



# The Mystery of MacKenzie

She's not your typical billionaire philanthropist. Since her divorce from Jeff Bezos, MacKenzie Scott has moved fast, given big, and shunned the spotlight. But as her power grows, will her yearning for privacy stop her from making even greater change?

**In March 2021, Sarah Bellamy** found her fairy godmother—in the third checkout aisle of Kowalski's Market in St. Paul. It had been a tumultuous and often tragic year for Bellamy and Penumbra, the 45-year-old Black theater company she runs in Minnesota, seven miles from where George Floyd was murdered. After months of protests and the pandemic's near-total shut-down of arts organizations, Penumbra was in the process of reinventing itself as a center for racial healing, adding wellness programs and more racial equity trainings to its traditional portfolio.

Days earlier, Bellamy had received a mysterious email noting only that a wealth management company was interested in discussing Penumbra. Now, as she was preparing to unload her groceries onto the conveyor belt, her phone rang.

"They told me that MacKenzie Scott was interested in investing in the organization, to the tune of \$5 million," Bellamy remembers. Overcome, she had to sit down. "[I had my] head between my knees—it probably looked like it wasn't good news. It came out of nowhere."

This rush was, by then, a familiar experience for hundreds of other nonprofit leaders—all thanks to the woman who, in two short years, has become one of the most generous and surprising philanthropists in the world. MacKenzie Scott—the writer, first Amazon employee, and former wife of company founder Jeff Bezos—was

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until 2020 known mostly as an entry in the “personal” section of Bezos’s Wikipedia page. But since taking control of her postdivorce fortune, Scott, 51, has given away more than \$12 billion of her now \$53 billion net worth. As this story went to press, Scott had just detonated her latest money bomb, revealing in late March that she’d given away \$3.9 billion—including a tidy \$436 million to Habitat for Humanity—since June 2021. These numbers put to shame the annual donations of almost every other billionaire in the United States; only the former spouses behind the Gates Foundation and Elon Musk pledged more money to charity in 2021, according to *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*.

And she’s done all this largely as Sarah Bellamy experienced it—Scott’s emissaries appearing out of nowhere with a huge check, without strings or fanfare, then vanishing. She is giving massive chunks of her wealth away with blistering speed, to organizations long overlooked by more established donors, and without the ponderous apparatus of a big foundation. This is all revolutionary in a field in which mega-donations usually come com-

**“IF YOU’VE BEEN DOING THIS WORK, YOU KNOW THE NAME MACKENZIE SCOTT—AND YOU KNOW THERE’S NOTHING YOU CAN DO TO GET TO THIS PERSON.”**

plete with press releases, restrictions, expectations.

Scott’s only demand of her recipients is that they help maintain her fiercely valued privacy. It’s impossible to apply for a Scott grant, to send her a thank-you note, or to contact her directly; she and her closest advisers almost never respond to requests for interviews. Even Bellamy and the heads of the more than 1,250 other nonprofits funded by Scott have been asked not to identify the person who informed them about her donations.

“If you’ve been doing this work for the past year and a half, you know the name MacKenzie Scott—and you know that there’s nothing you can do to get to this person,” says Rey Saldaña, CEO of Communities in Schools, a network of nonprofits that in November received one of those surprise phone calls, promising grants that eventually totalled \$133.5 million. “This is a person who holds a significant amount of power by virtue of her wealth—and understands how to actually share power.”

Scott has been publicly wrestling with how best to do so since July 2020, when she published the first of what would become a biannual series of essays announc-



ing her donations—and the philosophy behind them—on Medium. “There’s no question in my mind that anyone’s personal wealth is the product of a collective effort,” she wrote, “and of social structures which present opportunities to some people, and obstacles to countless others.”

Such rhetoric sets her apart from many of her billionaire peers. The wealthiest Americans and the companies that created their wealth, including Amazon, have become notorious for minimizing their tax bills, even as the runaway stock market boosts their fortunes to record levels—while the rest of the country endures crushing economic, social, and health crises.

Amid this toxic wealth gap, Scott has emerged as a refreshing heroine, publicly uncomfortable with her fortune and acting on her promises to get rid of it.



Her record-setting generosity has been a quiet rebuke to her peers, who give away only 1.2% of their assets on an annual basis, according to a 2018 report from philanthropic consultancy the Bridge-span Group. Last year, even as Amazon's rocketing stock price outpaced her efforts to disburse her wealth, Scott's donations through June alone accounted for nearly 5% of her year-end net worth.

While it's still early in her philanthropic tenure to measure its long-term effects, Scott already appears to be influencing other big donors. Rachel Stephenson Sheff, a philanthropic consultant to companies and individuals at I.G. Advisors, says "every single client" her firm has worked with in the past year has at least mentioned Scott, if not yet changed their approach to wealth distribution because of her. One, a multinational automo-

**RAVE REVIEW**  
Penumbra Theatre Co. received a \$5 million grant from Scott in 2021. Sarah Bellamy, Penumbra's president, calls the money "transformative."

tive business that declined to be named, removed all reporting requirements associated with many of its grants. "It was a light-bulb moment," Stephenson Sheff says. "They decided to 100% pursue trust-based philanthropy at the inspiration of her example."

But moving quickly and rocking the boat also means making mistakes. For Scott, these stumbles usually involve her desire for privacy, which can clash uncomfortably with values like transparency and accountability, and limit her ability to use her bully pulpit to make change. She's navigating these issues publicly, and somewhat messily: Scott earned her first backlash late last year when she experimented with leaving the recipients of her donations unnamed (she quickly changed course). Meanwhile, the operations of her giving remain cloaked in secrecy: Even the people widely understood to be her "team" refuse to discuss the connection. That hasn't kept Scott from nearly universal admiration, but it does illuminate how she might even further transform the world of philanthropy.

"She holds such power," says Elizabeth Dale, a Seattle University associate professor who studies women and philanthropy. But there has to be "a balance between having great wealth—and having some kind of accountability."

**It may be futile** to expect transparency from a woman who refuses to answer a single question. In the 20 months since Scott publicly announced her first donations, she has not given an interview, or participated in any of the many stories written about her (including ours).

What we do know—from her literary, reflective Medium essays—is Scott's dislike of "philanthropy," at least as the current billionaire class has defined it. "It's not a word I have ever loved or identified with," she wrote in December. "A lifetime of cultural references associated it with financially wealthy people who believed they knew best how to solve other people's problems."

A lifetime of direct experience too. The woman born MacKenzie Tuttle grew up familiar with both wealth and its sudden disappearance—as well as the harsh light of public scrutiny. The daughter of a San Francisco-based financial adviser and a philanthropist, Scott's early résumé reads like a menu of privilege: Hotchkiss, the tony Connecticut boarding school; Princeton, where Scott

studied with Toni Morrison; D.E. Shaw, the storied New York hedge fund. But while Scott was in high school, the Securities and Exchange Commission started investigating her father, who eventually declared bankruptcy; citing his firm's "lavish spending" and inability to refund clients, a judge later barred Jason Baker Tuttle from working in the securities industry again. His daughter still made it to Princeton but had to scramble to pay for it, scraping together financial aid and a bunch of low-wage side jobs.

After graduating in 1992 with an English degree, Scott took a day job as an administrative assistant at D.E. Shaw, where she interviewed with a young executive named Jeff Bezos. Taken with his laugh, she has said, she invited him to lunch—and married him six months later, when she was 23 and he was 29. Soon the couple had ditched their cushy finance jobs and set off on a cross-country entrepreneurial gamble: Bezos had this idea to start an online book store, and his wife was all in, starting with driving him to Seattle to set it up.

Scott was a significant and "wonderful" presence in Amazon's early days, one who has several fans among the more than 30 employees *Fortune* contacted from that era. ("I admire her tremendously, and she is obviously a far better human being than the man she married," says Alix Wilber, an Amazon editor from 1997 to 2000.) As the company took shape, she became its accountant, administrator, and jane-of-all-trades, happy to pitch in when "the whole corporate staff was given an all-hands-on-deck request to go help pack books and videos and CDs in the warehouse to help keep up with holiday orders," says Erica Jorgensen, an early editorial hire at Amazon.

Scott was the steadying grownup in the startup room, "unfazed by all the ruckus Jeff courted," says Jane Slade, who spent five years as a leader of Amazon's customer service strategy. But even as she supported her husband's ambitions, Scott hadn't given up on her own. Venture capital investor Mark Breier, who joined Amazon in 1997 as VP of marketing, recalls Scott as pleasant but reserved, as she "was writing her novel in a remote office on a busy floor in those days."

**Scott receded** further from the limelight as Amazon became A Thing, focusing on raising her four children with Bezos—and fully launching her writing



**SHE HAS A GIFT**  
Abby Falik, founder and CEO of Global Citizen Year, calls the Scott approach to philanthropy, "a partnership, not a patronage." Her education-focused organization received \$12 million in unrestricted funds.

career. Her debut novel, *The Testing of Luther Albright*, was published in 2005, followed by *Traps* in 2013. That was the last time Scott willingly submitted to the media publicity machine, giving interviews to Charlie Rose and *Vogue* about her books, her husband, and the company that had vaulted her family into the wealth stratosphere. "I am definitely a lottery winner of a certain kind," she told *Vogue* in 2013.

Still, she and Bezos weren't particularly known for sharing that lottery's proceeds. Amazon's founding couple gave money to Princeton (their joint alma mater) and in 2018 launched a \$2 billion fund to combat homelessness, but rarely appeared on lists of top philanthropists. The gap between this behavior and her current largesse doesn't surprise those who study couples' joint giving. A 2018

study found that one spouse usually acts as the “gas pedal,” while the other acts as the “brakes.” Dale says that “doesn’t mean that giving isn’t happening—but it looks different than when people approach it on their own.”

Six years—and \$690 billion added to Amazon’s market valuation—after her 2013 book tour, Scott was thrust back into the spotlight, unpleasantly. In early 2019, Bezos announced on Twitter that his marriage was dissolving—shortly before the *National Enquirer* revealed that he had been having an affair with television host Lauren Sanchez. By April of that year, the divorce was settled, seemingly amicably: Scott walked away with only a 4% stake in Amazon, giving her what was then a net worth of \$38 billion.

Soon after, Scott signed Warren Buffett’s Giving Pledge, in which billionaires promise to give away at least half of their fortunes. (Bezos, currently the world’s second-wealthiest person, hasn’t signed.) She dropped her married surname in favor of the middle name she had inherited from her grandfather, Scott. And then she could have quietly, comfortably disappeared.

**Scott’s next act** began—at least publicly—in July 2020, with a single tweet, the first under her new name. It linked to a Medium post outlining her plan to fulfill her Giving Pledge. Her mission: “to do it thoughtfully, to get started soon, and to keep at it until the safe is empty.”

What followed was an unusually transparent discussion of where she was devoting her money, and why. In the year since her divorce, Scott had already distributed a total of \$1.7 billion to 116 nonprofit organizations. She organized her giving into categories including racial, gender, and LGBTQ+ equity; economic mobility; public health; and functional democracy. The vast majority of equity-focused organizations were run by people of color, women, and/or LGBTQ+ leaders who brought “lived experience to solutions for imbalanced social systems,” Scott wrote. She prefaced the list by acknowledging the power of the megaphone she was picking up: “My own reflection after recent events revealed a dividend of privi-

## MONEY BOMBS AWAY!

Not all of Scott’s gifts have been announced (we still don’t know the size of her donations to YMCA or Goodwill, for instance), but among those that have, these are some of her biggest beneficiaries to date:

**\$560**  
MILLION OR MORE  
**Individual gifts to 23 historically Black colleges and universities,** multiple dates, 2020

**\$436**  
MILLION  
**Habitat for Humanity,** March 2022

**\$281**  
MILLION  
**Boys & Girls Clubs of America,** March 2022

**\$275**  
MILLION  
**Planned Parenthood,** March 2022

**\$162**  
MILLION  
**Easterseals,** December 2020

lege I’d been overlooking: the attention I can call to organizations and leaders driving change.”

While staking out this new public persona, Scott was also reinventing her private life, including falling in love again—with a science teacher at her children’s high school. In March 2021, she would reveal that she had married Dan Jewett; the forum for the announcement was, appropriately enough, the couple’s Giving Pledge page, where they posted a smiling, crinkly-eyed selfie amid pine trees—and a new letter from Jewett, who praised his wife as “one of the most generous and kind people I know.”

Jewett had moved to Seattle in 2011, after about a decade teaching AP chemistry and other science courses at Harriton High School, a public school in a well-to-do Philadelphia suburb. Former students remember him as a “funny, approachable, class-clown-type” teacher and a “total goofball,” who also loved golf and made time to assistant-coach Harriton’s golf team. Josh Verlin, a Philadelphia-area sportswriter who took Jewett’s AP course during his senior year and graduated from Harriton in 2007, calls the new Mr. Scott an all-around “good dude ... If there’s a guy who gets to [help] give away \$50 billion, I would trust him to do the right thing.”

**How exactly Scott** and Jewett are tackling this extraordinary task is far from clear. Certainly Scott has been advised by peers like Melinda French Gates; In 2020, the two launched a contest pledging \$40 million to organizations focused on gender equity. She’s also worked with a range of established wealth consultants and set up a Seattle-based family office called Lost Horse, according to digital publication *Puck*. And above all, Scott has relied on the Bridgespan Group, the philanthropic consultancy that spun out of Bain & Co. in 2000. Dubbed “the most powerful consultants you’ve never heard of” by *The Economist*, Bridgespan also advises the Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and most other big philanthropic names. (All parties declined or ignored requests for comment; Scott on Medium recently justified her team’s silence as “respecting” journalists “by doing nothing to try to influence” what we report.)

Philanthropy insiders have been stunned by how quickly Scott has moved to define her giving strategy and start handing out checks. Part of that speed can be attributed to her decision to route her money through donor-advised funds (DAFs), rather than the foundations employed by previous generations of billionaires. DAFs invest an individual’s money until she’s ready to write a check but avoid much of the overhead and bureaucracy that can come with creating a new organization. It’s worth noting that DAFs are the more opaque

option, with no requirements to disclose their giving, and no deadlines for distributing the money they hold.

Scott's giving also stands out on pure scale. In 2021, the largest 50 donors in the U.S. gave a median of just over \$101 million each, according to *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. Scott is not included in these figures because she declined to confirm details of her giving with *The Chronicle*, but even just the \$2.7 billion she disclosed in June 2021 would have made her the third-most-generous U.S. philanthropist that year. Not bad for someone who clocks in as the 16th-wealthiest person in the U.S., according to Bloomberg.

And as much as one imagines she would dislike it, her celebrity has emerged as another of her giving superpowers. Scott's sky-high profile has brought significant attention to aspects of how she approaches philanthropy, including her focus on racial and social justice and her willingness to make "unrestricted" gifts, which allow the receiving organization to use the money as they see fit. But giving experts point out that these aren't new strategies: Organizations like the Ford Foundation have long funneled significant money to underserved communities, while conservative donors such as the Charles Koch Foundation often favor unrestricted giving, according to a National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy analysis for *Fortune*.

Scott has something to teach the large number of philanthropists who are "uncomfortable with acknowledging and redistributing their own power," says Stephenson Sheff of I.G. Advisors. Doing so publicly is Scott's best option for persuading others to follow her lead, adds Stephenson Sheff: "She's modeling the best practices of philanthropy within her circle of influence, but her circle of influence happens to be the entire world."

**In early September** 2021, Abby Falik received her version of Sarah Bellamy's fairy-tale phone call—but with a bit of a twist. While previous recipients had been asked not to disclose Scott's grant until she did, the founder and CEO of Global Citizen Year was told she was free to announce it herself. So Falik did just that, issuing an October press release thanking Scott and Jewett for the \$12 million donation. Her announcement made a few headlines—but they couldn't hold a candle to the ones Scott would soon generate.

## DONATION NATION

Here's a look at how some of Scott's high-profile philanthropic peers are approaching their giving efforts.



**BILL GATES AND MELINDA FRENCH GATES** In their final year being measured together, the former spouses were the country's most generous philanthropists, pledging \$15 billion to their joint foundation. French Gates, one of the highest-profile female billionaires and close to Scott, is now managing a net worth of \$12.1 billion, a more modest sum than her friend's \$53 billion.



**CHARLES KOCH** The Koch Industries CEO personally gave about \$241 million last year; \$50 million of that pot went to his foundation, which lists education and criminal justice as some of its top priorities. The conservative political donor doesn't appear to share many interests with Scott, but she's adopted some of his methods, including relying heavily on unrestricted giving.



**ELON MUSK** The Tesla CEO pledged about 2% of his \$275 billion net worth, or \$5.7 billion, to charity last year. But as no nonprofits have since announced receiving a donation from Musk, philanthropy experts speculate that the billionaire may have simply moved the money to donor-advised funds, which provide tax advantages. (Musk did not respond to requests for comment.)



**JACK DORSEY** The Twitter and Block founder has created his own unique form of disclosure: a public Google doc. So far he's tracked about \$467 million in gifts from his \$8.5 billion fortune. In February, estimating Dorsey's 2021 charitable pledges at \$765 million, *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* named him the seventh most generous U.S. philanthropist (not including Scott).

Two months later, Scott published her latest missive—and perhaps her first significant misstep on the public stage. It spelled out the thinking behind the shift Falik had experienced: Scott would no longer disclose how much money she had given away in the past six months or to whom, a move she hoped would shift more attention to the nonprofits she was supporting and away from the person funding it. "I want to let each of these incredible teams speak for themselves first if they choose to," Scott wrote, "with the hope that when they do, media focuses on their contributions instead of mine."

A noble sentiment. But for many in the philanthropy world who'd hoped Scott would eventually become more transparent, the idea that she would move in the opposite direction was alarming. In the wake of widespread criticism, Scott

backpedaled. “We want to and will share more,” Scott wrote two days later, promising that her team was at work on an online database to provide more information about her grants. And this March, she snapped back to her old style of disclosure, publishing an essay with her latest donation figure (\$3.86 billion) and the names of 465 recipients.

For the organizations Scott selects, her gifts are often transformative—and a significant part of that impact is the attention that only she, like it or not, can draw. Nonprofit leaders told us that one of the upsides that comes with a Scott grant is the increased visibility, which can help attract additional funds. After Global Citizen Year announced Scott’s \$12 million grant, it raised nearly the same amount again from other benefactors—in just two months. “Other donors recognize that her process is very thorough, and that the vetting is careful,” says Falik, adding that one of these backers compared the process to raising money from venture capital investors: “No one wants to be first. But everyone wants to be first to be second.”

While her return to announcing her gifts suggests Scott recognizes this power, her progress toward increased transparency is slow. The promised database “will go live only after it reflects the preferences of every one of these non-profit teams about how details of their gifts are shared,” she wrote in March. Sources close to Scott say they don’t yet have an ETA for the website; nor would she or her team agree to discuss it in more detail.

Scott’s essays have also ignored another criticism: her lack of availability to those with good reason to seek her money. The nonprofits that she funds have no direct contact with Scott and limited interactions with her advisers. This is frustrating for those who would like the opportunity to plead their case and can cause problems for those left out. One board member at a top 10 historically Black university not funded by Scott told *Fortune* they worried about what message was sent to potential donors by Scott’s decision to invest in some, but not other, HBCUs.

For Communities in Schools, where

Scott’s team funded the national organization and 40 of its 110 affiliates, “the conversation [with the 70 other affiliates] was a difficult one. It stings to be on the outside when others in the network are receiving gifts,” CEO Saldaña acknowledges. “It was really difficult to know what their criteria was—and sure, I’d love to be able to provide input.”

“It reflects a problem in the intersection between democracy and philanthropy that there’s absolutely no way to contact her,” says Benjamin Soskis, a philanthropy researcher at the Urban Institute who in December achieved a rare distinction: He became the only person Scott has responded to on Twitter.

**Trying to get** a response from MacKenzie Scott has become its own subgenre of journalism. Over the past two years, many reporters have chronicled their Herculean and ultimately futile efforts to interview her; CBS anchor Gayle King pleaded on-air for Scott to come on her show, while hyper-connected tech journalist Kara Swisher threw down a public invitation on

## “SHE’S MODELING THE BEST PRACTICES OF PHILANTHROPY WITHIN HER CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE, BUT HER CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE HAPPENS TO BE THE ENTIRE WORLD.”

Twitter. The unfailing response has been silence.

So you can imagine our disproportionate delight when, after a barrage of similar pleas, *Fortune* actually received a response from Scott’s team. The email was brief, polite, and unsigned. It, naturally, declined our request—but provided an unexpected indication Scott might be reevaluating her stance, promising to let us know “in case an opportunity arises in the future.”

Yes, these are very thin tea leaves. But between this response, Scott’s Medium soul-searching, and her promised database, this very private philanthropist appears to be reluctantly accepting that one way to make change is to model transparency and accountability to her billionaire peers. At the very least, it seems Scott isn’t finished trying to make her new world better—however much personal discomfort it may cause.

“It would be easy to say, ‘This is too much work. This is too hard. I don’t like this criticism.’ And I really applaud the fact that she keeps going,” Dale says. After all, “we don’t talk about the hundreds of billionaires who aren’t giving a lot away.” ■

# Building Our Tomorrow, Together

**Northwell Health** is continuing its relentless pursuit of finding innovative ways to care for its team members.

THROUGH ITS DEDICATED “NORTHWELL CELEBRATES” PROGRAM, NORTHWELL CREATED “GRATITUDE POP UPS” ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION TO PROVIDE TEAM MEMBERS WITH WELL-BEING KITS TO SHOW APPRECIATION FOR THE WORK THEY DO EVERY DAY.

**TWO YEARS INTO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC,** Northwell Health is more committed than ever to helping its 79,000 team members thrive. For New York’s largest health care provider and private employer, with 22 hospitals and more than 850 outpatient facilities, there is a responsibility to support the individuals who provide care to more than 8 million patients annually.

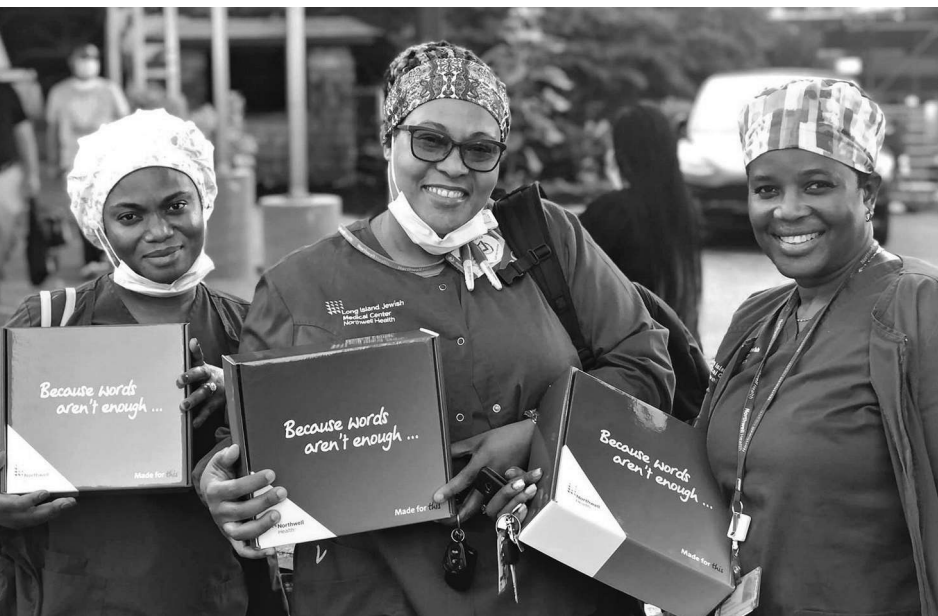
As its team members were put to the test amidst the pandemic, Northwell continued to design unique ways to care for its people. But first, the company had to pause and listen. “We’ve broadened our listening strategy,” says SVP and CPO

Maxine Carrington. “We listen in multiple ways, such as conducting more targeted sentiment surveys and inviting ongoing feedback through various advisory groups. Our people know we’re committed to caring for them both personally and professionally.”

Having heard from its team members, Northwell set out to evolve its values and commitments, refocusing what the organization stands for. The company launched “Northwell Celebrates,” a program committed to providing support for team members by helping them to maintain well-being and focus on the future. Offerings include a meal delivery service, mobile spa, and appreciation gifts. In addition, long-term, sustainable initiatives—such as designing standardized childcare and well-being centers and harnessing external learning and development partnerships with organizations such as LinkedIn Learning, Cornell University, and McKinsey & Company—have been key investments.

These unique offerings accompany Northwell’s already established well-being strategy. With more than 30 formalized resources available, the company is focused on connecting team members with targeted services. Nusrath Hussain-Ahmed, a human resources business partner, reflects on the company’s services: “I was lost and didn’t know how to help myself. I felt like I was doing my job well, but not feeling well, and realized the resources I was promoting to others were also for me. Northwell helped me on my journey, allowing me to build a personalized plan in all facets of wellness in my life.”

Northwell’s dedication to its team members allowed it to be recognized on the *Fortune* 100 list for the third consecutive year. Notably, the company was also named No. 1 Best Health System for Diversity in the nation by DiversityInc. These accolades encourage the entire Northwell family to stay true to its mission. Says Carrington: “We’ll continue to meet our people where they are, design programs that support their overall well-being, and help them take steps toward the future with hope and optimism.” ■



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