

# Unsung heroes producing pivotal changes in Miami-Dade

BY REBECCA SAN JUAN

Unsung heroes who are helping produce pivotal changes in multiple areas of Miami-Dade County are being put forward by observers as long overdue for credit.

Kilan Ashad-Bishop, a biomedical scientist who recently completed her Ph.D. in Cancer Biology at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, has shown her community involvement. She's an environmental justice advocate who volunteers as an appointee on the City of Miami's Sea Level Rise Committee and has been leading a subcommittee focusing on socioeconomically vulnerable communities for three years.

"I led the recent effort to get the commission to adopt legislation to direct the city manager to look into this climate gentrification phenomenon that we are witnessing, understand the research around it, and start brainstorming solutions so that we can keep low-income residents on their high-elevation land instead of letting them be displaced to areas of increased vulnerability," she said.

Dr. Ashad-Bishop also works across organizations to expose youth to STEM fields.

"I have been extremely blessed in my life to have the space to figure out what I am passionate about and to work in those spaces," she said. "I have an extremely supportive network that is comprised of family, friends, mentors and people that go beyond mentorship to sponsorship."

She recognizes that not all youth grow up in a similar situation and she hopes through her volunteerism that youth, particularly girls of color, have mentoring moments that begin

**Kilan Ashad-Bishop leads a sea level rise team looking at socioeconomically vulnerable communities.**

building the kind of confidence that they need to excel in STEM.

Brandon Okpalobi, the founder of DIBIA Development through Recreational Education for Aspiring Minds or DREAM, and DIBIA Athletic Development CEO, admires Dr. Ashad-Bishop's approach to working through a variety of fields to solve important problems.

"She is on the ground doing work on multiple levels, whether it's working with the National Academy of Sciences in DC, sitting on a climate change board in Miami, volunteering to help 20 girls for STEM Saturdays, or advocating alongside different county or state associations," he said. "At all levels, she is trying to create that change that is needed for the community."

A scientist at heart, Dr. Ashad-Bishop applies a scientific approach to all of her endeavors.

"I believe in science as a process and that you can apply your scientific process to solve a wide variety of societal problems," she said. "That is what I do with



**Gene Sulzberger urges leaders to adopt more HIV prevention tools.**

research. That is what I do with advocacy."

Mario Stevenson, University of Miami Health chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases, recognizes Gene C. Sulzberger for his support of HIV prevention. The president of Sulzberger Capital Advisors dedicates his time to initiating talks with changemakers, including policymakers, to adopt HIV prevention tools in Miami, one of the epicenters for HIV in the country.

"I lost a lot of friends in the '80s and '90s to AIDS," Mr. Sulzberger said. "Friends of mine in their 50s have just become HIV positive in the past year or two. It's because it's become this disease that is seen as not a death sentence; there is a lack of precaution."

He works with the university, county, and county commissioners to promote prevention methods and medication, such as PrEP, provided locally through Prevention 305 South Florida.

A county official, Deputy Mayor Alina T. Hudak, who is to retire from county service this summer, deserves credit for her contributions to the community, says University of Miami President of Student Affairs Patricia A. Whitely. "She has a personality that is able to motivate people."

Ms. Whitely admires how Mrs. Hudak has climbed the ranks. She says her leadership experience – "being a leader in a man's world" – sets her apart from other county officials.

Fine art advisor Lisa Austin says what separates Silvia Karman Cubiñá, Bass Museum executive director and chief curator, from others in similar positions is how she grew her organization.

"She's had to take The Bass Museum from zero to where it is today, which is a highly re-

spected institution," Ms. Austin said. "The Bass was floundering when she got there."

The reputation of the museum changed, Ms. Austin says, with Ms. Cubiñá working under strong board members and organizing well-respected exhibitions.

Her programming attracts a diverse crowd, a testament to what makes her successful, Ms. Austin said. "She knows what she's doing in terms of the art side of things. The proof is in the pudding because she's got so many great exhibits, and I know that it has become a place for younger people to go. She has a lot of good programming that attracts a younger, hipper people."

Ms. Cubiñá has called The Bass her workplace for about 11 years and recognizes that institution-building is a journey that may last a lifespan. But she credits her success to the team that surrounds her daily, especially the museum's chairman of the board, George Lindemann.

"I wouldn't have been able

to do anything without George Lindemann," she said. "He has been wise in the way he's led the board of directors. I wouldn't have been able to do it without him."

Cameron Sisser, Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired vice president for external relations, works tirelessly for his organization, says Matt Anderson, Bank of America Private Bank vice president and private client advisor.

"Cameron is a hidden gem of our community," Mr. Anderson said via email. "When it comes to building awareness for the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind, he has the innate ability to be a bridge between generations and also touch the hearts of those that do not have a natural connection to the blind and visually-impaired community. Alongside our community's pillar Virginia Jacko, [the Lighthouse's president and CEO], Cameron makes what seems at first glance impossible, possible."

Deborah Plutzik, The Betsy South Beach vice president for arts, culture and community, describes Carlene Sawyer, Dranoff International 2 Piano Foundation executive director, as "the mastermind behind what has become one of the area's most unique and powerful celebrations of youth poetry, presented against the backdrop of multi-genre music and rooted in issues related to sea level rise."

A native Miamian, Ms. Sawyer admits her achievements and professional pursuits are largely due to her love of community.

"I have been very fortunate to have a number of community roles here," she said. "I have always seen how important it was to be part of a broader community."



**Carlene Sawyer masterminded a salute to youth poetry set to music.**



**Silvia Karman Cubiñá increased the Bass Museum's level of respect.**