

SIU System Bestows ADEI Honor to SIUE's Dr. Venessa A. Brown and Professor Kathryn Bentley

by Patricia Merritt
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EDWARDSVILLE - Two of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's leaders and practitioners of inclusiveness were honored for their longtime efforts, in light of the work of Southern Illinois University (SIU) System's architect of antiracism, diversity, equity and inclusion (ADEI) at the SIU School of Medicine.

Venessa A. Brown, PhD, and Kathryn Bentley, MFA, each received the prestigious [Dr. Wesley G. Robinson-McNeese ADEI Lifetime Achievement Award](#) for 2024 at the SIU Board of Trustees' meeting on Thursday, April 11 in Carbondale.

Brown is associate athletic director for diversity, equity and inclusion, and chief diversity officer for Intercollegiate Athletics, and professor in the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) Department of Social Work. Bentley is associate professor in the CAS Department of Theater and Dance, director of Black Studies and director of IMPACT Academy. Bentley is also co-founder of the University's [Black Theatre Workshop \(BTW\)](#).

The award these two women received recognizes those whose careers include approximately 20 years of documented service and advocacy in antiracism, diversity, equity and inclusion within the SIU System. Winners have been determined to have made a meaningful impact on a substantial number of students, faculty, staff and alumni.

"The Dr. Wesley G. Robinson-McNeese ADEI Lifetime Achievement Award celebrates individuals who create, sustain, and expand ADEI, resulting in greater justice and belonging for all members in our community," said Sheila Caldwell, EdD, SIU System vice president for antiracism, diversity, equity and inclusion, and chief diversity officer.

[McNeese](#) was the SIU System executive director for diversity initiatives and special advisor to the SIU Department of Antiracism, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. He was an alumnus of the SIU School of Medicine. McNeese, a physician, joined the SIU faculty in 2001 and served in multiple roles during his 15-year tenure. He died Sept. 18, 2023.

Brown is grateful to be recognized in the name of a man with such integrity and spiritual presence. "Dr. McNeese spent his life being a difference maker and charting unterritorial waters to ensure students of color had an opportunity in the medical field," she said. "I am impressed with his determination and purpose-filled life. I have modeled those characteristics in my life and have allowed the Lord to order my steps and give me the boldness needed to be a change agent in an ever-changing world."

Brown's legacy at SIUE includes donating her own funds to open a mentoring room for student-athletes, which is dedicated in her honor. According to the [Dr. Venessa A. Brown Academic Mentoring Center](#) web page, the center features a computer lab and meeting spaces for student-athletes to work with mentors and advisors to map out their academic plans, helping ensure SIUE Athletics maintains their standard of excellence in the classroom and in athletic competition.

“I am most proud of my ability to remain true to my calling, live by my philosophy of ‘nothing happens outside of a relationship’ and continue to unify people no matter where they come from in life,” shared Brown. “I am fulfilled by advocacy for social justice and being ‘In it to Win it!’”

“I hope a little piece of my work lives in the lives of SIUE alumni, students, staff, faculty and the community,” disclosed Brown. “I hope people are more aware of how similar we are, regardless of all the demographics that define us. It is important we recognize that we are stronger together, and the more we are aware of our uniqueness, differences and similarities – the stronger the institution will be.”

Brown feels strongly that ADEI programs need support and growth in context of today’s climate. “We have been down this road before in history,” warned Brown. “We must stay the course and continue to embrace change, seek awareness, and be committed to a changing world! Be passionate, respectful, and committed to change in ways that sparks growth wherever you are planted.”

“With all of Dr. Brown’s contributions to SIUE during her over-29-year tenure at the University, her establishment and implementation of the annual Diversity Day conference in 2018 is one of the greatest,” wrote Phyleccia Reed Cole, SIUE senior associate general counsel, in her nomination letter. “SIUE’s annual Diversity Day was recognized, by the Illinois Department of Human Rights, as a recipient of its Human Rights Day Award...When social and civil unrest arose in nearby Ferguson, Missouri, Dr. Brown was motivated to host three Black Lives Matter conferences to enlighten the community and create understanding around the unfolding events.”

Some of Brown’s awards and other achievements include recognition of being one of 25 women who have made a difference in higher education by the Diverse Issues in Higher Education magazine in 2021, the [2020](#) Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) award from INSIGHT Into Diversity magazine and the [2017 Giving Back Award](#) from the INSIGHT Diversity magazine. She was honored by SIUE Intercollegiate Athletics with the Dr. Venessa A. Brown “In it to Win it” Leadership Development Program.

The other 2024 recipient of the SIU [Dr. Wesley G. Robinson-McNeese ADEI Lifetime Achievement Award](#), Kathryn Bentley, has done remarkable work in theater, both on campus and in the greater community.

“I am most proud of the work that I have done with Black Theatre Workshop (BTW) for the 20 years that I have been here,” said Bentley. “BTW has been a home for countless students who felt excluded and undervalued on this campus. This is a space where Black students can creatively raise awareness to issues most prevalent to them.”

“I am also pleased of the work that I have done in the St. Louis arts community – using theater to uplift social change,” continued Bentley. “As a founding member of [Action Art Collaborative](#), I recently directed and co-produced a play about activist Percy Green and AAC continues to do work that educates and challenges audiences with social justice themes. I am humbled to receive this award named in honor of Dr. McNeese.”

There have been notable effects because of Bentley’s tenure at SIUE, but she believes one of the more lasting ones will be IMPACT Academy. “The IMPACT Academy, formed under Vice Chancellor for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Jessica Harris (PhD), have an enduring influence in the ADEI training that it offers to faculty and staff. I am proud to have been part of this critical endeavor.”

“If SIUE is going to be competitive in recruitment and retention, it is imperative that ADEI efforts continue to grow,” shared Bentley. “It is important that the work becomes even more intentional.”

ADEI programs are being discontinued across the country and it is concerning, according to Bentley. “Our country is volatile right now, and there is little concern for equity and inclusivity,” she added. “If schools are not including ADEI-focused curriculum, young people will grow up with a distorted understanding of the world that will lead to continued bias and hatred towards anyone different than themselves.”

“My advice to people who are committed to the work of anti-racism is to understand that change is slow,” Bentley said. “Know that what you are doing matters. You are creating small ripples that will ultimately have larger impacts than what you can see.”

“Professor Bentley’s dedication to ADEI advocacy is evident in her work as artistic director of the Black Theater Workshop (BTW),” wrote J.T. Snipes, PhD, associate professor and chair in the School of Education, Health and Human Behavior (SEHHB) Department of Educational Leadership, in his nomination letter. “For nearly 20 years, her work has produced exceptional performances that critically examine Black life, bringing its terrors and triumphs into clear relief. As artistic director, she convened a diverse array of SIUE community members to participate in the process. This form of public and collaborative scholarship has undoubtedly cultivated a deeper appreciation for ADEI by BTW ensemble as well as theater goers alike.”

A sampling of Bentley’s accolades and accomplishments include [Saint Louis Visionary Award in the Outstanding Working Artist category](#), [\\$20,000 Fellowship from the Regional Arts Commission](#) and SIUE’s International Education Faculty Achievement Award. As a student, Bentley was awarded the 1989 SIUE Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Merit Scholarship and 20 years later she received the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Faculty/Staff Humanitarian Award.

“SIU is honored to have so many faculty, staff and students like those being honored today who are leading the way and making history in ADEI,” said SIU System President Dan Mahony, PhD. “SIU is committed to dedicating significant resources to our ADEI effort as we continue to make progress.”

[Southern Illinois University Edwardsville](#) provides students with a high-quality education that powerfully transforms the lives of all individuals who seek something greater. A premier metropolitan university, SIUE is creating social and economic mobility for individuals while also powering the workforce of the future. Built on the foundation of a broad-based liberal education, and enhanced by hands-on research and real-world experiences, the academic preparation SIUE students receive equips them to thrive in the global marketplace and make our communities better places to live. Home to a diverse student body, SIUE is situated on 2,660 acres of beautiful woodland atop the bluffs overlooking the natural beauty of the Mississippi River’s rich bottomland and only a short drive from downtown St. Louis.

[The Southern Illinois University System](#) enriches students and diverse communities through inclusive excellence, experiential education and innovation. The system creates and shares knowledge that enables stakeholders to achieve their full potential, serves as an economic catalyst for the region and state, and advances global change, opportunities and social justice. Over the course of the last 150 years, the SIU campuses have grown from humble beginnings to be recognized as ever-expanding centers for learning and research. During that time, SIU Carbondale and SIU Edwardsville have developed into the core of a modern university system that provides learning opportunities to more than 27,000 students.