning local journalist, serving as a contributing opinion columnist for The Journal Gazette to bring awareness to humanitarian issues, including drawing from her own experiences as a survivor of domestic violence.

Her proudest accomplishment is being a mother to her seven children.

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Nicky Nolot

Nicky Nolot is a Fort Wayne educator, restaurateur, and community advocate.

As co-owner and chief operating officer of Tolon, she works alongside her husband and business partner, Chef Matthew Nolot, to create memorable dining experiences while supporting local farmers and producers.

She also serves as a lead special education teacher at Portage Middle School with Fort Wayne Community Schools, helping students build confidence, independence, and the skills they need to thrive.

Her commitment to Indiana agriculture led to an appointment to the Indiana Grown Commission.

A proud member of a Pittie-loving family, Nolot supports the Fort Wayne Pitbull Coalition through community partnerships and awareness efforts.

Across her work in hospitality, education, and advocacy, she values making meaningful connections and opportunities that make a lasting difference.

Valerie Borchers

Valerie Borchers is a director and partner-elect in KSM's Outsourced Finance & Accounting Services practice, where she helps lead a team of more than 30 professionals serving 450+ clients with combined revenue exceeding $1 billion.

She specializes in CFO advisory, financial modeling and forecasting, helping leaders improve profitability, strengthen cash flow, and make informed decisions that support sustainable growth.

Borchers has helped scale KSM's practice by standardizing processes, expanding advisory capabilities, and establishing leadership and coaching systems that develop future leaders. Before joining KSM, she served as CFO and COO for high-growth businesses and helped launch more than 20 companies. She also founded and owns Waste Works, a local family-owned waste collection company with her husband.

A 2024 Forty Under 40 honoree, Borchers recently completed a two-year term as ministry chair at Sonrise Church. She is a mother of three and is passionate about helping people and businesses reach their full potential.

Congratulations, Valerie Borchers!

Your leadership, vision, and commitment to serving others are making a lasting impact on our clients, colleagues, and community. As a trusted advisor, accomplished business leader, dedicated mentor, and champion for the growth of others, you continue to strengthen every organization and person you serve.

From all of us at KSM, congratulations on being named one of the 2026 Influential Women of Northeast Indiana!

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Susan Baier

Susan Baier began as executive director of the Allen County Public Library in March 2021. She previously worked in public libraries in Ohio, Illinois, California, and Kentucky before moving to Fort Wayne.

She serves on the boards of Visit Fort Wayne, the Literacy Alliance, the Friends of the Lincoln Collection, and the Friends of the Allen County Library. She is a member of the Rotary Club of Fort Wayne.

She also serves as main coordinator of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Allen County, a program where more than 9,300 children receive a free, age-appropriate book in their mailbox each month.

2026 Influential Women of Northeast Indiana
Honoree
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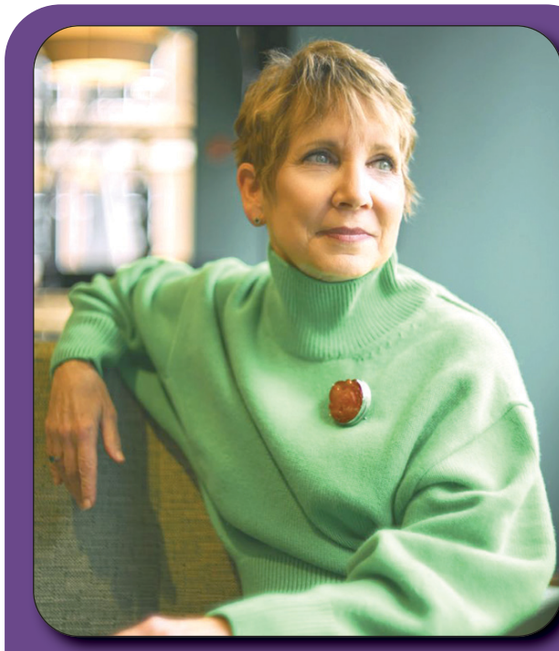


Patti Hayes

Patti Hays is CEO of WindSwell Foundation, whose mission is to support children and adults with intellectual, developmental and physical disabilities to live as independently as possible.

She is proud to be a part of an organization that is making a difference in defining our region as increasingly more inclusive for those with disabilities.

She grew up in Pittsburgh and earned a BSN from WV Wesleyan College and Masters in Nursing Administration from LSU Medical Center. She has worked as a staff nurse, educator, and hospital administrator across three southern communities before coming to Indiana.

As a part of LHN, she filled progressive roles, including strategic development, business development, physician services, marketing, construction and acquisitions.

She is vice chair of the executive committee of the Allen County Health Department and serves on the boards of Arts United, Greater Fort Wayne Inc., Indiana Philanthropy Alliance, and the Fort Wayne Philharmonic.

As co-founder of AVOW (Advancing Voices of Women), she was among those awarded Citizens of the Year by the Journal Gazette in 2018 for their work with training women for greater civic engagement. She has been active in local, state, and national politics. Married to Peter Hanley, they have three children and eight grandchildren.

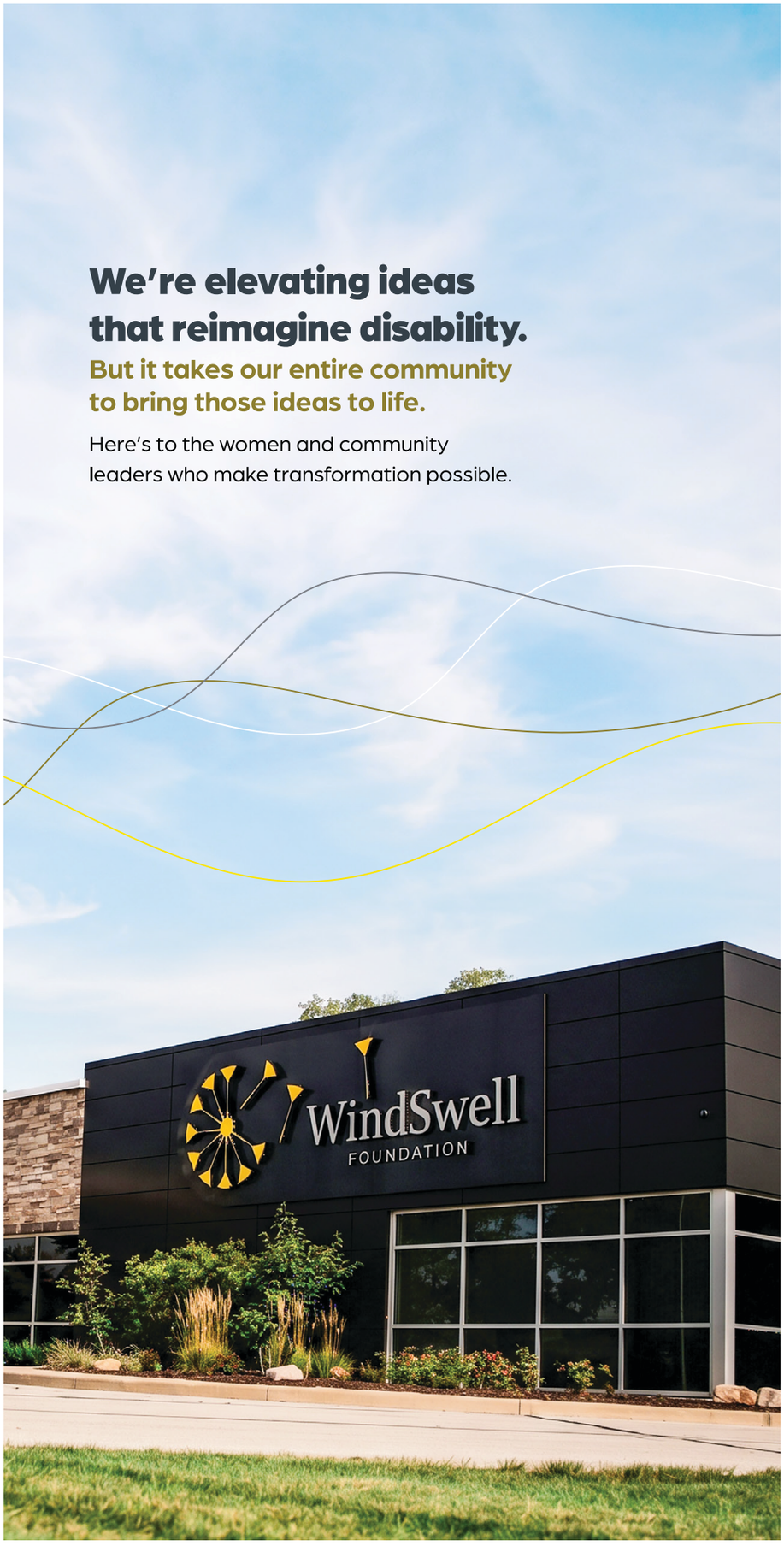
Kate Virag

As president of the Ferguson Agency, Kate Virag works closely with clients and agency teams to develop integrated marketing and communications strategies. Throughout her 15-plus-year career, she has led initiatives across a wide range of industries, leaning on expertise in public relations, communications and brand strategy.

Virag's professional journey includes roles with a variety of organizations, such as Vera Bradley, Matilda Jane Clothing and the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership. She earned her degree in journalism from Indiana University Bloomington and has built her career around a belief in strong relationships, thoughtful strategy and innovative thinking.

In addition to her professional work, Virag is deeply committed to serving her community through board membership with PBS Fort Wayne, the Northwest Allen County Schools Education Foundation, and the Play Like Bray Foundation.

Outside the office, Virag enjoys spending time with her husband, Dustin, and two children, Claire and Wes.



Cheri Becker

Cheri A. Becker is a respected community leader and advocate for leadership development, civic engagement, and nonprofit excellence. She retired in 2018 as vice president of investor services and signature programs at Greater Fort Wayne Inc., following her service as executive director of Leadership Fort Wayne.

An Indiana Tech graduate, Becker has served on numerous boards and the Fort Wayne Parks and Recreation Board of Commissioners and Plan Commission, including Fort Wayne Museum of Art, Fort Wayne Civic Theatre and Fort Wayne Parks and Recreation board of commissioners. She continues her work as an independent consultant specializing in community leadership, board development, and strategic planning and special projects. Currently Becker serves on the boards of Indiana Tech Board of Trustees, JobWorks and Friends of the Rivers.

Her distinguished service has earned numerous honors, including the Indiana Leadership Association's Marjorie Klinck Outstanding Leadership Award, Indiana Tech's CPS Alumnus of the Year in 2018, and was named as a North Side High School Distinguished Alumni in 2016. She received the Circle of Corydon Award in 2018 from then-Gov. Eric Holcomb in recognition of community service.

Wendy Davis

Wendy Davis is currently a senior and special judge for the State of Indiana, a direct appointment by the Supreme Court. Prior to her current appointment, Davis served as an Allen Superior Court judge and later the Allen Circuit Court judge since being elected in 2010.

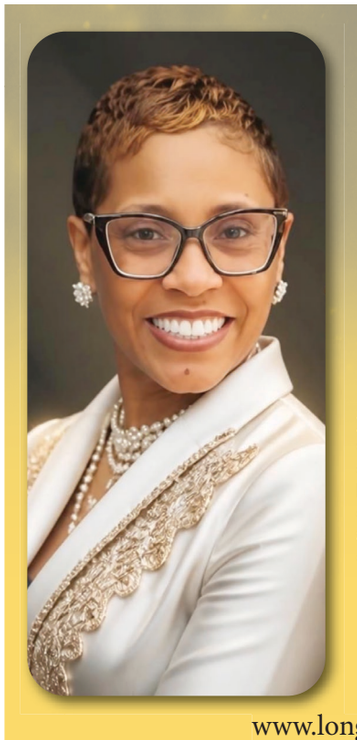
Davis is a dynamic legal professional with extensive leadership experience across judicial, governmental, and private practice settings. She has pioneered initiatives in judicial reform and driving statewide changes in addiction treatment and mental health within the criminal justice system. As an Allen Superior Court judge, Davis demonstrated exceptional leadership by spearheading the Hoosiers Opportunity Probation with Enforcement (HOPE) Probation Program, significantly reducing recidivism rates among low-level, nonviolent offenders. Davis was the chief judge of Superior Court from 2012-13. Her expertise in complex legal problem-solving is evident in her ability to manage large teams and lead critical negotiations in high-stakes environments.

Recognized for advancing the legal profession in Indiana, Davis has made significant contributions through her work with the Indiana Conference for Legal Education Opportunity (ICLEO) Commission, promoting diversity in the legal profession and the Governor's Task Force on Drug Enforcement Treatment and Prevention. A strong advocate for justice, Davis frequently contributes to public discourse through opinion editorials and community engagement. Her skills in managing certified problem-solving courts, like Drug Court, Mental Health and Addiction Restoration Court and Veterans Courts, and driving legislative reforms showcase her proven ability to tackle complex legal and social challenges by effectively addressing the intersection of mental health, addiction, and criminal justice.

Davis has a track record of impactful achievements that highlights her judicial leadership, commitment to a better justice system and legislative advocacy. As a pioneer in judicial leadership, she spearheaded the implementation of the HOPE Probation Program in Indiana, achieving a significant reduction in recidivism among low level, nonviolent drug offenders through innovative, evidence-based practices and received a national award for the program.

Her dedication to advancing diversity in the Indiana legal profession is evident through her work with the ICLEO Commission, where she successfully recruited highly qualified individuals to pursue legal careers and succeed in law school. Davis' legislative advocacy is showcased by her collaboration on the Indiana Governor's Task Force on Drug Enforcement, Treatment, and Prevention, helping to draft and implement statewide policies aimed at combating the drug epidemic. Davis also spearheaded SB 510 and pushed it through the legislature to obtain more resources in the justice system.

Davis serves on many boards across the state, including nonprofits like Northern Indiana Youth for Christ, Fort Wayne United, the Wilson Foundation and is the current vice chair of the board for Parkview Park Center Behavioral Health.



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