



NEWS FROM **ULSTER COUNTY** County Executive Jen Metzger

****For Immediate Release****

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Ulster County Celebrates Inaugural Sojourner Truth Awards Honoring 22 Local High School Students

KINGSTON, NY - Ulster County Executive Jen Metzger and Chief Diversity Officer Dina Suggs led a ceremony with community leaders, educators, and families on Saturday, November 22, at St. James United Methodist Church in Kingston to present the inaugural **Ulster County Sojourner Truth Awards**, honoring outstanding high school students who embody the courage, resilience, leadership in service to others, and advocacy of one of Ulster County's most extraordinary native daughters.

The ceremony, held in commemoration of Sojourner Truth Day 2025, featured music by Ubaka Hill and the Drumsong Orchestra, an original poem by Ulster County Poet Laureate Mike Jurkovic entitled *Your North Star*, a piece by storyteller Evelyn Clarke, and reflections on Truth's legacy. Speakers included Reverend Gia Hall of St. James United Methodist Church, County Executive Jen Metzger, County Clerk-elect Taylor Bruck, County Historian Eddie Moran, and culminated in the presentation of certificates and commemorative keepsakes to 22 student awardees from across Ulster County.

Visitors also had the opportunity to view a special Sojourner Truth display prepared by the Ulster County Clerk's Office, located outside the sanctuary. Coffee and pastries were provided by Di Sweet Spot following the ceremony.

2025 Ulster County Sojourner Truth Awardees:

- Nisean Abney, P-Tech at Ellenville High School – (nominated by) My Brother's Keeper
- Nino Belheleurl, Kingston High School – Center for Photography at Woodstock
- Johnell Brannon, Saugerties High School – Boys and Girls Club of Ulster County
- Kyra Campbell, Kingston High School – Center for Creative Education

- Bryan Correa, Jr., Kingston High School – YMCA of Kingston and Ulster County
- Sam Constable, Kingston High School – Center for Creative Education
- Diego Estrada Perez, Kingston High School – Fly the Coop
- Marlene Hernandez, Kingston High School – Fly the Coop
- Alanny Jimenez Peralta, Kingston High School – Boys and Girls Club of Ulster County
- Henry Jones, P-Tech at Ellenville High School – My Brother’s Keeper
- Isabela Lewis-Rivera, P-Tech at Ellenville High School – My Sister’s Keeper
- Zackary Mahoney, Highland High School – Ulster County 4-H
- Ella Maxwell, Saugerties High School – Ulster County 4-H
- Juelz Mayers, Rondout Valley High School – Center for Creative Education
- Wyatt McNeil, Ellenville Central School – Wild Earth
- Timothy Michaud, Wallkill Senior High – Ulster County 4-H
- Dalianis Ortega, P-Tech at Ellenville High School – My Sister’s Keeper
- Kurtis Owens, Kingston High School – Boys and Girls Club of Ulster County
- Raisa Rehuma, Kingston High School – Center for Photography at Woodstock
- Janaye Riley, Kingston High School – Boys and Girls Club of Ulster County
- Isabella Rivera, Saugerties High School – Boys and Girls Club of Ulster County
- Jarell Seabrook, Grove Street Academy – The Children’s Home of Kingston

“It was incredibly meaningful to gather in the very church where Sojourner herself once worshiped to celebrate her extraordinary legacy and the young people in Ulster County who embody Sojourner's spirit in their own lives,” **said County Executive Jen Metzger.** “I'm very proud of these 22 young leaders, and want to thank the youth-serving organizations who nominated them as well as the work of the Ulster County Sojourner Truth Awards Committee. This is the first of what will become an annual tradition to honor the young leaders who carry the legacy of Sojourner Truth forward in courage, resilience, advocacy, and leadership in service to the greater good.”

“Each awardee has shown great character through their actions, leadership, and care for others,” **said Dina Suggs, Ulster County Chief Diversity Officer.** “It has truly been a privilege to learn about each one of them as a member of the awards committee. These high school students enrich our community in meaningful ways and make us all deeply proud.”

“It was deeply moving to celebrate Ulster County’s inaugural Sojourner Truth Awards in the very church where Sojourner worshiped before forging her path to freedom and justice,” **said Taylor Bruck, Ulster County Clerk-elect.** “Watching young people step up to serve their communities — quietly, consistently, and with heart — felt like a living continuation of her

legacy. Their commitment honors the history we inherit and the future we're responsible for building."

Students were nominated by youth-serving organizations, based on criteria established by the Ulster County Sojourner Truth Awards Committee, including courage and persistence, leadership in service to others, and community advocacy. The Committee included Dina Suggs (Ulster County Chief Diversity Officer), Sharon Williams (Director of the Office of Employment and Training), Sugely Melenciano-Weed (Director of the Youth Bureau), and Kim Mapes (Youth and Family Engagement Coordinator at the Center for Restorative Justice).

About Sojourner Truth Day

Born enslaved in Esopus in 1797, Sojourner Truth freed herself in 1826 and made history in Kingston when she successfully sued to win back her son — becoming the first woman in the United States to win a court case against a man. She went on to become a fearless abolitionist, women's rights advocate, and one of the most powerful voices for justice in American history.

In 2022, four young women from the Kingston YMCA Farm Hub Youth Crew successfully advocated for Ulster County to permanently designate November 26 as Sojourner Truth Day. Their work inspired New York State to follow suit in 2024, making November 26 a statewide day of recognition.

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