

## Diversity in Business Awards 2026: Nicole Connell, Merakey



Nicole Connell is a 2026 Diversity in Business honoree.

Jamie Stow Photography

By [Lara Schwartz](#) – Special Projects Editor, Philadelphia Business Journal

Mar 19, 2026

### **Nicole Connell, senior executive director for Southeast Pennsylvania, Merakey**

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Nicole Connell has translated her commitment to improving mental health in her community into a career. In her current role at Merakey, a developmental, behavioral health and education nonprofit provider serving 12 states, she works to expand equitable access to critical mental health services. As senior executive director for Southeast Pennsylvania, Connell's strategic vision has strengthened behavioral health systems, advanced trauma-informed care and improved service delivery for vulnerable populations in the region. In partnership with the City of Philadelphia and Community Behavioral Health, she spearheaded the launch of the city's first and only adult behavioral health urgent care in September 2024. In its first year, the Merakey Mental Health Walk-In Clinic provided immediate psychiatric care and crisis stabilization to more than 3,000 individuals.

**Education:** B.S., Temple University; M.Ed., Eastern University

**A word that best describes me:** Tenacious

**My biggest work-related accomplishment in the past year:** Led implementation of Philadelphia's first adult behavioral health urgent care, delivering same-day access to nearly 4,000 individuals, reducing emergency and crisis service utilization and expanding equitable behavioral health care for historically underserved communities.

**My most significant contribution to DEI so far:** Led implementation of Philadelphia's first adult behavioral health urgent care, delivering same-day access to nearly 4,000

individuals, reducing emergency and crisis service utilization and expanding equitable behavioral health care for historically underserved communities.

**My advice for rising leaders of color:** Lead boldly with authenticity. You belong in every room you occupy. Leverage your lived experience to drive meaningful, equitable, system-level change.

**A lesson I've learned from other generations that I wish everyone learned:** Be resourceful with what you have. It's not about having the most, but how effectively you use what you do have.

**What was your first job, and would you do it again?** My first role as a case manager built my understanding of social services, system impact and community needs. I would do it again because it shaped my resilience and ability to lead meaningful change across complex systems.

**A diverse business icon I admire:** Ursula Burns broke barriers as the first Black woman Fortune 500 CEO, rising from humble beginnings to transform a global corporation through resilience, authenticity and strategic leadership in a male-dominated industry.

**For fun I like to:** Host events with family and friends.

**My favorite way to unwind:** Movie nights.

**Something I do daily to set up my day for success:** Organize my physical space to promote mental clarity and focus.

**TV show I can't stop watching:** "Paradise"