Women of DISTINCTION

HONORING WOMEN IN NEW YORK

Zola Brown

Zola Brown, a second-generation union activist, has dedicated over 44 years to the labor movement. She began her journey with Local 1199, now 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East, while working as a patient unit secretary at Strong Memorial Hospital.

Inspired by her mentors, she fought for social and economic justice, participating in contract negotiations, picket lines, and the Solidarity Singers. Ms. Brown became a delegate, Executive Board member, and Vice President of the Rochester local. She also participated in the historic merger of Local 144 and 1199SEIU. Ms. Brown led 1199's Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration for over 20 years and launched the Black History Month Celebration. In 2007 and 2008, she managed 1199's Young Workers Program.

A founding member and past Executive Vice President of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU) Rochester Chapter, Ms. Brown organized town halls, voter registration drives, financial wellness fairs, and community events. She launched CBTU's annual voter education drive at the HBCU Fair and chaired Region 1's Women's Committee for 13 years, empowering members through dynamic speakers and workshops.

In 2009, Ms. Brown organized the annual Stop The Violence/Peace on the Streets event in memory of union member Latasha Shaw and worked to diversify Monroe County's jury pool. She has served on the boards of Metro Justice Council, Rochester's Labor Council, John Wegman Foundation, and Finger Lakes Health System Agency. As former President of the 19th Ward Community Association and an advisor to Rochester's Puerto Rican Parade, she created their Peace and Prayer Unity event.

Her activism has earned numerous accolades, including the CBTU Carolyn Holmes Humanitarian Award, United Way's Richard M. Downey Heart of Gold Award, and the Black Heritage Pioneer Award. In 2021, Mayor Lovely Warren proclaimed April 18 as Zola Brown Day and awarded her the key to the City.

Ms. Brown's poetry was published in *The Power of Purple: SEIU's Poetry Jam*. She currently leads Rochester's 1199SEIU National Benefit Fund field operations, hosts an annual college scholarship event, and directs the Earned Income Tax Program.

A mentor and Black Lives Matter advocate, Ms. Brown enjoys crafting, gardening, traveling with her daughter, and honoring her late mother, Betty L. Lea.

Zola Brown was selected as a
2025 Women of Distinction honoree by Senator Jeremy A. Cooney