



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### ROI Introduces the 2024 Rural Change Makers

GUELPH, ON, December 2, 2024 - The Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) is excited to announce the 2024 young leaders of change who have begun their leadership learning journey together through the Rural Change Makers (RCM) program.

*"We have another incredible group of passionate emerging leaders this year each with unique perspectives and lived experiences. 2024 participants in the program span northern, southwestern, central and eastern Ontario. They range in age from 18 to 35 years old and are at various stages in their lives and careers, but all at the beginning of this leadership experience of change and growth," says Melanie Bidiuk, ROI Communications and RCM Program Manager. "I am excited to see how we come together, lead and how we give back in our communities."*

*"With fresh perspectives, diverse skills and boundless passion, these young leaders will spark change, inspire action and ensure their communities thrive and prosper for generations to come," says Ellen Sinclair, Executive Director, Rural Ontario Institute.*

This transformative program will equip emerging leaders throughout rural and northern Ontario with skills to mobilize community-led action on local priorities. More than 20 regional partners and collectives are coming alongside these leaders including: Opiikapawiin Services LP [ᐅᐱᑲᑦᐱᑦᐅᑦ ᐅᑦᑦᑦᑦᐅᑦᐅᑦᐅᑦᐅᑦ](#) (OSLP) - representing a collective of 24 First Nations in northwestern Ontario, Community Futures Huron, Trenval Business Development Corporation, Minden Hills/Haliburton Collective - representing over 20 leaders, experts, business owners, CFDC's, educators, organizations and farmers, Four County Labour Market Planning Board and Renfrew County alongside Renfrew County Community Futures Development Corporation.

*"We believe the future belongs to our young leaders. First Nations peoples and communities are calling upon our young leaders to take a bold step forward - to lead, influence and guide the sustainable and prosperous growth of our communities and homelands," said Laura Calmwind, Opiikapawiin Services LP Training Manager.*

*"Farm Credit Canada is proud to support the Rural Change Makers program, which aligns closely with our commitment to fostering youth leadership, innovation, and economic resiliency in rural and agricultural communities," said Perry Wilson, FCC Senior Vice-President. "This program empowers young leaders, including those from Indigenous and remote communities, to build connections, develop essential skills, and drive meaningful change. By investing in initiatives like this, we're not only supporting the next generation of rural leaders but also strengthening the future of Canada's agricultural sector."*

*"We are so excited to be a partner and supporter of this program," says Dana Soucie, Executive Director, Four County Labour Market Planning Board. "Programs like Rural Change Makers are essential to the sustainability of our communities as they are developing leaders with innovative and collaborative tools to achieve maximum impact and success."*

*"Renfrew County Community Futures Development Corporation, along with the County of Renfrew, are thrilled to support the 2024 cohort of the Rural Change Makers program. These young leaders bring a wealth of fresh ideas, diverse experiences, and a shared commitment to driving positive change in their communities. We are confident that their participation in this transformative program will not only enhance their leadership skills but also foster innovative solutions to local challenges. Together, we look forward to seeing the impactful contributions they will make in Renfrew County and beyond," says Cyndy Phillips, Executive Director, Renfrew County CFDC.*

*"Congratulations to the 2024 Rural Change Makers as you work to create positive, grassroots change in communities across the province. Your hard work ensures that diverse voices are heard and valued, and that passion and dedication can lead to incredible things," said Lisa Hunter, Ontario Mutual Insurance Association Marketing & Communications Manager.*

*"At Trenval, we believe that investing in leadership development for young people is essential for fostering a thriving and sustainable future. Leadership skills empower youth to think critically, collaborate effectively, and take initiative—skills that are not only vital for their personal growth but also for the growth of our communities. By supporting programs that nurture these skills, we are creating the leaders of tomorrow, capable of driving innovation, inclusivity, and positive change in the communities we serve. Trenval is thrilled to be a part of this year's Rural Change Maker program," said Amber Darling, Trenval Executive Director.*

Over the course of the program Change Makers will participate in a series of developmental and experiential Learning Labs. They will complete community and self-assessments, establish planning committees that inform the program, and develop Community Economic Development SMART Action Plans to guide their community projects as they build their preferred futures and create strong rural communities.

### **Please join us in welcoming the 2024 Rural Change Makers:**

- **Abbie Lakhani** (Petawawa) - Industrial Hygiene Technician at Canadian Nuclear Laboratories who is passionate about the environment and sustainability.
- **Bobbie McKay** (Thunder Bay) - Youth Amplifier for Feathers of Hope who is passionate about the work that she does, spending time with her family and in nature.
- **Charlie Plourde** (Timmins) - Charlie is from Timmins and recently moved to Sudbury. They volunteer with the Timmins Youth Wellness Hub, as well as run a chapter of the charity Sending Sunshine from Timmins. Charlie has a passion for accessibility and mental health, especially among youth.
- **Chirag Parcha** (Belleville) - Entrepreneur, community volunteer, author, artist and Founder of Official Humans of Canada. Chirag is passionate about creating real change, he empowers others through mentorship, writing, art, and community initiatives.
- **Christina Raddatz** (Douglas) - Christina lives in Renfrew County and is involved with her local crisis center. She has supported fundraising at the center, as well as at church and her children's school.



- **Davinder Singh** (Timmins) - Davinder is involved with Anti-Hunger Coalition Timmins, an organization that fights hunger and works for food security. He has been involved with meetings and discussions for the improvement of his community and always tries to bring new and creative ideas to both his community and his workplace to make it a better place. *Davinder is a key member of this year's Rural Change Maker Fund Development Committee as well as the Ignite Planning Committee.*
- **Elizabeth Edwards** (Trenton) - Economic Development Officer for the City of Quinte West. Outside of work Elizabeth volunteers on the Northumberland Fare Share Foodbank Board of Directors, is a Unit Leader Assistant for the Sparks (Girl Guides), is on the Board of Directors for the Ontario East Economic Development Commission, the Port Hope Environmental Advisory Committee, the Loyalist College Business Program PAC, the Bay of Quinte Film Office, and a mentor through the Small Business Centre. *Elizabeth is a key member of this year's Rural Change Maker Communications Committee.*
- **Francesca Solomon** (Guelph) - Francesca is a passionate advocate for leadership, public policy, and international development. Fun-loving and grounded in strong family values, she comes from a close-knit family of five and shares their life with a lively dog named Ragna. She lives in Guelph, Canada, where she is currently pursuing an MSc in Capacity Development & Extension with a focus on International Development Studies and Public Policy at the University of Guelph. *Francesca is a key member of this year's Rural Change Maker Fund Development Committee.*
- **Jesselyn Gray** (Pikangikum) - Jesselyn is interested in mentoring young leaders to guide future generations. She has previously been a youth leader, working with Right to Play and community youth intervention. Jesselyn has experience with raising funds for new programs for youth, as well as hosting a cooking class for youth.
- **Dr. Jessica Becking** (Bath) - Jessica is a passionate interdisciplinary researcher, artist and administrator. Jessica holds a PhD in Cultural Studies from Trent University and is currently the Research Coordinator for Loyalist College. She is actively involved in applied research and research creation, and she is a passionate place-poet. *Jessica is a key member of this year's Rural Change Maker Fund Development Committee.*
- **Jolenè Drouin** (Niagara Falls) - Jolenè is the mother of two boys. She is a maple farmer and beekeeper, and works with Niagara Bee. Jolenè values being a steward of the land and it is important to her to highlight the challenges facing pollinators and educate the public about biodiversity.
- **Josée Labelle** (Kapuskwasing) - Network Support Specialist at College Boreal's SSM. Josée is passionate about sustainable economic development for Northern Ontario and is dedicated to promoting and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises. *Josée is a key member of this year's Rural Change Maker Ignite Planning Committee.*

- **Kasha Kakekagumick** (Wabigoon) - Kasha helps her family raise money for community members and events, as well as for her school and church. She is an environmental monitor and is a strong advocate for communication and the environment. Kasha wants to start an environmental team owned by the reserves and start up training services for students finishing high school. She advocates for the inherent rights of First Peoples.
- **Kiydan Zacariah** (Picton) - Youth advocate from Prince Edward County. Kiydan has worked closely with many non-profit organizations in their community to improve youth well-being and leadership and is now supporting youth engagement for various projects with their municipality. *Kiydan is a key member of this year's Rural Change Maker Ignite Planning Committee.*
- **Matthias Brown** (Angling Lake) - Matthias is working with Pennco to build a new school. He has helped youth raise funds to travel to other northern communities for volleyball tournaments. Matthias would like to see a double volleyball court facility in his community for local volleyball players of all ages.
- **Mina Bahador** (Richmond Hill) - Mina Bahador is a dedicated urban planner and is currently pursuing her Master's in Rural Planning and Development at the University of Guelph. She is passionate about contributing to community-driven, resilient planning initiatives that improve quality of life in rural areas.
- **Morgan Scott** (Brighton) - Community Engagement Officer for the Municipality of Brighton who is passionate about making a positive impact in her community through her volunteerism. *Morgan Scott is a key member of this year's Rural Change Maker Communications Committee.*
- **Natalee Schors** (Hillsdale) - Recent graduate of the Bachelor of Health Sciences (Honours) program at Queen's University, currently working with the Rural Ontario Medical Program (ROMP), based out of Collingwood. Natalee is passionate about rural medicine and improving economic development in rural communities.
- **Rachel Richer** (Laurentian Hills) - Deputy Mayor at United Townships of Head, Clara & Maria. She volunteers her time to her local snowmobile club and library board and is passionate about lifelong learning and preserving the natural beauty of the area she calls home. *Rachel is a key member of this year's Rural Change Maker Ignite Planning Committee.*
- **Ropheka Adofo** (Thunder Bay) - Planner for the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Ropheka is a dedicated mother and a wife who values quality time with her family and is passionate about travelling, meeting new people and actively seeks to make positive impact in her community. *Ropheka is a key member of this year's Rural Change Maker Fund Development Committee.*
- **Samantha Loney** (Barrie) - Producer for Travelling Metis Podcast, filmmaker and journalist for Simcoe Community Media. Samantha is passionate about traveling around Turtle Island and sharing the stories of Metis people. *Samantha is a key member of this year's Rural Change Maker Communications Committee.*
- **Sarah Richer** (Eganville) - Community Development and Administration Assistant who is passionate about photography and the natural beauty of rural Ontario. *Sarah is a key member of this year's Rural Change Maker Fund Development Committee.*



- **Shay Hutchings** (Haliburton) - Shay is the Co-owner of Reform + Restore: Wellness Hub, a registered Massage Therapist and a certified Spins Instructor and is passionate about supporting youth in her community.
- **Skye Kakekagumic** (Sandy Lake) - Skye is a passionate, determined Change Maker who is eager to participate in the Rural Change Makers experience and learn how to better support herself, her family, and her community.
- **Vijay Monias** (Sandy Lake) - Vijay is eager to learn new things. His goals are to become the first Indigenous body builder, to spread positivity, and to motivate and inspire youth to become a better version of themselves every day. Vijay helps with fundraisers at his job and at an elementary school, and recently helped fundraise money for prom. He also volunteers to coach kids with after-school sports.
- **Will Wellington** (Stratford) - Social Research and Planning Specialist at United Way Perth-Huron. Will is passionate about conflict transformation, housing affordability, public policy, and organizational development.
- **Zeel Parmer** (Windsor) - Zeel is an urban and regional planner. She completed her Master of Science degree in Italy and would like to contribute her innovative approaches to the program. Zeel has worked for a government smart village scheme designed to enhance community development and create a better life for residents.

**Follow Rural Change Makers' Journey:** [ROI Connect | Blog – Rural Change Makers](#)

Support for the 2024 Rural Change Maker Program has been generously provided in part by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness and Farm Credit Canada. If you would like to support young rural leaders, we invite you to become a program sponsor. Your sponsorship ensures youth have access to expert training and necessary resources to make a difference in their community. For more information, please contact [mbidiuk@ruralontarioinstitute.ca](mailto:mbidiuk@ruralontarioinstitute.ca)

## ABOUT

The Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) is a non-profit organization committed to developing leaders, informing decision makers and connecting communities. ROI delivers the renowned Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program (AALP) entering its 40th year and the Rural Change Makers program, a leadership and rural development program working to creating meaningful change with communities. We provide data research and analysis on rural priorities, sharing information and equipping communities with tools through our Rural Community Wellbeing factsheets and accompanying dashboards, and Rural Housing Information System - addressing the housing and homelessness crisis faced by thousands of Canadians.

## **ASSOCIATED LINKS**

- [RURAL CHANGE MAKERS](#)
- [RURAL ONTARIO INSTITUTE](#)

## **CONTACTS**

### **Melanie Bidiuk**

Communications and Program Manager

[info@ruralontarioinstitute.ca](mailto:info@ruralontarioinstitute.ca)

[www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/changemakers](http://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/changemakers)

### **Kelsey Randhawa**

Rural Project & Events Coordinator

[krandhawa@ruralontarioinstitute.ca](mailto:krandhawa@ruralontarioinstitute.ca)

### **Media Relations**

Rural Ontario Institute

Guelph, Ontario

519-826-4204

[info@ruralontarioinstitute.ca](mailto:info@ruralontarioinstitute.ca)

[www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca](http://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca)