

2025 Facing Race Awards Recipient Biographies

2025 Recipients

- Alexs Pate
- Nate Smith
- Kathy Sublett
- Sai Thao
- Patricia Torres Ray

Alexs Pate

Alexs Pate is President and CEO and creator of the Innocent Classroom. He is a New York Times bestselling author who has written five novels (Losing Absalom, Finding Makeba, Amistad, The Multicultiboho Sideshow, and West of Rehoboth), a children's book (Being You, a book of nonfiction (In The Heart of the Beat: The Poetry of Rap), and has edited or contributed to numerous literary anthologies.

He is the 2021 winner of the Kay Sexton Award for his significant contributions to and leadership in Minnesota's literary community. He also wrote *The Innocent Classroom: Dismantling Racial Bias to Support Students of Color*, published by ASCD in August 2020. His latest children's book, *Good*, was published in August 2025 by Capstone Editions.

In 2012, Alexs launched the [Innocent Classroom](#), a teacher-training initiative that puts into action his ideas on building relationships and dismantling racial bias in education. This effort has trained over 10,000 educators across the U.S. by 2025 and expanded to programs like Innocent Classroom for early educators and Innocent Care in healthcare contexts.

His work centers on rejecting racial stereotypes and fostering environments where the humanity and potential of people of color are assumed and nurtured.

In recognition of his impact on Minnesota's literary ecosystem, Alexs received the 2021 Kay Sexton Award, honoring leadership and cultural contribution.

He's curated and interviewed nationally known Black authors like Sonia Sanchez, Ishmael Reed, Amiri Baraka, and Lucille Clifton as part of the Givens Nomo Series.



In 1992, Alexs and writer David Mura created “Secret Colors,” which centered on the Rodney King beating and not only highlighted police brutality but also the tensions between the Black and Asian communities in Los Angeles. The piece then became a film for PBS, *Slowly This*, directed by Arthur Jafa.

Nate Smith

Nate Smith, whose spirit name is Mino Animikiikaa, meaning Good Thunder, is an Anishinaabeg Ojibwe community leader enrolled with Miskwaabikaang, the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, and a descendant of Zagaakwaandagowininiwag, the Bois Forte Band of Minnesota Chippewa. He is Bear Clan (Mukwa Dodem), a traditional medicine gatherer, cultural educator and father of three.

Nate is the Founder and Executive Director of Good Thunder Collective, a newly launched Indigenous-led initiative focused on traditional wellness and community education. Through this work, he helps reconnect people with sacred medicines — teaching how to gather, grow and use them in culturally grounded ways. In July 2025, Nate transitioned out of public education to lead this work full-time — a move that also allows him to be more present as a father to his infant daughter. This new chapter reflects Nate’s continued commitment to racial justice, cultural revitalization and intergenerational healing.

Previously, Nate served as the Education Equity Coordinator for Duluth Public Schools, where he played a pivotal role in reshaping the district’s approach to equity and inclusion. He led the district’s first-ever required professional development day focused on Indigenous education and racial justice for all 1,300 staff and helped restructure the Education Equity Advisory Committee to support broader participation and issue-focused advocacy.

Nate is a current and founding board member of [Ignite, Empower, Transform](#), a nonprofit advancing economic and cultural empowerment in the Upper Midwest. He also serves on the executive committee of Minnesota’s largest NAACP branch, where he helped lead efforts to end pretextual traffic stops in Duluth.

His leadership extends across many community boards and advisory committees, including the Great Lakes Aquarium, American Indian Parent Advisory Committee, Title VI Committee, and UMD’s CITS Advisory Board, and the twin port region Men of Color Group. Guided by love, land and legacy, Nate’s work honors the generations before and after him.



Kathy Sublett

Katherine Sublett began her journey in the nonprofit sector in 2020 with the founding of Let's Erase the Stigma. Her organization delivers innovative and impactful programs rooted in her own lived experiences.

Through her challenges, Kathy has developed invaluable skills and gained deep insights into complex, often unjust systems. She is highly effective at forging partnerships within these systems to create meaningful change.

Notably, she collaborated with the legal department at Winona State University and Southeastern Minnesota Legal Aid Services to establish an expungement clinic serving Winona and surrounding counties. Her organization is the first in her community to offer an expungement workshop and clinic, making a lasting impact.

[Let's Erase the Stigma](#) (LETS) is driving transformative change across Southeast Minnesota. Its programs focus on restoring self-worth, respect and confidence to underserved communities of color who have been systematically overlooked. Kathy's innovative programs continue to expand and evolve. In five years, she has built a thriving nonprofit and defies age-related stereotypes.

In 2022, she was honored with the 50 Over 50 award by AARP Minnesota and Pollen, recognizing her as one of the most accomplished and inspiring Minnesotans over 50 in the nonprofit sector. That same year, she received the Top Women in Finance award from Minnesota Finance and Commerce. In February 2023, Kathy was awarded the John A. Latsch Human Rights Award for her exceptional contributions to human rights in Winona.

Beyond her nonprofit work, Kathy is a dynamic motivational speaker, a cultural humility trainer and an active community volunteer. Her guiding motto is, "If you make a mistake, fix it and move on."

Sai Thao

Sai Thao is a Hmong-American woman born and raised on the East Side of Saint Paul. As a parent to four children, all with special needs, Sai's leadership emphasizes education equity and justice, ensuring students and families are at the center of all decision-making. As a media artist, Sai uses digital tools to inspire communities to confront the inequity, tragedy



and isolation symptomatic of racism to deepen their awareness and strengthen community bonds.

Sai earned her Early Childhood Studies degree and Family Studies minor from Metropolitan State University in 2019. Currently, she is a co-chair of a nonprofit art organization called [In Progress](#), which she co-founded 30 years ago to pave the way for new voices in the field of digital media.

Sai also serves on the Community Solution Advisory Council within the MN Department of Health to improve children development outcomes and she is a part of the Hmong Parent Advisory Council within Saint Paul Public Schools to ensure Hmong families are a part of the decision-making in their children's education.

Patricia Torres Ray

Patricia Torres Ray, affectionately known as “La Senadora” or “PTR” by those who have closely collaborated with her, has devoted an impressive 35 years of public service to our state.

Patricia, originally from Colombia, moved to Minnesota in the mid-1980s after marrying her husband, Jack Ray. Upon settling in Minnesota, she initially worked in demanding factory jobs but soon shifted her focus toward mastering the English language and connecting with people in her new country. During this transformative period, she established close relationships with Indigenous, Black and Latina social workers who were at the forefront of the family preservation movement in Minnesota. Patricia credits her professional successes and her passion for social justice to the mentorship she received from these social workers, who embraced her and mentored her upon her arrival in a new country, guiding her during challenging times in her life.

After volunteering in numerous jobs, including the Guardian Ad-litem program in Hennepin County, Patricia was hired as the first Ombudsperson for Families in the State. She was a key advocate for the creation of this office to safeguard the rights of children involved in the child protection system. After serving for seven years in this crucial role, she was hired by the Department of Human Services to spearhead the Children of Color Initiative, where she worked for several years to integrate cultural competence and social justice into social services, juvenile justice and early childhood education. For over 35 years, Patricia has been highlighting the urgent need to address racial and economic disparities in our state, and her determination to effect change is stronger than ever.

In 2006, she ran for office and became the first Latina elected to the Minnesota Senate. During her tenure, Patricia emerged as a powerful advocate for policies aimed at



addressing inequality, authoring and co-authoring numerous bills related to health care, education, housing, the environment, transportation and economic development to uplift and protect minorities across the state.

La Senadora has taken on various leadership positions within the Senate, including Majority Whip, Chair of the Parks and Trails Legacy Committee, Chair of the New Immigration Policy Commission, Chair of the Education Policy Committee and Chair of the State and Local Government Committee.

She made history as the first woman of color to run for Lieutenant Governor alongside Senator John Marty in the gubernatorial race. She is recognized nationally for her advocacy on behalf of women and minorities, and she founded the National Latinas Lead Academy through the National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators, playing a pivotal role in supporting and mentoring numerous Latinos and Latinas in their leadership journeys.

Patricia is a recognized leader both locally and nationally, having received multiple awards for her dedication to dismantling disparities and creating opportunities for women, immigrants and marginalized communities. Among her honors is the prestigious Joan and Walter Mondale Leadership Award.

She is a Public Affairs graduate from the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota and a parent of two beautiful boys, Tomas and Patrick.

Last year Patricia decided not to run for re-election after serving in the Senate for 16 years and opened her own firm, PTR Associates, to assist small organizations in managing political and public policy strategies centered around the needs and assets of Indigenous communities, people of color and immigrant communities.