

TRI-C®

# TIMES

**FEEDING BODIES AND MINDS**

Metropolitan Campus gets a new food pantry



## PREPARED FOR THE NEXT CHALLENGE

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**STUDENTS WHO PERSEVERED**

P16:  
FROM STUDENTS TO  
HORTICULTURE PROS

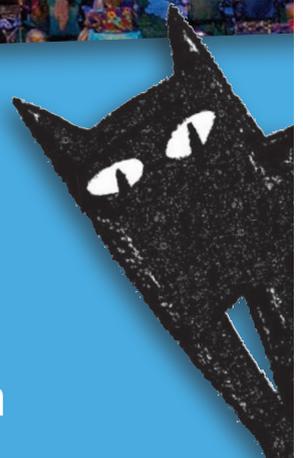
P20:  
GAME DESIGN  
CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

# TRI-C JAZZFEST CLEVELAND

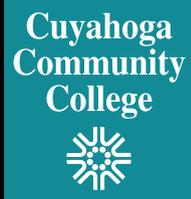
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# PRESIDENT'S Message

## TO OUR ALUMNI AND FRIENDS,

This summer, as we emerge from the pandemic, we see signs of new growth all around us.

At Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C®), one of the greatest signs of growth is a new group of students receiving their hard-earned degrees.

This spring, we celebrated the magnificent achievements of more than 2,000 Tri-C graduates, including the College's first cohort of Say Yes Scholars. These students overcame extreme circumstances to achieve their academic goals.

They will be remembered for confronting challenges head-on, remaining steadfast in their commitment to educational excellence. Altogether, more than 4,200 students graduated from Tri-C this academic year, earning more than 4,900 degrees and certificates — the highest number in our institution's history.

Last March, few among us would have thought this was possible. Fortunately, at Tri-C, perseverance is a way of life — for students as well as employees.

The challenges we have overcome together have made us more flexible, adaptable and resourceful. In fact, remarkable improvements in the delivery of education and support services over the past year have won the College multiple accolades, including:

- “Best Community College” in the Northeast (and fifth in the country) from Intelligent.com
- Top 50 Community College for Online Learning from College Consensus
- Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) Award from *INSIGHT Into Diversity* magazine
- Excellence and Equity in Community College STEM Award from the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program and the Siemens Foundation



**WHILE WE CAN CERTAINLY CELEBRATE THESE SUCCESSES, WE CANNOT LET THEM MAKE US COMPLACENT. THIS IS A PIVOTAL MOMENT FOR THE COLLEGE AND THOSE WE SERVE.**

We must continue to promote flexibility and accessibility by increasing on-site hours, expanding 24/7 services and resources, and extending the reach of our community Access Centers and job hubs. We must focus on increasing enrollment through partnerships that help us get students back into the classroom. And we must continue to implement emerging educational technologies that provide equally rewarding experiences for students on campus and online.

The past year has shown us that every challenge is an opportunity for growth and innovation. As we move forward, we will seize the opportunity to build on these accomplishments and create a bright and purposeful future for the College and our students.

I am proud of how our institution has responded to support our students, our community and, most importantly, each other.

We are emerging stronger, smarter and more compassionate than before, with a clear focus on the opportunities that lie ahead.

Sincerely,

Alex Johnson, Ph.D.  
President



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*Tri-C Times* is published by Cuyahoga Community College's Integrated Communications department for its friends and constituents. Feedback and story ideas are welcome. Send correspondence to *Tri-C Times*, 2500 E. 22nd St., Cleveland, OH 44115; call 216-987-4322; or email [editorial@tri-c.edu](mailto:editorial@tri-c.edu).

## NATIONAL INFLUENCE

A national panel shaping economic recovery initiatives in the health care industry includes William Gary, executive vice president of Tri-C's Workforce Community and Economic Development division. He is among 15 workforce leaders selected to advise U.S. President Joe Biden's administration and congressional leaders. The Health Care Industry Recovery Panel will recommend investments in workforce training and supports to help those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.



## STOMPING THE COMPETITION

Cuyahoga Community College students carry the best ID cards in the country. The Stomp Card issued to Tri-C students took top prize in the 2021 Best Card Design Award competition sponsored by the National Association of Campus Card Users. The teal-and-black card features the College's Triceratops mascot, Stomp, as well as a student's picture, name and ID number. The award was announced during the association's national conference.

# MMMER 2021

## PROMOTING THE VOTE

Cuyahoga Community College again earned national status as a "Voter Friendly Campus" in recognition of its efforts to help students participate in the political process. The project asks campuses to promote voter registration and voting to help students establish civic habits that last a lifetime. Overall, 231 campuses in 37 states and Washington, D.C., were recognized for their work to develop a culture of democratic engagement. Tri-C also received the two-year honor in 2019.



# COMMENCEMENT LIFE

THE LAST YEAR HAS BEEN AN ABJECT LESSON  
IN ADAPTABILITY — FOR BUSINESSES, FOR  
FAMILIES AND, OF COURSE, FOR STUDENTS.

On-campus socializing turned into online club meetings. In-person learning gave way to toggling between small squares on a computer screen. From securing reliable internet access to navigating online testing, learning on the fly has been the order of every day.

But Cuyahoga Community College and its students persisted — and, in many cases, flourished. This spring, tenacious students from all walks of life and from far-flung areas of the globe completed a singular academic year to earn their degrees.

As commencement moved from the computer to the real world in June, signs of emergence were palpable. What follows is a collection of stories about students who persevered and who stand ready for the next challenge.

## THE ART OF THE MATTER

**Commencement speaker Julie Marie Wetzel found her future in art therapy, a program offered by few schools other than Tri-C**

Julie Marie Wetzel of Westfield Township graduated summa cum laude from Cuyahoga Community College this spring with an Associate of Arts degree focused in art therapy. The 20-year-old began attending Tri-C in fall 2019 after graduating from high school and the Medina County Career Center the previous spring.



Although Wetzel started out in criminal justice, after one semester she began to feel it wasn't the right field for her. Casting about for another major, she was delighted to discover that the College's Art program included an Art Therapy track.

"I've always been creative with the visual and performing arts," she said. "But I liked this because it had a mix of tools — still helping out people who need help, but I'm also incorporating the art into it."

"You can work with all populations, from children all the way to seniors, folks who have PTSD, all different sorts of people. So I think it's just a rewarding career path."

If not for Tri-C, she said, she probably wouldn't have found that path, since few colleges offer art therapy courses.

While in some respects, the pandemic-driven switch to remote learning was disappointing to Wetzel, who'd been looking forward to a "regular" college experience, it did save her a 40-minute commute to and from Western Campus. In addition, she said, "I think because we were able to do it online, I was able to get involved in more stuff."

And get involved she did, serving as an officer for both the Phi Theta Kappa Chi Omega chapter at Western Campus and the Tri-C Art Club, participating in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and, having been in Key Club in high school, becoming president of Tri-C's chapter of Circle K International, a collegiate program of Kiwanis International that promotes service, leadership and fellowship.

*Julie*



STORIES BY  
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**Madeline Shepherd**  
**Katie Utrata**  
**Leanne van Beers-Werneke**  
**Michael von Glahn**

Lucy



## A LIFE REIMAGINED

**How a new country and new connections inspired an interior design degree at Tri-C**



Ludmila “Lucy” Zaharieva moved to the United States from Bulgaria in 2005 alongside her husband and teenage daughter. Unemployed and unable to speak English, Zaharieva focused on reimagining life in her new country.

Times change. The 51-year-old

graduated from Tri-C this spring with an Associate of Applied Business degree in interior design. But this nontraditional student didn’t always know she wanted to be a designer.

“I started classes at Tri-C seven years ago to learn English,” she said. “Since I was older and working full time, it was difficult for me to figure out what I wanted to do.”

Her initial interest was physical therapy. After taking classes, she realized it wasn’t for her.

“I took a break for about six months,” Zaharieva said. “I lost myself and was not sure what to do, but I knew I needed to quit physical therapy.”

Throughout her schooling, Zaharieva had been working for a family as a housekeeper. She decided to circle back on her education and began browsing programs at Tri-C. Interior design intrigued her.

“I didn’t realize I was already doing interior design,” she said. “When the family would go out of town, I would decorate their home for Christmas. They would come home, and it would all be done.”

She recalls when she became a U.S. citizen in 2013. Her housekeeping family threw a surprise party for her, decorating the entire home with American flags.

“I was crying, I was so happy,” Zaharieva said. “Those people are my family. Maybe they are the reason I started interior design.”

She began taking interior design classes in spring 2018, and the rest is history.

“The experience has been amazing for me,” she said. “It was really hard work, but I’m glad I made the decision to be in the program. It’s the best choice I ever made.”

She ties the connections she’s made to her success in the program. She received a wealth of support from her family, fellow students and instructors.

“I learned something new in every class and had support for everything,” Zaharieva said. “People were always ready to help me in any way. I was never told to figure it out on my own.”

When asked what she will pursue upon graduation, Zaharieva said she hopes to find a job.

“I want to design plans for people’s homes and then work on retirement after that,” she said. “I just hope to work as an interior designer either by myself or with a company.”

As for the connections she made at Tri-C, Zaharieva continues to stay in touch and is thankful for their support.

“I’m just lucky to have them all in my life,” she said. “They are my friends now.”

**On June 9, Tri-C honored its Spring 2021 class at two socially distanced ceremonies, held at Byers Field at Robert M. Boulton Stadium in Parma.**



## FINDING HER VOICE

**The Women in Transition program helped Laura Stasik find a path to a secure future**

Laura Stasik, who turned 59 in April, has always had jobs — secretary, data entry, restaurant work — but she’s never had what she would call a career.



Now, having completed the Captioning and Court Reporting program at Cuyahoga Community College’s Western Campus, Stasik is ready to change that. She recently accepted a job at Parise & Associates Court Reporters in Cleveland armed with an Associate of Applied Business degree.

The road there began in her 40s, when a counselor pointed her toward Tri-C’s Women in Transition (WIT) program, which aims to empower women to move forward through education



*Laura*

and skills training. Through WIT, she met Kelly Moranz, director of the College’s Captioning and Court Reporting program, who suggested a path that would both pay well and capitalize on Stasik’s existing secretarial skills.

She began classes, but after a year in the program she became worried. She wasn’t keeping up on her stenography speed tests. Moranz suggested she switch to voice. Stasik never looked back.

“I was struggling with 80 or 100 words per minute in steno,” she said. “I started in on voice and was passing 140.”

She can’t say enough about WIT. “It covers so many things that are lacking in education,” she said. “I would recommend it for anybody who is on the fence about anything in their life.”

## CHANGING COURSE

### Tri-C's evening courses allowed Jameelah Johnson to pursue her passion for helping people

Jameelah Johnson's calendar is full.

During the day, the 48-year-old works full time at Lorain County Alcohol and Drug Abuse Services. She also runs her own insurance and financial services company. On top of that, she's the executive director of Multi-Generational Youth Outreach, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit she founded in 2013 that works to alleviate poverty among homeless and neglected kids and young adults ages 12 to 21. She even manages to work out four days a week.

But that wasn't enough for Johnson, who recently added evening classes at Cuyahoga Community College's Metropolitan Campus to her itinerary. She graduated this spring with an associate degree in human services.

"Don't ask me how I do it, but I do it," said the mother of two grown children. "I have support from my siblings, my mom is still alive, my children, cousins — I have a very big family, and we're very family-oriented."



With her day job in Lorain, Tri-C's evening track proved convenient. Johnson also availed herself of internships, including one at Oriana House, whose locations throughout Ohio provide community corrections programs, substance abuse treatment and mental health services.

"That taught me so many things," she said. "It was an amazing experience. I never thought I would be pulled to this path."

Johnson previously worked in banking and real estate, but chasing a good income left her passion for helping people unfulfilled.

"After 20-something years in finance, I chose a different career path," she said. "At the end of the day now, I can say I have helped someone to remain sober and helped to identify tools and resources and strategies to look at it from a different perspective."

A class with Joseph Cummins, assistant professor in the Human Services program, helped her better understand her own late father's heroin addiction.

"I always thought it was something that a person can just get over on their own, that it was a mind-over-matter thing," said Johnson. "But after taking that class and completing that program — and now, working in the field — it's a disease. I have a whole different perspective on it now."

Part of the first generation in her family to attend college, Johnson wishes younger inner-city students knew more about the opportunities, low cost of tuition and "amazing staff" at Tri-C.

"Paint that picture freshman year or in junior high school," she said. "That's when I find I'm meeting with kids in the community that are homeless, that age out of the foster system. They need to know about their educational options sooner than their senior year."

Johnson's next step will be to attend either Ursuline College for a master's in social work or John Carroll University for a master's in clinical counseling. Within three to five years, she hopes to get her Ph.D.

"In 10 years," she said, "I want to be fully, 100% working for my own company."



*Jameelah*

## UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES

### Tri-C is full of surprises as avenues open for Associate of Arts grad

Coming to Cuyahoga Community College was a triage decision for Amya “Mya” McCain. She didn’t plan to attend Tri-C, but she needed to improve her GPA before going to a four-year school.

So, Tri-C it was — but her journey took her to unexpected places.

“I ended up being happily surprised with my Tri-C experience, especially being a Mandel Scholar. I had a really, really good experience at Tri-C,” she said.

The aspiring college professor claimed an Associate of Arts degree with a concentration in political science this spring.

McCain, who called Westshore Campus home base, came to Tri-C after graduating from North Olmsted High School in 2019. A counselor suggested she apply to the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Scholars Academy because, to her amazement, she earned a high ACT score — especially in math.

McCain was accepted to the Scholars Academy soon after applying. She found it a perfect fit for her area of concentration because of the focus on leadership and other humanities studies.

“I loved the sense of community the Scholars Academy built for me. I really missed that part during COVID,” McCain said. “I made friends and met people from a lot of different places. I really like learning about different cultures and different languages. Having that kind of connection became important to me, especially coming from an area where one doesn’t get exposure to a lot of different cultures.”

McCain said these new connections taught her to discuss things in a nonconfrontational way. She enjoyed the way she and her peers could talk about heavy topics and still respect each other.

Following the 2016 presidential election, McCain realized how much she cared about politics and policy. “I got used to watching the news a lot and talking about politics. It came to the point where it was normal for me. I really wanted a career that gave me an opportunity to talk about these things. Instead of going into politics per se, I could study political science, become a professor and teach politics to others.”

McCain is still considering post-graduation options. She is leaning toward American University in Washington, D.C. She said the location would offer “fantastic internship opportunities” that would allow her to grow professionally.

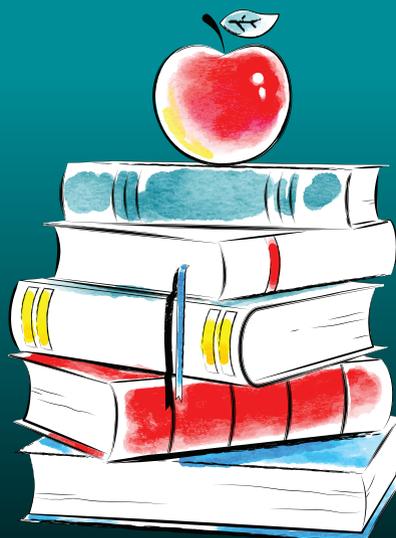
And Tri-C proved an unexpected launching pad.

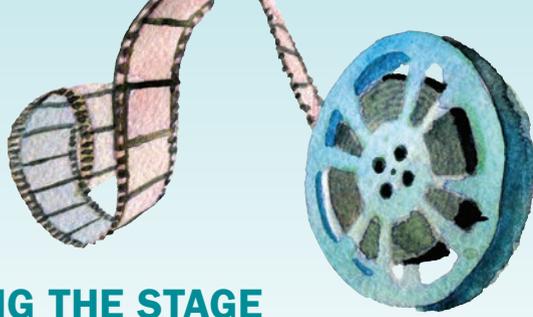


McCain said the College community is what stood out to her.

“It was nice to have a stable support system that, no matter what, I could rely on,” she said. “I got a lot of emotional security out of this community. I was really lucky to have that at Tri-C.”

*Mya*





# Kaleny



## SETTING THE STAGE

**21-year-old Kaleny Balfour earns degree at Tri-C, plans to pursue a career in acting**

“I want to be an actress.”

That’s not typically the response you get when you ask someone what they want to do for a living. For Kaleny Balfour, the answer was a no-brainer.

“I always really enjoyed performing,” Balfour said. “My first performance was in eighth grade.”

Born and raised in Cleveland, Balfour was no stranger to Cuyahoga Community College. She graduated from high school in 2018, took a year off and began her journey at Tri-C in August 2019.

Balfour graduated this spring with an Associate of Arts degree in theater arts. She plans to attend Cleveland State University to obtain a bachelor’s degree in theater.

But her path to commencement wasn’t straightforward. She, along with many other students, had to overcome the struggles of graduating during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It was pretty stressful,” Balfour said. “Generally, it’s been hard for me to do online classes, but it was nice how understanding the professors were.”

Though many of her general education classes have been online, she was able

to participate in her acting class on campus and still receive the same quality instruction as in pre-COVID times.

“We had to wear masks and social distance,” she said. “Aside from the class being a combination of Acting I and II, it would have been pretty much the same experience if it weren’t for COVID.”

Even though the past year did not go as she expected, Balfour is still thankful for the experience she gained from attending Tri-C.

“Tri-C changed the way I communicate with people,” she said. “My biggest advice to someone in a similar situation is to not be afraid to ask for help. Someone will help you to the best of their ability.”

## A FAMILY CALLING

**Anthony Pugh’s grandmother inspired him to pursue an associate degree in nursing**



Growing up listening to his grandma recount her experiences as an ICU and travel nurse inclined Anthony Pugh toward medicine, but upon her death in 2016, he realized nursing was his calling.

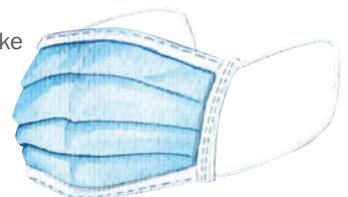
“I kind of wanted to be a nurse while she was alive, but then when she died I was like, ‘Oh, now I really want to be a nurse,’” recalled the 22-year-old from East Sparta in Stark County.

He obtained his State Tested Nursing Assistant (STNA) license while still in high school and took jobs that eventually led to Cleveland Clinic’s orthopedic trauma floor — and Tri-C’s nursing program, from which he graduated this spring.

After his grandfather died in 2020, Pugh suddenly had company on his learning path. A longtime STNA, his mother got her GED and applied to the Licensed Practical Nurse track of the Canton City Schools Adult Career & Technical Education program. Pugh’s sister entered the program at the same time.

“This whole last year we’ve been going to nursing school together and studying together and doing homework together,” Pugh, a student at Eastern Campus, said.

After graduation, Pugh plans to take his National Council Licensure Examination and then start work in the ICU at Cleveland Clinic’s Hillcrest Hospital.



# Anthony

## GRIT AND FAITH PAY OFF FOR TRI-C GRAD

**After service in the Army and Air Force, Eva Kelley is soaring into her next chapter**

Eva Kelley has tackled a lot of things, including motherhood, Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) certification and stints in both the Army and the Air Force. This spring, she added an associate degree from Tri-C to the list.

The Euclid resident and mother of four graduated with honors.

Kelley joined the U.S. Army in 1987 and the U.S. Air Force in 2001. She speaks highly of her experiences in each branch, which afforded her the opportunity to travel, bond with her brothers and sisters in arms, and discover her passion for helping people.

She was a combat medic in the Army and a pararescue specialist in the Air Force. Because of those jobs and that experience, she decided to become an LPN after leaving the military.



She worked in the profession for more than 20 years. But when it began to take a toll on her body, Kelley started to think about a career change.

After getting divorced in 2012, she moved to Northeast Ohio. In 2015, she participated in Tri-C's Women in Transition (WIT) program.



"WIT really helped me," Kelley said. The program put the College on her radar. "I thought, when I go back to school, it's going to be at Tri-C."

And she did just that, enrolling at the Metropolitan Campus in fall 2019.

Kelley took part in Tri-C's Veterans Education Access Program (VEAP). She said the support and encouragement she received contributed to her positive experience at the College.

"I'd never experienced that kind of support before," she said, adding that VEAP staff not only checked in on her periodically to monitor her progress, but also offered condolences and resources when she was grieving the loss of several loved ones during her Tri-C journey.

Though she hasn't decided on a specific major yet, Kelley plans to continue her education and is leaning toward a degree in social work.

"I love people — all people," she said. "I want to help them in any way I can."

Also, as a domestic violence survivor, Kelley said she wasn't always able to stand up for herself. Now, she wants to be that "stand-up" person for others.

It's taken strength and hard work for her to get to this place.

"I had to learn to forgive myself," she said. "I had to learn my worth. Once I did, no one can do it [domestic violence] to me again. It's empowering to learn that I don't deserve to be treated that way."

Going back to school as an adult student and mother was a challenge for Kelley, but she is proud of her accomplishments and grateful for her Tri-C experience.

Her hard work and belief in herself paid off.

"I got in there and figured it out," she said.

## A PROMISE KEPT

### Tri-C resources helped Mechelee Torres find her path to success



Mechelee Torres' life changed forever when Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico in September 2017. With no electricity on the island, she was unable to continue working or taking classes at her university. A month later, she moved to Cleveland so she could continue her education.

"When I came to the United States, my English was not very good, so I enrolled in English as a Second Language classes at Tri-C," Torres said.

Shortly after the start of her first semester, Torres received bad news. Her withdrawal from the university in Puerto Rico had not been processed, and Tri-C could not access her financial aid to pay her tuition. Torres credits the College's Hispanic Council and coordinator Sylvia Royle with keeping her on track.

"Sylvia helped me with my financial aid paperwork and talked to my professors to make sure I could stay in my ESL classes even though I had officially been dropped. She told me she would help me stay in college."

Royle kept that promise, helping Torres find and apply for scholarships that would cover the cost of her classes that semester.

After a year of ESL courses, Torres, a Western Campus student, began working toward the Associate of Applied Science degree in criminal justice that she received in June. She balanced her schoolwork with a full-time job, where she often put in 50 hours a week. She is also highly competitive, winning first prize in an Earth Day poster design contest at Tri-C.

"I like to draw and paint. I think that is something about me that would surprise a lot of people."

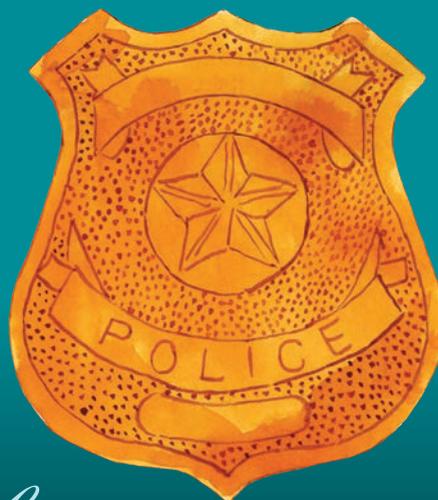
Following graduation, she plans to enroll in a six-month police academy.

"Participating in the police academy and working as a police officer will help me understand the law enforcement system and provide me with practical experience as I continue my studies."

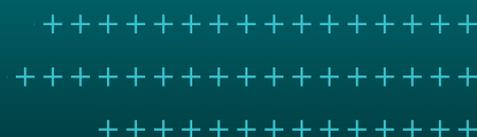
Her goal is to become a forensic scientist processing evidence in a laboratory.

Torres recommends Tri-C to anyone starting over in the Cleveland area.

"It's a great place to connect with people. There are students from all over the world, and the employees are friendly and helpful. Everyone there wants to help you move forward and succeed."



*Mechelee*





# FEEDING BODIES

## THROUGH A DONATION FROM CHAR AND CHUCK FOWLER, TRI-C'S METRO CAMPUS HAS A NEW FOOD PANTRY TO ASSIST STUDENTS IN NEED

For many, the path to success in the classroom starts at the kitchen table.

Students who deal with hunger and food insecurity are less likely to perform well in their studies, complete a degree and attain employment in their chosen career.

But over the past year, the Cuyahoga Community College Foundation has teamed with Char and Chuck Fowler to combat this problem. The result is The Pantry: A Tri-C Connect Initiative.

The new facility, located in the south concourse near the lower level of the Metro politan Campus Center, officially opened with a ribbon-cutting on June 10.

For years, food insecurity has been an unfortunate fact of life for many Tri-C students — and the financial hardship brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has only made the situation worse. But this initiative by the College and two of its most significant donors aims to confront the issue head-on.

“For too many of our students, food insecurity can be a significant barrier to realizing their dreams,” said Megan O’Bryan, president of the Tri-C Foundation. “We are honored to work alongside our friends, Char and Chuck Fowler, to make this investment in our students and their success.”

The Pantry allows currently enrolled Tri-C students to receive food, toiletries and other basic household products Monday through Thursday. Staff will also be available to connect students to the College’s additional wraparound services and longer-term food-sourcing solutions.

The Fowlers funded the construction of The Pantry via a \$1,020,000 gift to the Tri-C Foundation in June 2020. The gift also established the Fowler Family Student Success and Resource Fund, which will help ensure continued funding for The Pantry while assisting students with short-term financial expenses in times of hardship, including housing costs and child care.

**“FOR TOO MANY OF OUR STUDENTS, FOOD INSECURITY CAN BE A SIGNIFICANT BARRIER TO REALIZING THEIR DREAMS.”**

— Megan O’Bryan, President, Tri-C Foundation

“It’s an approach that will meet the holistic needs of Tri-C students,” O’Bryan said. “With the establishment of the Fowler Family Student Success and Resource Fund, we can meet students’ basic personal needs and provide the emergency resources to get them through a challenging time.”

The Fowlers’ involvement in The Pantry didn’t stop with their gift. They took an active role in planning the design and crafting the long-term vision for it. The goal is to remove any self-consciousness among those using The Pantry by making it a well-lit, clean and inviting place.

“We want our students to know there is no stigma associated with using a food pantry,” said Denise McCory, president of the Metro Campus. “That’s why this is a welcoming and conveniently located space that will encourage more students to take advantage of this resource.”

It will be stocked by the Greater Cleveland Food Bank, funded in part by the Fowlers’ gift.

As longtime Tri-C supporters, the Fowlers are happy to have helped pilot this new initiative aimed at keeping students in class and on track toward a degree and a brighter future.

“Chuck and I were happy to work with the great team at Tri-C. Cleveland is fortunate to have this caring, quality college in our midst,” Char Fowler said.



# AND MINDS

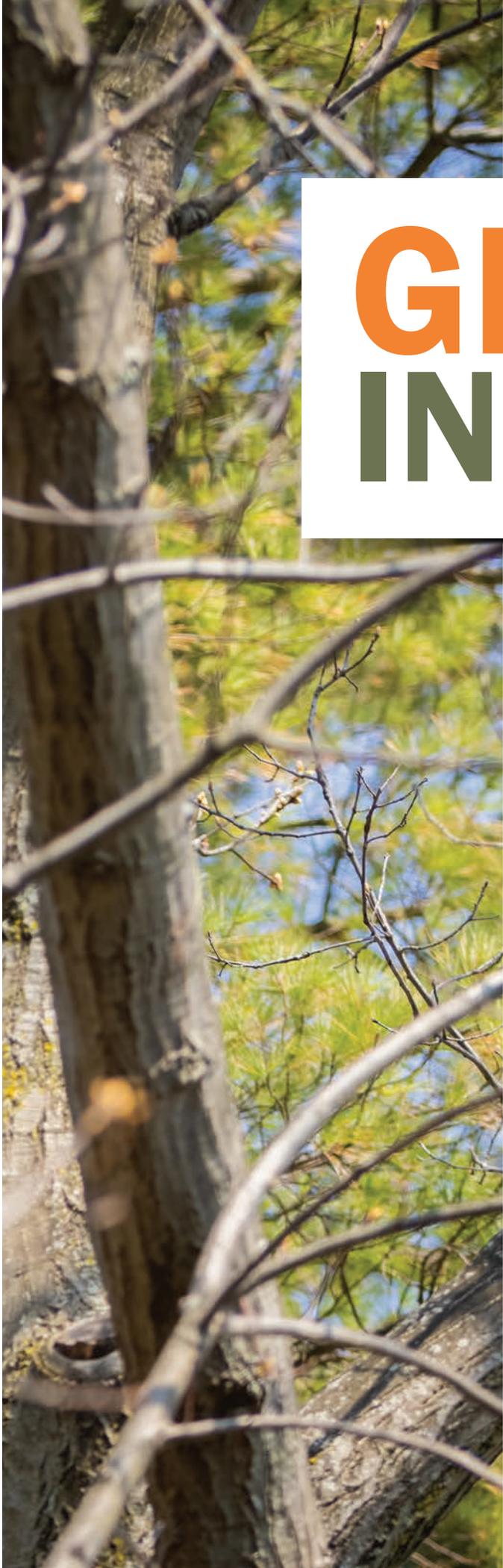
STORY BY **Erik Cassano**

PHOTOS BY **Cody York**



*The Tri-C Connect concept represents a hub that reduces equity gaps, establishes systems of support and empowers community by unifying individuals across identities, backgrounds and experiences.*





# GROWTH INDUSTRY

## PLANT SCIENCE PROFESSOR **JIM FUNAI** HELPS TURN TODAY'S STUDENTS INTO TOMORROW'S HORTICULTURE PROFESSIONALS

Jim Funai has a confession to make.

"I'm afraid of humans," he said. "I'm much more comfortable talking to plants."

This isn't surprising, given Funai's extensive background in the green industry. It all started at 15, when he worked at an apple orchard owned by his high school track coach. After earning a bachelor's degree in horticulture from The Ohio State University, he began working as a landscape production manager. But an opportunity came along in 2009 that changed the trajectory of his career — and forced him to face his fears.

"I never planned on becoming a teacher," said Funai, now an assistant professor in Tri-C's Plant Science and Landscape Technology program. "In fact, I would have laughed at anyone who told me that's what I'd be doing."

Funai was in charge of in-house training at Wheeler Landscaping in Chagrin Falls when its human resources director told him about an opening in Tri-C's Plant Science program. She thought it would be a great fit for him — and so did the College.

"I was overseeing a patio install in Solon, knee-deep in mud, when they called to offer me the job," he said.

STORY BY **Beth Cieslik**

PHOTOS BY **Cody York**

## TRI-C FACULTY PROFILE

Funai inherited a program that seated between three and 10 students per class and ranked in the low 50s among programs accredited by the National Association of Landscape Professionals. By 2015, enrollment had doubled, and students began placing in the Top 10 at national competitions.

Today, Tri-C has the No. 1 two-year program in the country. It's produced two individual national champions, and the team typically places among the top handful of two- and four-year programs.

How does Funai account for this success? "I don't give them the option not to be awesome," he said. "We're here to be great and do great things, so let's get to it."

Funai's down-to-earth approach in the classroom endears him to his students, while his expert knowledge and passion for horticulture inspire them to become top performers in the industry. While he brought home many state and national design awards in his past life as a production manager, these days his biggest reward is seeing his students win competitions and flourish in their own careers.

"I love seeing them develop over time into the rock stars they never thought they could be," he said.

Among the many skills Funai, a certified arborist, imparts to Tri-C students is how to safely climb a tree. This may seem simple, but protecting one's limbs while scaling a tree is a complicated maneuver. And it's important because there's a shortage of qualified tree care professionals in Northeast Ohio. In fact, there are hundreds of such jobs available within half-an-hour's drive of the Eastern Campus, where Funai's program is based.

"I'll never be able to fill all the openings, but the ones we do fill, our students are making two to three times what untrained labor can," he said.

That's why Funai is working with Davey Tree Company to build specialized courses aimed directly at tree care. His ultimate goal is to become the top urban forestry program in the nation.

But that's not the only job opportunity for graduates of Tri-C's program. Plant science majors are prepared for careers in landscape design, urban farming, irrigation, lawn care, greenhouse management, plant taxonomy and more. It all depends where their unique skills and interests lie.

"Each student's career path is different," said Funai. "We learn what will bring them the most joy, and then we help them get there."

**"I'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO FILL ALL THE OPENINGS, BUT THE ONES WE DO FILL, OUR STUDENTS ARE MAKING TWO TO THREE TIMES WHAT UNTRAINED LABOR CAN."**

— Jim Funai, Assistant Professor, Plant Science





## Growing Student Honors

The 2021 National Collegiate Landscape Competition proved once again that some of the industry's top rising talent attends Tri-C.

The College's **Andrew White** finished second overall in the virtual competition, which attracted hundreds of students from 34 horticulture and landscape programs at two- and four-year schools across the country.

The competition challenged students in 21 events that require the expertise needed to work in the industry. It is organized by the National Association of Landscape Professionals.

White, of Akron, climbed onto the award stand with strong scores in 14 different events.



Two Tri-C students claimed event championships. **Sarah Lippert** of Solon posted the top score in interior plant identification, while **Cathy Wheeler** of Hiram placed first in annual and perennial plant identification.

Another eight students from the College posted Top 5 performances: **Jake Barber** of Chester Township; **Carly Fanta** of Silver Lake; **Kyle Kutinsky** of Kent; **Layla Lang** of Olmsted Township; **Keith Rush** of University Heights; **Emily Vogel** of Cleveland; **Beth Whipple** of Mentor; and **Andrew Yormick** of Lyndhurst.

Earlier this year, Funai was named president of the Ohio Landscape Association's Board of Directors. The association is currently preparing to launch a workforce development initiative designed to educate and recruit new employees to the industry. There is no doubt that Funai's expertise in this area will contribute extensively toward this effort.

He and his team — lab coordinator Stacey Lorenz and program director Lori Zatroch — work tirelessly to enhance training opportunities and recruit participants. Instead of waiting for students to come to them, they visit local high schools to educate them about green careers. Interested students can also observe classes to determine if Tri-C's program is right for them.

Above all else, it's important to Funai that his students realize the significance of the work they do.

"We don't have to apologize for what we do, for working in the dirt," he said.

"The green industry is the answer to global climate change. We're the ones who can control the narrative. And while we're doing that, we can also make the world look a little better each day."

**"WE DON'T HAVE TO  
APOLOGIZE FOR WHAT WE DO,  
FOR WORKING IN THE DIRT."**

— Jim Funai





# GAMING THE SYSTEM

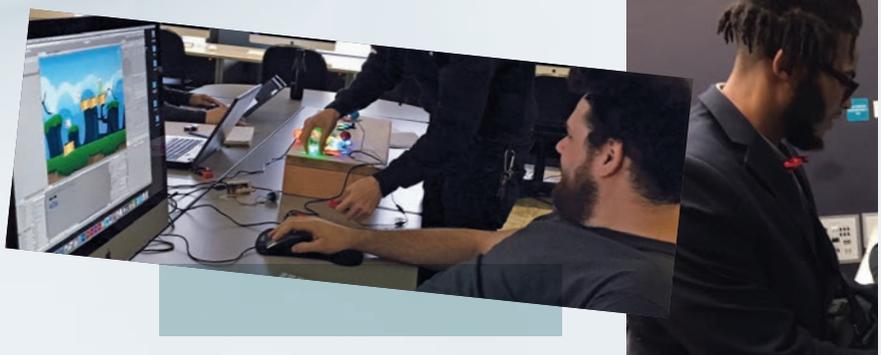
**TRI-C'S GAME DESIGN CERTIFICATE PROGRAM OFFERS STUDENTS A DIVERSE SKILL SET THAT TRANSLATES TO A WIDE VARIETY OF WORK OPPORTUNITIES**



As an undergrad, Bill Whetsel was a web developer who never turned down a job. Even if he had no idea what he would be doing, the journey was part of the challenge and fun.

Now Whetsel, an assistant professor in Visual Communication and Design at Cuyahoga Community College, brings that same sense of curiosity and enthusiasm to the College's Game Design certificate program. For students pursuing this credential, curiosity is a must.

STORY BY **Jarrod Zickefoose**



“In our program, a successful student is someone who appreciates interdisciplinary study and emerging technologies; someone who is curious and creative,” Whetsel said.

The words “game design” conjure a certain image — perhaps virtual reality (VR) goggles, first-person shooter games and massive computer arrays in dark rooms. But a chasm separates gaming from designing games. Those studying game design combine emotional and analytical thinking in an exercise of self-expression.

A good game designer is part hardcore developer and part artist, Whetsel said. Through world-building, character development and storytelling — and by deploying the skills it takes to execute all of that in a 2D or 3D environment — they create an experience that connects the designer with the end user.

Those skills translate to a wide variety of job opportunities.

Whetsel discussed an insurance company’s use of virtual reality to help representatives assess car crash scenes. Instructors in Tri-C’s Public Safety Center of Excellence use VR to teach cadets how to handle volatile real-world scenarios.

“You’re going to learn how to make compelling, interactive designs, and that has value in non-entertainment spaces,” Whetsel said.

When Whetsel first pitched the Game Design program in the early 2000s, it was given a thumbs down. A few years later, video games entered the mainstream.

Students were earning college scholarships for gaming prowess. New consoles were introduced. National and international tournaments offered big purses. Gaming was suddenly legit.

Tri-C had the constituent courses to offer a game design certificate; they just needed to be brought together in a curriculum. On his second pitch, about 10 years ago, Whetsel got the green light.

“We couldn’t have been any earlier than we were,” he said.

Fast forward to today, and game design technology can be seen just about everywhere. Your phone uses it. Realtors create virtual home walk-throughs with it. Doctors use it to help treat post-traumatic stress disorder.

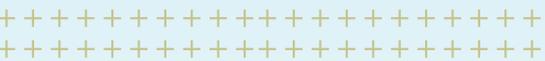
Tri-C’s Game Design program remains among the few of its kind in Northeast Ohio. Similar programs tend to focus either on the developer side or on the fine arts side, Whetsel said. Tri-C’s program marries both — and that, according to Whetsel, is its greatest strength.

“I don’t want people to think they have to be a developer or an artist,” he said. “They are going to be somewhere on that continuum. They are going to find their sweet spot.”

**“YOU’RE GOING TO LEARN HOW TO MAKE COMPELLING, INTERACTIVE DESIGNS, AND THAT HAS VALUE IN NON-ENTERTAINMENT SPACES.”**

— Bill Whetsel, Assistant Professor, Visual Communication





# DAUGHTER OF TRI-C ADMINISTRATOR REMEMBERS HER ROOTS

**MONTI BECKER KELLY HAS CONNECTION TO COLLEGE THROUGH FAMILY SCHOLARSHIP**

STORY BY Erik Cassano





## WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN THE OPRAH WINFREY NETWORK SAYS IT'S INTERESTED IN YOUR LIFE STORY?

**MONTI BECKER KELLY IS ONE OF THE FEW PEOPLE WHO HAS NEEDED AN ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION.**

Monti Becker Kelly is one of the most successful Black women in Charlotte, North Carolina. As senior vice president at [24]7.ai — an artificial intelligence software and service provider for businesses — she is passionate about community service, civil rights and social justice, serving in a variety of mentorship and leadership roles throughout the Charlotte area.

That passion comes from another chapter in Becker Kelly's story, one that started more than 40 years ago at Cuyahoga Community College. Her mother, former Tri-C administrator and English instructor Stanli Becker, founded the College's Jesse Owens Olympian Youth Summer Development Program in the 1970s to teach children important life skills. Her efforts to improve the lives of Cleveland youth were recognized at the White House in the early 1980s.

As a teen, Becker Kelly helped her mother work with program participants — mainly Black inner-city students. It's that journey from community-minded Cleveland youth to successful Charlotte businesswoman that caught the attention of the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN).

**"THROUGH THIS OPPORTUNITY, I'M CONTINUING TO ADVANCE THE CAUSES I'M PASSIONATE ABOUT, AND ONE OF THEM IS AT TRI-C."**

— Monti Becker Kelly, Senior Vice President, [24]7.ai

"There's a new show being produced for OWN called *Delilah*," Becker Kelly said. "It's a legal drama set in Charlotte, highlighting real experiences of Black women as they balance their lives and stand up for what is meaningful to them. As part of that, they started searching for real-life 'Delilahs' with personal stories that align with the plot of the series."

Becker Kelly, who moved to Charlotte 18 years ago, belongs to the Queen City Metropolitan Chapter of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women (NCBW) — and it was through her NCBW relationships that OWN discovered her story. She was asked to pen an essay and give an interview outlining her history, goals and community outreach work. It was published on oprah.com at the end of March.

And when you get the kind of publicity Winfrey's media empire can provide, it quickly opens other doors.

"This is such an honor and a humbling experience. Through this opportunity, I'm continuing to advance the causes I'm passionate about, and one of them is at Tri-C," Becker Kelly said.





### A mother's legacy

Stanli Becker suffered from Type 1 diabetes, which created health challenges throughout her life. She eventually required a kidney transplant, but complications arose. She passed away in 1993 at age 50.

Becker was devoted to Cleveland's underserved youth, working tirelessly to improve their access to education, health and fitness, and other paths to a more fulfilling life. Her unexpected death left unfinished work.

That's why, shortly after her mother's death, Becker Kelly established the Stanli K. Becker Memorial Scholarship Fund.

"Hundreds of people attended her funeral, so I used the registry to begin asking for donations," Becker Kelly said. "Working with the Cuyahoga Community College Foundation, we sent out handwritten letters and made phone calls, ultimately raising \$10,000 to start the fund."

**"MY STORY IS STRONGLY ROOTED IN MY MOTHER'S STORY. IT'S PART OF HER LEGACY."**

— Monti Becker Kelly

The scholarship awards money to several students each academic year who might not otherwise have the financial support to stay in school. The focus of the scholarship is Cleveland students at Tri-C who promote academic excellence, cultural enrichment and career exploration. Eligible students must maintain at least a 2.5 GPA and take a full course load (12 credit hours) each semester.

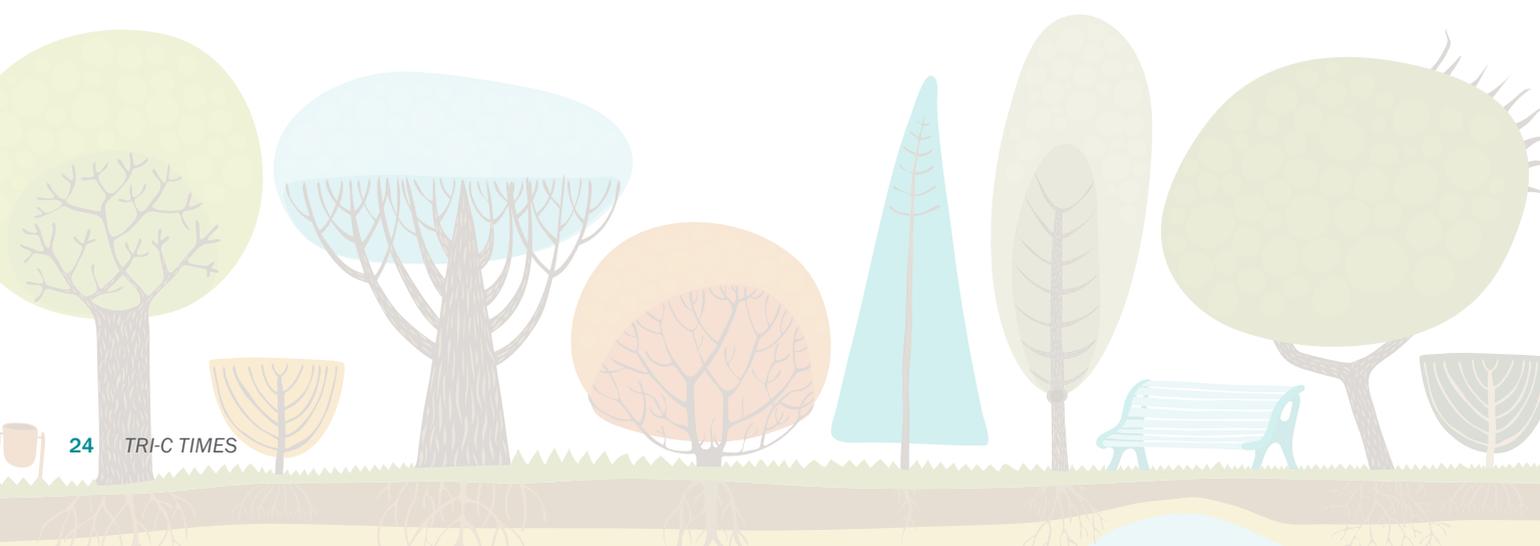
Becker Kelly's essay for OWN prominently mentions her mother's scholarship, and as more people have read it, she has seen a significant increase in donation requests. She hopes to continue that trend — in the Cleveland area and beyond.

"I'm getting interest from friends, coworkers, those I'm connected to on social media," she said. "These are people who didn't even know my mom, and they're wanting to support her scholarship fund. The outpouring has been incredible."

The main character of *Delilah* — played by Cleveland native Maahra Hill — is a Black female attorney who leaves her job at an establishment law firm to fight for the underrepresented and disenfranchised. Becker Kelly knows one of the reasons OWN was interested in her story as a "real-life Delilah" is because her mother taught her many of the same lessons: Get involved in the community, and work to improve the lives of those who need help.

"My passion for helping people was solidified at an early age," she said. "My story is strongly rooted in my mother's story. It's part of her legacy. And one of the best ways I can honor that legacy is to continue supporting her scholarship at Tri-C and encouraging others to do the same."

Visit [tri-c.edu/give](https://tri-c.edu/give) to donate to the Stanli K. Becker Memorial Scholarship fund.



# INTERNATIONAL IMPACT

## FORMER BRITISH PRIME MINISTER THERESA MAY HEADLINED THE CUYAHOGA COMMUNITY COLLEGE FOUNDATION'S 2021 PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLARSHIP LUNCHEON TO BENEFIT TRI-C STUDENTS

The Right Honourable Theresa May, former prime minister of the United Kingdom, added to her legacy of leadership by helping the Cuyahoga Community College Foundation raise money for scholarships.

The critically needed funds — the result of the Foundation's 2021 Presidential Scholarship Luncheon — will help Tri-C students with financial need pursue higher education and achieve their academic goals.



*From left: Tri-C President Alex Johnson and Pat Pastore, Regional President of PNC Cleveland and Tri-C Foundation Board Member*

May served as keynote speaker at the event, which took place virtually Thursday, May 13.

Dollars generated at the event create scholarships that turn students into graduates and dreams into success stories. Money raised at this year's event will benefit students pursuing careers as first responders.

Since its inception in 1992, the Foundation's Presidential Scholarship Luncheon has raised nearly \$22 million for Tri-C students.

"Lives change from these scholarships and the generosity of Foundation donors," said Louis G. Joseph, chairperson of the Tri-C Foundation. "Now more than ever, given the impact of COVID-19, we need to provide opportunities to achieve. This is an investment in our community's future."

May adds to the list of distinguished diplomats to headline the luncheon, joining another former British prime minister — The Right Honourable Tony Blair — and U.S. Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton.

More than 800 Tri-C supporters registered for the virtual discussion with May, who offered unique insights about the intersection of politics, technology and business at a time of profound global change.

May served as British prime minister and leader of the Conservative Party from 2016 to 2019. She was the second woman to ascend to the premiership, following Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990).

Pat Pastore, regional president of PNC Cleveland and a director on the Tri-C Foundation board since 2019, moderated the discussion with May. PNC served as presenting sponsor of the virtual event.

Event co-chair sponsors included AT&T, Barnes & Noble College, The Brewer-Garrett Company, Consolidated Solutions, Medical Mutual of Ohio and Pepsi Beverages Company.



STORY BY **John Horton**



CR



# OWNING QUEENS

**TRI-C ALUMNA AND SUCCESS COACH DAMEYONNA WILLIS ENCOURAGES CLEVELAND-AREA GIRLS TO SEE THEMSELVES AS ROYALTY THROUGH HER QUEENIAM INITIATIVE**

Sometimes, our greatest inspiration comes from our toughest trials.

It was August 2016 when Dameyonna Willis brought her 5-month-old daughter, Kylee, to Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital. Over the preceding months, the infant had begun experiencing a series of worsening symptoms, including heavy breathing and an inability to feed properly.

Doctors quickly determined the cause — congestive heart failure — and scheduled Kylee for surgery.

"Her chest was held open for three days because her heart was so enlarged," Willis said. "Overnight, my daughter's health and recovery became my singular focus."

Just a year earlier, Willis was a newly minted Cuyahoga Community College graduate. Her Associate of Arts degree had led to a job working with youths at a nonprofit. She planned to continue her education at Cleveland State University.

She set all that aside to care for Kylee, who was released from the hospital two months after successful surgery and treatment.

But Willis still had a desire to improve the lives of Cleveland's children — particularly girls like her daughter. She knew the struggles many of them faced to overcome life challenges while maintaining a sense of self-love and self-worth.

"When I had to leave the nonprofit to care for my daughter, the girls wanted me to come back," she said. "I was a mentor and confidant for a lot of them, and they were missing that. I couldn't commit to a regular job at that point, so I started to think about other things I could do."

She came up with the idea of a girls' empowerment group that would meet several times a month for activities to promote positive self-image, build friendships and provide a safe haven. On the suggestion of a friend, she named the group QUEENIAM.

STORY BY [Erik Cassano](#)

PHOTOS BY [Victoria Stanbridge](#)

“I thought it was perfect,” Willis said. “It gets to the heart of the idea that I want these girls to see themselves as royalty — to value themselves in that way.”

After Kylee’s release from the hospital, Willis began advertising her group on social media. The response was overwhelming, with numerous girls and their parents attending the first informational session.

Out of that initial session came about 25 participants between the ages of 7 and 17. The four core focus areas introduced back then continue to guide QUEENIAM today.

“We help them explore health and wellness, financial literacy, community service and college readiness,” she said. “For example, in health and wellness, we might have a yoga or Zumba class and talk about positive body image. We always try to tie everything back to self-love and self-development.”

Her work with QUEENIAM led to other speaking and mentorship opportunities. She brought her message to students at John Marshall High School and spoke to students at Hathaway Brown School and the Douglas MacArthur Girls’ Leadership Academy.

Willis began searching for ways to expand her reach even further. She explored the possibility of renting or purchasing a permanent home for QUEENIAM instead of holding meetings at libraries and schools.

That all came to a halt when the COVID-19 pandemic forced mass closures in spring 2020.

Willis needed to get creative. She knew how much the QUEENIAM program meant to participants and didn’t want to shut it down due to a lack of available meeting space.

So she moved the program online, launching the “Queen in Quarantine” initiative and hosting more than 20 virtual workshops. Though it wasn’t the same as being together in person, it gave the QUEENIAM girls a much-needed sense of belonging and connection during the pandemic isolation.

“It actually worked out very well,” she said. “Just about everything we did in person, we were able to do virtually.”

**“IT GETS TO THE HEART OF THE IDEA THAT I WANT THESE GIRLS TO SEE THEMSELVES AS ROYALTY — TO VALUE THEMSELVES IN THAT WAY.”**

— Dameyonna Willis, Tri-C alumna





But the goal always was to return to in-person meetings. This spring, as parents began receiving COVID-19 vaccines, Willis surveyed them to gauge their comfort with having their children attend on-site gatherings again. In April, QUEENIAM had its first in-person meeting in more than a year at JJ Ice Cream and Café in East Cleveland.

“We want to gradually get back to a sense of normalcy,” she said. “I’d like to get back to speaking engagements at area schools. But we’ll take it one step at a time.”

Willis’ life has also started returning to normal. From those initial anxiety-filled days in the hospital following open-heart surgery, Kylee, now 5, requires only yearly follow-ups with her doctor.

Her daughter’s return to health allowed Willis to resume her education and full-time employment.

She joined Tri-C in 2019 as a success coach with the Say Yes Scholar program. Say Yes encourages Cleveland Metropolitan School District students to pursue postsecondary education through scholarships, mentoring and other forms of support.

In 2020, Willis re-enrolled at CSU. The 26-year-old Cleveland resident plans to graduate this summer with a degree in nonprofit administration.

“My CSU degree will help me in my role in the Say Yes program, which has been a great fit,” she said. “The social and emotional support component, which is central to QUEENIAM, translates very well to my job. In both cases, I’m helping students develop skills for meeting the challenges of daily life.”

Whether it is with QUEENIAM, the Say Yes program or speaking to students in area schools, Willis plans to keep communicating her message of positivity and self-worth. She also resumed her pursuit of a permanent home for QUEENIAM and is exploring grant opportunities.

“I try to fill a gap by teaching kids what they might not learn in school,” she said. “How to grow as a person. How to love yourself. How to work through a challenge you’re facing. There are so many peer-pressure and self-esteem issues children and teens face today, and I think above all, young people need to learn that being an individual and being yourself is OK.”

**ONE  
LAST  
THING**



## **STAND FOR RACIAL JUSTICE**

**TRI-C PRESIDENT ALEX JOHNSON FORMED THE STAND FOR RACIAL JUSTICE ALLIANCE LAST SUMMER TO ADVANCE THE CAUSE OF RACIAL EQUITY AND INCLUSION. THE GROUP IS CO-LEAD BY MATT JORDAN, DEAN OF HUMANITIES AND CHAIR OF THE JACK, JOSEPH AND MORTON MANDEL HUMANITIES CENTER; MAGDA GOMEZ, DIRECTOR, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION; AND CLAYTON HARRIS, DEAN OF PUBLIC SAFETY AT TRI-C AND THE COLLEGE'S POLICE CHIEF. HERE, JORDAN DESCRIBES THE INITIATIVE AND WHAT IT REPRESENTS.**



BY **Matt Jordan**



EQUITY | ACTION | HEALING | UNITY

Nearly 250 years ago, the framers of our nation penned these words:  
*"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..."*

The murder of George Floyd — who gasped his final words on a Minneapolis street corner last May with a police officer's knee pressing on his neck — forced the nation to reflect on where we stand in regards to meeting that lofty ideal.

Tri-C organized Stand for Racial Justice to launch a community conversation on equality and racial justice. It's an uncomfortable topic for many, but it's one that must be addressed for the betterment of society.

One of our primary goals with Stand for Racial Justice is to bring understanding to the concept of systemic racism with the idea that knowledge brings reform.

With that in mind, we created a racial justice playbook for Tri-C students and employees, developed a diversity and inclusion certificate program and sponsored an essay contest for area high school students.

The College also hosted online programs examining the imprint of racism on health care and public policy. Thousands of people viewed these informative and impactful discussions.

Similar events and partnerships are in the works for the rest of this year and beyond as we strive to make a meaningful impact. Visit [tri-c.edu/stand-for-racial-justice](http://tri-c.edu/stand-for-racial-justice) to learn more or get involved.

Now is the time to stand up for the sake of justice, unity and healing. Much work remains to be done, but together we can live up to the ideals all of us share.



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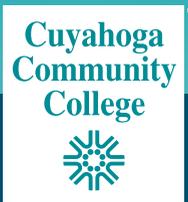
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