



INDIGENOUS NIAGARA OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

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Women Lead the Way at 2025 Indigenous Niagara Outstanding Achievement Awards

Niagara's Indigenous leaders, artists, and educators celebrated in an emotionally charged ceremony anchored in artistic freedom, reconciliation, and cultural integrity.

NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE, ON — With resounding applause, powerful music, and deeply moving stories, the **2025 Indigenous Niagara Outstanding Achievement Awards (INOAA)** unfolded this past weekend in a triumphant return following a one-year hiatus. Now in its sixth year, the awards continue to honour those shaping the Indigenous cultural, educational, and artistic landscape across the Niagara region — and this year, women took centre stage.

Held in Niagara College's Yerich Auditorium and on the traditional territory of Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabek peoples, this year's awards ceremony was hosted by **Tim Johnson**, founder of the Awards and former associate director for Museum Programs with the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, and **Santee Smith**, Artistic Director of Kaha:wi Dance Theatre, recipient of the 2019 INOAA for Performing Arts, and Chancellor of McMaster University.

"These Awards constitute a ceremony of peer-acknowledged confirmation, sincerity, respect, and joy," said Johnson. "There is something very special that happens in this environment, where audience members come in with both curiosity and anticipation, and, importantly, as active participants in the program. Without the audience there is no ceremony, because they bring the affirmation and they bring the cheers of support that make the recipients deeply feel the merits of their accomplishments."

From accomplished artists to nationally celebrated scholars, creators, and civic leaders, female recipients predominated in a **lineup that highlighted the extraordinary**

achievements of professionals across six categories, including Visual Arts, Performing Arts, Intellectual Advancement, Language and Culture, Empathic Traditions, and Two-Row Alliance. This year's recipients were chosen through a rigorous peer-nomination and selection process led by a committee of previous honourees. The 2025 INOAA recipients are:

Visual Arts: Dr. Sara General

A Turtle Clan Mohawk from Six Nations, Dr. General is a writer, illustrator, and educator whose work integrates Indigenous storytelling into public art and children's literature. Her contributions include public art designs for Niagara Parks' *Niagara Takes Flight* and the Lincoln Museum.

Performing Arts: January Rogers

A Haudenosaunee writer, poet, and media producer with more than 30 years of groundbreaking work in Indigenous broadcasting, Rogers is known for her spoken word performances and award-winning audio and video works, including *Ego of a Nation* and *The Battle Within*, and her short play *Blood Sport*, that deals adroitly with Indigenous identity.

Intellectual Advancement: Dr. Jennifer Brant

A Mohawk scholar and academic innovator, Dr. Brant is a leading voice in Indigenous maternal pedagogy and gender studies. She is co-editor of *Forever Loved* and *Rematriating Justice*, and a prominent educator at the University of Toronto and within the Niagara region.

Language and Culture: Alyssa General

An artist, educator, and language revivalist, General has contributed significantly to the promotion of Kanyen'kéha (Mohawk language) through films, design work, and educational initiatives, including the Greenbelt Indigenous Botanical Survey and Spirit & Intent publishing.

Empathic Traditions: Phil Davis

The only male recipient in 2025, Davis is a beloved cultural leader from St. Catharines with Cayuga and Mohawk (Haudenosaunee) heritage. Davis is recognized for his decades of community work, music, and cultural education. A skilled blues guitarist, Haudenosaunee social dance singer, and powwow singer, Davis embodies Indigenous values through every engagement and interaction.

Two-Row Alliance: Mayor Sandra Easton

As the Mayor of the Town of Lincoln, Sandra Easton is being honoured for her steadfast support of Indigenous relations, including the development of *Sho'aríshon Neutral Nation Park* and the integration of Indigenous history and public art into the town's landscape and new state-of-the-art community museum.

“The Indigenous Niagara Outstanding Achievement Awards showcased how our stories, languages, and traditions continue to thrive,” said Sean Vanderklis, member of the Awards Committee. “It was a reminder that our cultural strength is not only alive but flourishing, carried forward by those we honoured.”

The evening opened with a Thanksgiving Address by **Karl Dockstader**, Indigenous Cultural Advisor at Niagara College, followed by remarks from Niagara College President **Sean Kennedy** and **Leah Hogan**, Director of Indigenous Education. Also speaking was **Dr. Lesley Rigg**, president of Brock University.

Both presidents spoke eloquently about the value of the Awards in establishing high standards and for setting aspirational goals. In these challenging times, they also warned about censorship and the banning of books (currently something institutions of higher learning must be vigilant about and defend against).

“The themes that resonate throughout this evening are important to all of us not only at Niagara College, but important to all of us across Turtle Island,” said Kennedy. “It is really **important that we continue to nurture and promote artistic freedom**, freedom of speech, intellectual freedom, and that we continue to oppose censorship where censorship is simply not justified, and that we continue to promote the importance of accomplishment and encouraging strong artists.”

“This is a powerful and inspiring celebration,” said Rigg. “Tonight is about honouring individuals who are making extraordinary contributions in our community, in culture, in education, in leadership, and the arts. Each of the honourees tonight reflect strength and dedication, and remind us that resilience is built through determination and connection to culture. This celebration also invites us to reflect on how we **build relationships grounded in respect**, and shared purpose between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities alike.”

A highlight of the evening was the inclusion of musical performances by celebrated Indigenous artists, including **Tom and Thompson Wilson, Derek Miller, Lacey Hill**, and **The Ollivanders (Martin Isaacs, Ryan Johnson, and Roxanne Rendle)**, culminating in a powerful honour song by recipient **Phil Davis**. The 2025 Awards also marked a milestone in the program's growth — thanks to the generosity of **eleven sponsors** from diverse sectors recipients received **cash awards** in addition to their trophies for the first time in the Awards' history.

Sponsors included: Barry and Laurie Green Family Trust (Title Sponsor), Niagara College (Venue Sponsor), Brock University, Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres, James A. Burton & Family Foundation, Hawley Family, Town of Fort Erie, Town of Lincoln, Lord Cultural Resources, Nancy J. Coombs, Six Nations House.

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Additional quotes:

“What made this year’s Awards truly powerful was not only the quality of the honourees, but the way our entire community came together to celebrate them. It was a night that showed our strength, our unity, and our deep pride in one another.” — **Awards Committee Member Sean Vanderklis**

“It was a high honour to be a part of bringing joy and happiness to the community in the form of recognizing and celebrating Indigenous talent in Niagara. It reminds me of Creator’s original intent for us as humans and that is to be happy. We did that and I am grateful.” — **Awards Committee Member Jennifer Dockstader**

“At Brock we strongly support the freedom to publish, to express and to share Indigenous stories, particularly those of Indigenous women who have so often been sidelined in traditional narratives. As the politics of voices are changing around the world, we understand and acknowledge the roll that we play in insuring that books, writings, and stories are available to everyone.” — **Brock University President Dr. Lesley Rigg**

“We support this award and stand with those building strong, respectful relationships with Indigenous Peoples. The Foundation recognizes the value of this ongoing, thoughtful, and accountable alliance—guided by the spirit of the Two-Row Wampum and grounded in mutual learning and shared responsibility.” — **James A. Burton & Family Foundation**

Photos of the event are available upon request.

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