

## YOUNG PROFESSIONAL OF THE YEAR AWARD FINALISTS

### Amanda Owen

Founder and Executive Director, Puzzle Pieces

Amanda Owen is a nationally recognized disability advocate, visionary nonprofit leader, and dynamic storyteller who has redefined inclusive service delivery in Kentucky and beyond. As the Founder and Executive Director of Puzzle Pieces, a nonprofit organization supporting over 400 individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, Amanda leads a team of 100+ staff with a \$7 million annual operating budget. Under her leadership, Puzzle Pieces has become a state and national model for innovative programming, including residential living, vocational training, supported employment, behavioral therapy, and the region's only targeted autism supports. Amanda's passion for this work is rooted in her personal experience as the sibling of one of the first individuals in the world diagnosed with a rare chromosomal disability. Inspired by her brother Nick, Amanda became a special education teacher before launching Puzzle Pieces in 2012. Since then, she has dedicated her life to transforming systems that serve individuals with disabilities—from classrooms to communities to the workforce. Her academic and professional training reflects her commitment to evidence-based practices and inclusive design. Amanda has a Bachelor's and Master's Degree in Exceptional Education K-12, with an Autism Certificate. Amanda holds advanced Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) training through the Carbone Clinic, TEACCH certification in structured teaching strategies for autism, and is a Certified Safe Crisis Management Trainer through JKM. She is also trained in Universal Design through the Human Development Institute (HDI-UK) and is Health Matters certified to deliver accessible nutrition and exercise curricula to individuals with disabilities. In addition to her clinical and educational background, Amanda is the Chair of the Advocacy and Education Committee for the Kentucky Employment First Council, where she champions competitive, integrated employment for individuals with disabilities. She also spearheaded the Coalition for Workforce Diversity, partnering with regional employers to build inclusive hiring practices, and launched the Employment Opportunities initiative, which has successfully placed more than 100 individuals into meaningful, competitive employment. Beyond her professional endeavors, Amanda is a children's book author (Owen the Wonderer series), host of the Pieces of Me podcast, and creator of a storytelling platform that reaches more than 3.5 million people annually. Her recently released memoir, *Rarely Different*, offers an unfiltered and powerful look into life as a sibling of someone with a disability, selling in all 50 states and four countries. Through her writing and speaking, Amanda uplifts caregivers, educators, and female entrepreneurs with humor, heart, and vulnerability. Her leadership and impact have earned widespread recognition, including being named a 40 Under 40 community leader, 2019 Nonprofit of the Year by the Greater Owensboro Chamber of Commerce, and 2023 Education & Workforce Development Institution of the Year for



her work with Employment Opportunities. Whether she's leading statewide initiatives, mentoring women across the country, or navigating life as a mother to her two sons, Landon and Layne, Amanda remains grounded in her mission: to build a world where every person—regardless of ability—is seen, valued, and celebrated. Her life and leadership embody her guiding philosophy: dream big, work hard, own your journey, and always laugh along the way.

### Why Should This Nominee Be Recognized as Kentucky's Young Professional of the Year?

Amanda Owen should be recognized as Kentucky's Young Professional of the Year because she embodies what it means to lead with vision, purpose, and heart. She's not just building a better community—she's inspiring others to believe they can too. At just 28 years old, Amanda left her career as a special education teacher to launch a nonprofit, while raising a 3-year-old and discovering she was pregnant with her second child just two months after opening its doors. As the founder and Executive Director of Puzzle Pieces, she balanced early motherhood, marriage, and leadership to grow what began as a small dream into a \$7 million organization now serving over 400 individuals with disabilities. Her leadership has turned a seven-person team into a staff of more than 100. But Amanda's impact extends well beyond the walls of her organization. When something doesn't exist in her community, she creates it—from launching Kentucky's only targeted autism program to co-founding the Coalition for Workforce Diversity. She doesn't just advocate—she empowers. Amanda mentors emerging leaders who've become teachers, nurses, and nonprofit founders. Her mindset is always “Why not me?”—but more importantly, “How can I make others better?” For seven years, her monthly column has challenged and uplifted her community's mindset, pushing for meaningful progress. Beyond her nonprofit, Amanda has founded three other LLCs, self-published her own book, and built a national platform that honors and uplifts her local community. She integrates her values into every venture, choosing to partner with local community businesses and represent Kentucky well with her national presence. Amanda Owen isn't just a professional to watch—she's a force to follow.