Since its inception, the annual ONYX Magazine’s Women on the Move celebration has given tribute to Florida’s most impactful and influential women. They are like-minded and kindred, community-centric and excel in varied professional sectors.

Each awardee receives public recognition, a crystal desk award and an archived biographical salute in the women’s leadership edition of ONYX Magazine.

The aforementioned may beckon bragging rights for some honorees, but the event’s most esteemed honor is conferred to a woman who has curated a career that amplifies success. She is a change agent for humanity and a behemoth in her field. This distinct leader is selected as ONYX Magazine’s Woman of the Year, and the 2024 recipient is Juliet M. Daniel, Ph.D.

Daniel is an acclaimed cancer researcher of Barbadian descent who is currently based in Ontario, Canada. Her expertise is cell-cell adhesion, signaling through transcription factors and how their malfunction contributes to cancer. Her research has been cited more than 4,000 times and she exudes unwavering dedication to closing the gap on racial disparity in healthcare.

On February 14, Daniel was one of three Canadian scientists to be named a Black Innovator in Research and Medicine by the Government of Canada’s Canadian Intellectual Property Office (CIPO). The award recognizes her pioneering research on triple negative breast cancer (TNBC), an aggressive type of breast cancer that disproportionately affects Black and Hispanic women.

Daniel’s long-list of prestigious awards and academic pedigree was not a convenient quantum leap. The approximate distance between Barbados and Ontario is 4,800 miles, so bouts of homesickness were to be expected along with a drastic climate change. None of the latter were a deterrence for the emerging genius who exuded fortitude and invested decades to make a prominent difference in cancer research.

“I grew up in poverty in Barbados and my parents had very little means,” Daniel told ONYX Magazine. “When I was young, I was always a curious student who studied hard and did well in school, so Canada wasn’t a particular goal, it simply cost less to pursue higher education.”
Embracing Canada does not require much. Ontario is both the most populous and wealthiest Canadian province. Conversely, Barbados is an island built on the backs of slaves who knew how to harvest sugar. The current minimum wage is $8.5. The latter dichotomy is marginally eased when you consider that both Barbados and Canada offer its citizens free healthcare.

“I was 16 when I left Barbados and traveled to Kingston, Ontario, to study at Queens University,” Daniel said. “In 1987, I earned a bachelor’s degree in life sciences followed by a Ph.D. in microbiology in 1993 from the University of British Columbia.”

A new trifecta of study ensued when Daniel completed her post-doctoral research. Included was a three-year postdoctoral research fellowship at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital and an additional three-years at the renowned Vanderbilt University in Memphis, Tenn.

The crowning achievement that best illustrates Daniel’s brilliance emerged during her postdoctoral research. In a recent McMaster digital interview, Daniel simplified how she identified a breakthrough cancer gene:

“I was conducting postdoctoral research in Dr. Al Reynolds’s lab at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital in Memphis when I discovered the gene. At the time, I was trying to understand what caused tumor cells to break away from the primary tumor and metastasize (or spread) to other parts of the body or vital organs, such as the brain and lungs.

While conducting experiments to identify proteins involved in cell-cell adhesion, I identified a new gene which I named Kaiso. Kaiso is the slang term for Calypso—a genre of Caribbean music that I listened to almost every night in the lab when I was cloning the gene.”

In 1999, Daniel returned to Ontario and joined McMaster University’s department of biology. She is an associate professor who teaches molecular biology courses on the undergraduate and graduate level. To have a dedicated space for research, she established her namesake: the Daniel Lab.

The lab’s team is currently focused on colon cancer and the aggressive and difficult to treat triple negative breast cancers (TNBC), which are most prevalent in young women of African ancestry and Hispanic women groups that paradoxically have a lower incidence and lifetime risk of breast cancer.

Additionally, the Daniel Lab seeks to identify unique DNA mutations or markers in cells that may explain this racial disparity, and then be developed for diagnostic tests or therapeutics for women diagnosed with TNBC worldwide regardless of ethnicity.

“I recognized that there weren’t enough Black students involved in research or having a presence at conferences.” Daniel said. “I currently mentor African Caribbean students at McMaster and within the community of Hamilton. In 2006, I co-founded the Canadian Multicultural LEAD Organization for mentoring and training.”

Daniel is a breast cancer survivor who continues to enjoy good health following treatment. She professionally partners with The Olive Branch of Hope—a Toronto-based organization that has offered programmatic resources for more than 20 years to support Black women with breast cancer.

It would be an understatement to refer to Daniel as anything short of remarkable. She is an engaging conversationist who is passionate about possibilities and training the next generation of ethically diverse researchers. Under Daniel’s tutelage, they will be prepared to research and identify new modalities to diagnose and manage all cancers with priority given to those affected by racial disparity.

Daniel shared that at a previous juncture, she wanted to marry and have children. She has since dismissed those dreams. Beyond the Daniel Lab and her teaching load, she enjoys relaxation, exercise and reading a good book.

Penny Dickerson works as an independent journalist. She is passionate about cool people, extraordinary places, and good sushi.