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Photos courtesy NOWCS.







Dawn Bradley-Fletcher

The class of 2023 is the 25th year of CityBusiness' Women of the Year, with Dawn Bradley-Fletcher, CEO of the New Orleans Women & Children's Shelter, taking this year's top honor. Bradley-Fletcher and the other 49 Women of the Year were honored at an event Monday at the New Orleans Museum of Art.

Bradley-Fletcher laughs that she always used to get in trouble as a kid, but it was a "good trouble."

"I would give away my toys. I would give away my clothes. I would invite people over for dinner. I was always getting in trouble for helping random people, but I guess it was a good trouble looking back on it. Helping people has just always been a part of who I am."

Bradley-Fletcher has made a career of helping people, and she's quite good at it.

She has led the shelter's operations for 16 years. As the largest homeless shelter for women and children in the Greater New Orleans area and the only homeless shelter for intact families (including fathers), NOWCS had served more than 4,000 parents and children recovering from homelessness with an 98% success rate in preventing the return to homelessness.

"I was put here to serve people and help them get to a better place in life," said Bradley-Fletcher, who has more than 20 years in nonprofit work and in the public health and human services sectors. "I wake up every day with a purpose of leading a team that is impacting people's lives –knocking down any barriers that people are facing to getting their lives back on track. We are breaking the cycle of homelessness and ensuring families are never homeless again."

Bradley-Fletcher is a 2019 recipient of the Louisiana Association of Nonprofit Organization's Force for Good Award. In 2023, she received *New Orleans Magazine's* "Top Female Achiever" award, and now, she has been honored as the *New Orleans CityBusiness* "Woman of the Year".

Actually born in Cleveland, but rightfully claiming herself as a New Orleans native (moving here at 3 months old), Bradley-Fletcher's first job assisting children was as a teenager herself. At the age of 14, while attending Warren Easton High School, she served as a children's camp counselor. From 1995-2002, Bradley-Fletcher was the H.E.A.R.T. center manager in the FACES Program at Children's Hospital, working with families whose children were battling HIV.

From 2002-2007, Bradley-Fletcher transitioned to her first taste of helping the homeless. She worked as the Self-Help Employment program coordinator at Traveler's Aid Society in New Orleans, where she helped homeless men gain the skills to escape homelessness.

In 2008, Bradley-Fletcher met Jackie Silverman, who had just founded the New Orleans Women's Shelter (NOWCS' original name) to combat homelessness following the massive loss of housing after Hurricane Katrina. "Originally, I just wanted to volunteer for the shelter, but then seven interviews later, I said this could be a real job for me. I felt this was my cause and my next calling in life," she said. "I actually interviewed for the shelter manager's position, then I became program director, executive director, and most recently, CEO. It's been an amazing journey, and we have an impressive team here."

Bradley-Fletcher leads a staff of 22 employees. The NOWCS is a 16-bedroom facility in Central City that can serve up to 60 people. But in addition to the temporary services at the shelter, it's the wrap-around, "stepping stones to self-sufficiency" services that the shelter offers – case management, financial literacy, résumé building, job searches, life-skills training, mental health needs, housing assistance, and an after-school program – that are the critical differences to ensuring families do not return to being homeless.

For example, the transition assistance program requires a minimum of 18 months of ongoing case management, post-residence household and budget management assistance, continued access to education and workforce development resources, summer programs and laundry facilities, savings match program, and school supply and holiday gift program support.

“When we get families in, we ensure they’re safe, fed, clean, and comfortable, but they realize the shelter is just temporary,” Bradley-Fletcher said. “Our job is to transition them back to society, provide them the tools and resources to strengthen every aspect of their work and family life from education to employment to parenting and planning ahead. We have worked with women to earn their GEDs, become RNs, children to get the mental health they need, and families to move them into permanent residences. The work we do is very fulfilling.”

Under Bradley-Fletcher’s leadership, NOWCS has built an extensive network of close to 60 collaborators – schools, employers, childcare providers, financial institutions, mental and medical health care providers, universities, businesses and corporations, nonprofits, foundations, and local and state governments. “Our public, service partners, funders, and stakeholders enable us to provide the programs and services that are critical to our mission, operations, sustainability, and growth,” she said. “You have to have a surrounding, supportive community that can help sustain our women and children as independent families and residents of our city.”

Bradley-Fletcher served on former Mayor Landrieu’s Homeless Transition Team and the Housing Transition Team, contributing to the 2010 Plan to End Homelessness. Extending her volunteerism into the community, Bradley-Fletcher is a board member for Love365, former board member of the Paragon Society and A Shared Initiative, and she is a member of the Krewe of Athena and Krewe of Nefertiti. Most recently, she joined the board of City Park Conservancy.

“I get to be a part of the City Park Master Plan to re-envision City Park over the next century. How rewarding is that opportunity?” said Bradley-Fletcher. “I remember my mom taking us there. We have our annual picnic at the Park. I know every part of that park and how special it is. It’s a crown jewel in our City, and it’s an honor to donate my time to this amazing project.”

Bradley-Fletcher joins a list that not only includes the 2023 class, but also our Hall of Fame and overall Woman of the Year honorees that are selected annually. Women of the Year was started in 1999. However, CityBusiness did not begin naming an overall Woman of the Year until 2004.

In 2019, the nonprofit organizations category was added to Women of the Year as a way to honor those who have gone above and beyond in serving the needs of local women

and/or children. The 2023 nonprofit honorees have shown their commitment and impact on our region.

Also at the event, CityBusiness honored 10 business leaders who have had a lasting influence on the city's economic development and made their mark on the city overall. These ICON Award honorees, through their innovative ideas, achievements and commitment to excellence, have moved the community forward.

Learn more about each honoree in the magazine that will publish in CityBusiness on Nov 17.