



THOUGHT LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE



**BUILDING A CONNECTED CULTURE
BY CENTERING HUMAN RELATIONS**

Continuing the Conversation: It Takes a Village

MAY 5-7, 2026

HOSTED BY



**INTERCULTURAL
RELATIONS
INSTITUTE**



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Welcome!

Welcome to the 10th Anniversary of the Thought Leadership Conference.

What began as a regional gathering has grown into a shared community experience—bringing together business, education, and community to strengthen connection, deepen understanding, and inspire collective action.

This year, we pause to reflect and refocus on what matters most: human connection. Through conversation and collaboration, we create space to relate, interact, and grow together. This is more than an event. It is an invitation to engage, to connect, and to be part of building a more connected culture.

We are grateful for your presence and your voice in this shared experience.

It takes a village!

With appreciation,

Dr. Tessa R. Sutton, Founder and President

Thank You Partners and Sponsors

We are grateful for the partners and sponsors whose contributions—time, resources, and expertise—make this experience possible.



Schedule

Community Day May 7, 2026

3:00
PM

**Youth Empowerment
Symposium (YES!) - Seth Maust**

4:00
PM

Youth and Family Community Fair

4:15
PM

TLC26 World Café: What Is Possible Now?
Greater Elkhart Chamber of Commerce

6:00
PM

Michaeleen Doucleff - Reflective Address

6:00
PM

Continuing the Conversation - It Takes a Village
Chamber President Levon Johnson (Moderator),
Mayor Rod Roberson and Superintendent Dr. Byron Sanders

7:30
PM

Book Signing with Dr. Michaeleen Doucleff



FEATURED SPEAKER
Coach Seth Maust
Five Star Life, President

Youth Empowerment Symposium

YES! with Seth Maust

THURSDAY, MAY 7, 3PM

Welcome and Opening

Dr. Tessa Sutton, *Intercultural Relations Institute*

School Leadership Remarks

Principal LaTosha Bonds, *Elkhart Community Schools*

Community Acknowledgment

Tonda Hines, *Elkhart Community Schools and City Councilwoman*

Speaker Introduction

Student Representative Jania Walker,
Freshmen Division, Elkhart Community Schools

Featured Speaker

Coach Seth Maust, *President, Five Star Life*

Youth Recognition and Awards

Dacey Davis, *Board Member, Elkhart Community Schools*
Leslie Wesley, *Board Member, Intercultural Relations Institute*

Student Refreshments

Transition to the Youth Family Community Fair

Youth Empowerment Symposium

YES! Student Honorees



Jania Walker

Jania is a dedicated and well-rounded student involved in student government, Move to Stand, SSAC basketball, and track. Known for her kindness and positive attitude, she values meaningful relationships and teamwork. Her commitment to academics and activities reflects strong character, leadership, and a passion for connection.



Mason Erlacher

An emerging student-athlete at Elkhart High School, recognized for his leadership and commitment to excellence in academics, athletics, and service. A member of the Class of 2029, Mason contributes to the varsity football team as a tight end and linebacker and plays second base and shortstop in baseball. He also serves on the Leadership Council. Mason maintains high academic honors with a 3.938 GPA and is actively involved in SSAC, the NIC Leadership Summit, and school activities. He supports his peers and engages fully in student life. Outside of school, Mason volunteers with local organizations, demonstrating a strong commitment to his community.



Kamitri Hennings

A dedicated student-athlete who leads with responsibility and pride. He excels in football, swimming, track, and school clubs while maintaining a 3.7 GPA, demonstrating strong discipline and focus. Kamitri is known for his kindness and willingness to support others. He leads by example among his peers and teammates, approaching every challenge with determination and effort. Respected within his school community, Kamitri is both a positive role model and a committed leader. He plans to continue his athletic career at the collegiate level while pursuing studies in business and entrepreneurship.



Valentina Marquez

Surprised in the moment, Valentina did not expect her efforts to be noticed until being selected for this leadership award. Including others comes naturally to her, as she understands how isolating it can feel to be left out. She strives to bring people together in the classroom, on teams, and in clubs. Through her involvement in track, swimming, and student government, she connects with a wide range of peers, creating spaces where others feel valued and encouraged. For her, leadership is not about being in charge—it is about helping others feel seen. She is grateful for the Youth Thought Leader recognition and remains committed to building a welcoming community.

Youth Empowerment Symposium

Student Honorees



Braedyn Brenneman

A dedicated and curious student at Elkhart High School. A ninth grader, he is actively involved in band, jazz band, and swimming, including both the high school team and the Elkhart Aquatics club. Braedyn enjoys helping others and values learning about different backgrounds and perspectives, which strengthens his understanding of the world around him. He is especially committed to service, volunteering his time at swim events to support younger athletes. Outside of school, Braedyn spends much of his time swimming and sharing his experiences with others. As he looks ahead to tenth grade, he is eager to continue learning, growing, and exploring future opportunities.



Adrian Lopez

An exceptional young man who leads with heart, discipline, and determination. He is a student who values both his education and his relationships, and he consistently demonstrates respect and gratitude for those who support him. Adrian is deeply inspired by his family, especially his father, who has helped shape his character and passion for soccer. He has played since the age of three, has competed on a travel team, and has earned a place on varsity as a freshman—an accomplishment that reflects his dedication and work ethic. Beyond athletics, Adrian enjoys drawing, traveling, and spending time with his family. He is a positive role model and a student we are proud to recognize.



Volunteer Appreciation

We extend our sincere gratitude to the many volunteers who contributed their time, energy, and care to support this year's Thought Leadership Conference and community experience. Your efforts help bring this work to life and create meaningful opportunities for connection across our community. **We are grateful for each of you!**

2026
**THOUGHT
LEADERSHIP
CONFERENCE**





Youth and Community Fair

Lerner Theatre Gallery | May 7, 4 P.M. - 8 P.M.
In Collaboration with
Tolson Center for Community Excellence



Barnes & Noble
Help customers and booksellers reach their aspirations and be a credit to the communities we serve



Beacon Health System
Deliver outstanding care, inspire health and connect with heart



CARE University
Provide mentorship, resources, and opportunities



The E3 Robotics Center
Provide youth robotics and STEM-based programming to students K-12



Elkhart Public Library
Inform, inspire and empower our diverse communities



Everwise Credit Union
Deliver outstanding care, inspire health and connect with heart



Five Star Life
Transform the lives of students by challenging the way they think, act, and lead



Minority Health Coalition of Elkhart Co.
Promote minority health through education, advocacy, and leadership



Lifeline Youth Ministries
Impacting youth today, to lead tomorrow



Regality, Inc.
Help young women realize their potential



Tolson Center for Comm. Excellence
Empower lives through inclusive learning, recreation and cultural exchange



United Community Arts
Empower youth to lead art projects and create cleaner, safer, and more welcoming communities



United Youth Theatre
Empower Michiana youth through the arts and equip with lifelong skills



Continuing the Conversation

THURSDAY, MAY 7, 6PM

Welcome

Mayor Rod Roberson, City of Elkhart

Opening and Acknowledgments

Dr. Tessa Sutton, Intercultural Relations Institute
Velishea Smiley, Tolson Center for Community Excellence
LaTosha Bonds, Freshman Division, Elkhart Community Schools

Introduction of Dr. Michaeleen Doucleff

Denyse Pontius, Century Chemical Corporation

Introduction of "It Takes a Village" Panel

Dr. Tessa Sutton, Intercultural Relations Institute

Premier Arts Academy Choir

"Like the Beat of a Drum"

Zella Rick, Choir Director

Continuing the Conversation: It Takes a Village Panel

Levon Johnson (Moderator), Mayor Rod Roberson, and Dr. Byron Sanders

Closing

Dr. Tessa Sutton, Intercultural Relations Institute

Stay Connected

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