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**2023
Women of
Influence**

Chandana Nandi

By Jean Campbell

Chandana Nandi is passionate about community health and has spent her adult life advocating for how healthy life choices can help prevent chronic disease. The results of her work have been felt locally, statewide, nationally and internationally.

Nandi was born and raised in the state of West Bengal in India. Her childhood was occupied mostly with music, art, studies and school activities. In 1974, after earning a bachelor's degree in science from P.D. Women's College, she wed Dr. Proshanta Nandi. It was an arranged marriage, and after the ceremony she moved to Springfield with her husband where he had been living and working. He was one of the earliest faculty members at Sangamon State University. She was impressed by America's openness, diversity and the many opportunities for growth and self-fulfillment.

Nandi earned a master's degree in nutrition from Sangamon State University and later became a registered dietitian. "Chemistry was my favorite subject, which is why I chose nutrition," she says. "Food science is nothing but chemistry. Nutrition affects everything in your body."

During an internship at the Illinois Department of Public Health, Nandi realized she could use her knowledge and education to help improve the health of a wide segment of people. Thus, her internship turned into a 24-year career with IDPH where she rose to the position of chief of the division of chronic diseases and was responsible for 12 programs. In 2008, she spent two years as the assistant director for policy and resource development at Midwest Latino Health Research, Training and Policy Center, University of Illinois Chicago.

Early in her career, Nandi was very interested in improving the outcomes of high-risk pregnancies. "In those days, people didn't understand the effect of smoking on low-birth weight babies," she recalls. "In one of my most-requested papers, we documented that mothers who were older than 35, underweight and smokers had the highest risk factors for having low-birth weight babies. This, along with other studies, resulted in policies that improved the health outcomes for mothers and newborns around the world."

After several years, her focus expanded to helping other marginalized and low-income populations achieve better health outcomes. Overall, her research, public health programs and grant proposals provided resources to health organizations throughout Illinois and the country.

Nandi's grant proposals garnered millions of dollars in federal aid for programs to improve breastfeeding and pregnancy nutrition among WIC

participants, establish a National Latino Tobacco Control Network and reduce the incidence of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer and asthma.

Among the many statewide efforts Nandi led was the development of nutrition standards for meals at all Illinois public schools. She also took the lead on state strategic plans to reduce obesity, cancer and heart disease. She often prepared position papers and testified before the Illinois General Assembly on topics such as nutrition, chronic diseases, tobacco control and Alzheimer's disease.

On a national level, Nandi secured resources and developed policies for the prevention of diabetes, cancer and heart disease. She served as a member of the Centers for Disease Control's Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection and Control Advisory Committee for three years. She also was a member of the planning committee for the CDC's diabetes conference for several years and was co-chair of the committee in 2004. She served twice as the national chair of the Diabetes Council of the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors.

Nandi has personal experience with diabetes. "Last October, I learned I was pre-diabetic," she shares. "I changed my diet to limit simple carbohydrates, including sugar, and increased my fiber and protein through food choices only. I also increased the intensity and duration of my exercise. In three months, I reversed my condition and now have normal blood-glucose levels."

It is impossible to quantify the numbers of lives that have been changed for the better by Nandi. Those who know her personally have been touched by her warmth, dedication and passion.

Although she retired in 2010, Nandi is still committed to improving health care. "I give talks about diabetes prevention and nutrition at local organizations. And I volunteer my time to review grants for the Health Resources and Services Administration to improve rural health care."

Nandi also continues to be active in the Asian Indian Women's Organization, serving as president in 2022 and 2023. "It is a volunteer group that promotes Indian cultural activities and conducts fundraising that has benefited Girls on the Run for Central Illinois, the Ronald McDonald House, M.E.R.C.Y. Communities, St. John's Hospital's NICU and many others," she says. "I am proud of my Indian culture and heritage. The food and music of India play a huge role in my daily life and pleasures."

Nandi and Proshanta had two children and two grandchildren together and were married for 49 years before he died in March 2023.

"I am honored and privileged to have been selected to receive this award," says Nandi. "My first thought when I received it was to think how happy Proshanta would have been for me. He was my biggest supporter in all that I have done. Thank you, Springfield."



Taryn Grant

By Karen Ackerman Witter

Taryn Grant started ballet at the age of three and has been involved with dance ever since. While teaching dance in high school and college, she discovered that teaching is her true passion. She says teaching enables her to make a difference in young people's lives. She delights in helping students express themselves through the performing arts and develop discipline and self-confidence. She has an extensive network of supporters and has been described as a selfless community servant who has a passion for making our community better and bringing out the best in those around her.

Grant earned a degree in business and marketing from SIU Edwardsville. Later, she took a class at The Juilliard School in New York City to complete her Dance for Parkinson's Disease teacher certification. She completed her adaptive movement teacher training with the Boston Ballet.

Grant is the director of community outreach for the Springfield Youth Performance Group, which she founded in 2005 to enrich the lives of children through the performing arts. She has never turned a child away who wants to be a part of the group. She established the SYPG Foundation in 2012 to support her mission of community arts outreach programming.

In 2021, Grant purchased the former Elliott Avenue Baptist Church at 501 W. Elliott Ave., and created the Grant Conservatory of Music and Dance as a permanent home for SYPG. Grant describes this as a gift to the community that is filled with love and kindness – a place to try new things and performance styles. The Conservatory has a strong partnership with the Illinois Symphony Orchestra. Grant says it is both humbling and exciting to see the Conservatory grow faster than expected in its first two years.

"The arts are a language we can all speak," says Grant. She is dedicated to teaching typical

dance classes as well as adaptive movement instruction like the class she teaches weekly at Hope that combines music and movement. She created the Mighty Movers adaptive

physical activity that increases fitness, boosts self-esteem and facilitates friendships.

Grant says her reward is the relationships she builds with her students. Other outreach initiatives include visits by child-friendly characters and fairy-tale princesses to children with medical conditions, live performances based on books at underserved schools and chair-based fitness/dance classes for seniors.

Grant shows students what they can do if they work hard, and she tells them, "You are who you surround yourself with." She says it is important for children to know that she respects them, and in turn, they respect her. The extent of Grant's impact is both broad and deep – introducing many young people to the performing arts while giving countless individuals opportunities to enrich their self-esteem and confidence.

She is also dedicated to inspiring her young dancers to give back to the community. She created the Bravery Ambassadors to encourage SYPG alumnae and studio company members to reach beyond their dance experience to boost community involvement, foster continuing education, mentor younger dancers and build future leaders.

Grant is proud of the longevity of the organization she created – staying true to the mission and focusing on children and what's best for them. She is quick to say that she hasn't done this alone. She credits her friends, volunteers, dancer families and her own family. She is grateful for the strong community involvement that has helped make many programs possible.

Grant's passion, energy and leadership have motivated others to embrace and support her endeavors. And, she has inspired many young girls to become strong, kind and independent female leaders. Clearly, Taryn Grant is a Woman of Influence.

movement program to provide a gross motor skills program for children with developmental delays and at-risk youth. She provides weekly programs at Enos Elementary School, the Boys and Girls Club and St. Patrick Catholic School. Students benefit from these programs through

Carrie Ward

By Carey Smith

"As a leader, think of Carrie like this: It's not so much what keeps Carrie awake all night, but what gets her up in the morning. She has a plan and is relentless in making a difference each day in helping others enjoy a better quality of life," said Marilyn Kushak, who nominated Carrie Ward for Women of Influence.

Ward attributes her personal ethic to her great-grandfather, who lived next door to her as a child. "He's my No. 1 role model and mentor. He was just a hardworking, good and kind person who wanted me to be the same. By far, he was the deepest influence in my life."

A native of Jacksonville, Illinois, Ward attended Illinois College on a scholarship, thanks to her mother, who worked there for 36 years. She went on to attend graduate school at Sangamon State University, now UIS.

Ward began her professional career as a case manager at Big Brothers Big Sisters. Though she worked there only a year, her involvement in the Bowl for Kids' Sake program was a 20-year commitment. "I love to volunteer," says Ward. "What I tend to do is stick to one thing and do a whole bunch of that."

An internship at Rape Information and Counseling Service, now Prairie Center Against Sexual Assault, led to taking a newly-created staff position, which Ward maintained until the birth of her first child. Ward then took a position as grants manager and was eventually promoted to grants director at Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault (ICASA), where she spent a total of 22 years. Building on that solid foundation, Ward was hired as executive director and CEO when founding director Polly Poskin retired in 2018.

ICASA is the face of 30 community-based sexual assault crisis centers in Illinois, all working together to end sexual violence and provide support services to survivors of sexual assault. "A lot of my responsibilities are about representation, making sure ICASA is included in conversations about funding, changes in the law and influential in terms of opportunities for the development of services," explains Ward. "I have to stay connected with what individual rape centers are doing." Ward also

serves on a number of statewide committees and task forces. "I represent not only the state coalition but sexual assault survivors."

One vital component Ward has brought to the conversation is talking about marginalized populations and racial justice. "Equality is so important. As much as we'd like to recognize the progress that has been made, racism is alive and well and affects decisions people make."

With a grant from the state of Illinois, Ward coordinated a multitude of conversations with groups and people in leadership roles, inviting speakers and a human resources expert in equity and inclusion issues to the table for discussion.

Ward states, "Sexual assault survivors who are people of color experience additional challenges, such as interactions with law enforcement or access to services. We acknowledge that and asked how we could be influential in a positive way." In addition to hosting these conversations, ICASA created racial healing libraries in its crisis centers.

Talking about race can be "difficult and awkward," Ward acknowledges. "A lot of people feel guilt and shame and feel defensive." Ward says she can appreciate that people today may not have contributed personally to racism, "but we all live in an environment where racism exists. We have to acknowledge that it exists, and it hurts us all. If we live in a society that doesn't value people equally, it is problematic for all of us."

Ward says that people often remark on her positive personality. "In recognition of the things that are bad in the world, I want to do something better," says Ward. "Whether paid or volunteer, I do have a positive attitude about it. I'm honored to be included."

A number of community organizations have been blessed with Ward's volunteer leadership, from being a part of her kids' Parent Teacher Club and her neighborhood homeowner's association, to a variety of walking and running groups, including Girls on the Run. Ward herself has run six marathons and 37 half-marathons.

Of all Ward's accomplishments, she says she is most proud of her daughters, Jessica and Macy. "I can't take credit for who they are, but I am most proud of being their mom, and being somebody that they can be proud of. I think that is a great motivator for me. My motivation on the daily is being a good person, being somebody who will make them proud. If I use that as a starting point, everything else is a bonus. They inspire me."

Shatriya Smith

By Carey Smith

"I don't feel like I'm working, because I love what I do. I'm blessed. I get to live my life being a public servant, and sometimes I come to tears for the excitement of helping others," remarks Shatriya Smith, executive director of the Garvey-Tubman Cultural Arts & Research Center since 2019.

A self-described "girl from the gutter with a chaotic upbringing," Smith credits her grandmother, Ernestine Teena Nicks, for taking her in at age 16, spending quality time with her, and being her foundation and inspiration.

It all began with poetry, specifically with her grandmother reading her *An Ante-Bellum Sermon* by Paul Laurence Dunbar, written in Ebonics. "I was blown away," says Smith, of the poem that was written in "a language we speak and could recognize." Smith, who laughs that she has always had trouble with spelling, says that this poem made her realize that "even though I can't spell, that doesn't invalidate what I'm saying. It opened my eyes to different forms of communication, respecting the history of where we came from and where we're going."

From there, her grandmother emphasized writing. "Grandma would tell me for my own counsel, 'Write it down. Write down your feelings. Write down your next steps. Write it down.' I would write it and rhyme it sometimes. Writing things down helps me to overcome my demons, my own drama, my underdeveloped sense of worth."

This foundation of poetry and writing has served Smith well in her professional and volunteer life. "I've taken to journaling, to poetry, to wordsmithing and turned it into executive director documentation, grant writing, writing legislation – the list goes on. When you have the ability to write, you have so many avenues of expression, and everybody's almost anticipating the words that are about to come out of your mouth. It's a palpable situation, when I'm

standing in front of a crowd of 500 people and they're waiting for my poem. It's just amazing."

Smith felt underqualified when she began with GTCARC, but her mentors, John Crisp, Jr. and Charles Scott, supported and guided her as she

reading poetry in schools and churches, summer camps, providing instruments for kids to take home, a speaker series and more.

All of GTCARC's programming and services are provided free of charge to low-income beneficiaries. Smith notes the Robin Hood-style of operations, asking the better off to provide services for underserved populations. As leader of a nonprofit organization that provides social supports, Smith laments the city's earmarking of monies to do things such as fund the demolition of one of Horace Mann's dilapidated buildings when there are so many worthy social programs doing good in our community that are underfunded.

Like many community leaders of color, Smith appreciates the recent push for diversity in Springfield, but laments that there is still so far to go in the struggle for equity. "We have a number of people in the community who want to see diversity grow and strengthen. Springfield is the birthplace of the Emancipation Proclamation.

How can we not be the leaders in integrating spaces?"

One of the recurring issues

Smith sees is the powers that be prioritizing things over people.

"We haven't been building up our community. Like when we have Levitt AMP, it's not that we need to build something, but we make a space. The parking lots and buildings aren't the community, it's the people."

Smith's devotion to people has led her to volunteer for a number of community groups, including those that advocate for equity and the arts. Her poetry has uplifted many of the hearts who have attended rallies

where she speaks.

"It's not about mine. It's about ours," says Smith. "We have to make that the forward template. I want to be the tribe that raised me, to mirror that image in the community. I wouldn't be who I am today without them. My legacy is the same as the person before me: to leave a template of understanding so other people can follow in the footsteps."

gained confidence in her leadership and development skills. "I'm really pleased at the opportunities," says Smith, "because I would never have imagined myself in this space."

The GTCARC makes available a variety of arts programming to both children and adults, including art workshops (from making jewelry to origami), poetry open mics and workshops,

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From the Officers, Employees and Board of Directors of Security Bank

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