



# Women of DISTINCTION

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## HONORING WOMEN IN NEW YORK

*Bess Watts*

Bess Watts, originally from Bluebell, Utah, has been a formidable labor union and social equity advocate in the Rochester community for over two decades. Her long history of serving her community began with a six-year tour in the United States Army, from 1976-1982. After her honorable discharge, she worked in libraries in the San Diego, California area before moving to New York State in 1987.

Ms. Watts began her career as an Interlibrary Loan Specialist at Monroe Community College. She joined the CSEA union, and became a CSEA Unit Steward in 2002. In this role, she devoted much of her time to improving workers' rights for all union members. As she became more educated in the language of the collective bargaining agreement for her Union, she soon realized that not all people were being treated equally.

At this intersection of workers and civil rights began Ms. Watts' impressive record of activism; she began organizing support for the LGBTQ+ community in the labor world. In recognition of her work, Ms. Watts was chosen to lead the local chapter of Pride at Work, AFL-CIO when it was chartered in 2007.

Her commitment to LGBTQ+ rights also extended outside of the labor world. Ms. Watts and her wife fought for marriage equality. Organizing labor workers and community members to inundate legislators demanding marriage equality, they succeeded in gaining support, which was the tipping point for legalizing same-sex marriage in New York State.

Ms. Watts has been recognized with a bipartisan proclamation from the Monroe County Legislature, is a two-time "STAR" awardee from the Empire State Pride Agenda, and has received the "Innovation of the Year" award, Rochester Labor Council "Community Solidarity" award, and the Rochester Labor Council "Mother Jones" award.

Ms. Watts recognized that lack of visibility and participation prevented the improvement of labor rights. She made it her mission to change this, and in doing so, she gained support in her fight to improve the rights of LGBTQ+ members. Her commitment to improving life for all in Rochester is an inspiration to all who have the privilege to know her.

***Bess Watts was selected as a  
2022 Women of Distinction honoree by Senator Jeremy A. Cooney***

