

# OUTSTANDING TRANSFORMATIONS

*DBJ's 2021 class of Outstanding Women in Business has thrived through a transformative year. Here's how it changed them — and how they're changing the world.*

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# Ceyl Prinster

Lifetime Achievement Award

CYRUS MCCRIMMON FOR DBJ

*The president and CEO of Colorado Enterprise Fund has long acted as a resource for small businesses. The pandemic only amplified that.*

The Denver Business Journal Outstanding Women in Business Lifetime Achievement Award honors a woman who has quantifiably transformed Denver's business community through a lifetime of work. Ceyl Prinster personifies that definition – she was the 2011 DBJ Outstanding Women in Business winner in the Banking and Finance category, and DBJ explored some of her more recent work in the award-winning Small Business, Big Mission series.

Prinster joined the Colorado Enterprise Fund in 1987, first as executive director and then president and CEO – positions she holds to this day.

Under Prinster's leadership, the Denver-based, nonprofit community development finan-

cial institution has grown from \$200,000 in assets in 1987 to \$65 million today. CEF, which focuses on underserved and minority entrepreneurs, has made \$125 million in loans to nearly 4,000 small businesses that would otherwise be unable to obtain funding from traditional lenders.

"I love working with small businesses and I'm really passionate about entrepreneurs," Prinster told DBJ. "Their energy, their creativity, their investment – not only financially, but their soul, blood, sweat and tears – is just so inspiring."

CEF's mission was amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic and related business closures as it provided \$18 million in PPP loans – and \$5.1 million in Covid-19

relief loans – to nearly 1,000 small businesses in 2020 alone.

Prinster's mentorship and volunteerism have benefited countless businesses as well as nonprofits like The Other Side Academy Denver, which provides vocational training to students who have been incarcerated or have a history of substance abuse.

And her background as a graduate of one of the first classes of women at the University of Notre Dame, she says, was a transformational moment in her life.

"What was transformational about having been there was the environment of women's rights and feminism coming to the fore, and also the culture there at Notre Dame of very much of a focus on social justice," Prinster said. "It's really helped me to be on that trajectory that I want to be a force for good through my work and in my personal interactions of making life and the world a little bit better because of me being in it and the work that I do." ❧

#### **Pandemic transformation:**

*The shift to a completely remote working environment forced me to become more productive, less formal, more collaborative, and more innovative. It was so rewarding to help thousands of businesses with critical funds so they could survive when everything shut down. On the personal side, I carved out a new exercise routine with my Peloton bike and ventured into some cooking experiments, including a scratch-made blueberry pie that turned out great!*

#### **Permanent workplace transformation:**

*Workplaces will have more flexible work arrangements for employees with options for remote work that use cloud-based and internet systems for communication and connection. Having fewer people commute to and work in offices will mean reduced demand for commercial office space, lighter weekday traffic, and less shopping and dining activity in business districts.*

#### **No. 1 piece of advice for emerging leaders:**

*The experience of this unprecedented pandemic time will live with all of us for the rest of our lives, for good or for ill. Ask yourself, "What did I learn about myself? What do I value? What are my hopes, fears, dreams? How did the pandemic experience reveal my strengths and weaknesses? How did it help me be more resilient and focused going forward? What did I learn about my community and the world? How can I contribute to positive change from all these insights?"*

#### **Hashtag that describes your year:**

*#ISurvivedCovid19*

#### **No. 1 pandemic escape:**

*Setting exercise goals, walking in my neighborhood, seeing my grandkids, watching Netflix and enjoying my garden.*



# Jessica Billingsley

**Title:**  
CEO

**Organization:**  
Akerna

**Industry:**  
Cannabis-tech

**Location:**  
Denver

**Pandemic transformation:** Akerna successfully supported the digital evolution of the brick-and-mortar cannabis industry amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Although cannabis was deemed essential, there was a lot of catching up to be done in the industry to ensure safety requirements and guidelines were met in farms, production sites and dispensaries.

Even amid the economic downturn, we closed three strategic acquisitions — Ample Organics, Trellis and Viridian Sciences — to further our strategy of consolidating cannabis technology companies to connect data points and create one of the world's most transparent and accountable consumer packaged goods supply chains.

**Permanent workplace transformations:** I think remote work will become permanent for a lot of companies in the post-Covid world. I believe that talent across many industries will now seek remote work as a benefit — the same way they would vacation days or health plans. As a result, businesses not offering remote work may lose out on talent to another company that is.

**Permanent cultural transformations:** I think a lot more activities will take place outdoors — from increased outdoor fitness practices like choosing running or hiking to outdoor dining and even outdoor business meetings and events.

**If you could transform anything in Denver with the flick of a switch, what would it be?** I would address the heartbreaking houseless population crisis that is happening on our streets right now.

**Transformational life experience:** I met my partner, John, while volunteering as a mentor in Inc. 5000's Military Entrepreneur Program. If I hadn't volunteered as a mentor, and if John wouldn't have entered as an entrepreneur, we would have likely never met, and I am so thankful for that experience that brought us together.

**Proudest 2020 accomplishment:** That my daughter is doing great and moving onto high school! Amid a crazy year, I am so proud of her perseverance.

**No. 1 piece of advice for emerging leaders:** It's essential to have an entrepreneurial mindset, business fundamentals and not be scared to fail.

It's also important to leverage your connections — networking is invaluable and crucial to success, especially for women. If you don't have relationships, reach out and make them. You have to try.

**Hashtag that describes your year:** #Resilience

**No. 1 pandemic escape:** Climbing gyms — I'm a huge rock climber and am very thankful they were allowed to remain open in the pandemic. 🚩



# Jacqueline Bonanno

**Title:**  
Creative director and proprietor

**Organization:**  
Bonanno Concepts

**Industry:**  
Hospitality

**Location:**  
Denver

**Pandemic transformation:** It started with family, just working every day with my husband, closest friend and sons — and doing what we know best. The transformation continued into our restaurant family, then our community. Every day a new challenge, but every day working closely with people who elevate, and every night celebrating the little successes over bad television and good wine.

**Permanent workplace transformations:** I hope the pedestrian communities and block closures are forever. Denver business owners can create these beautiful zones of mixed commerce and industry with intentional design. I hope we always have the opportunity to offer you an alcoholic beverage when you order a meal to go, because great food deserves great drink. I believe QR codes, online celebrations, occasional mask use and greater respect of personal space will forever be a part of my industry, and those are good, healthy developments.

**Permanent cultural transformations:** On a wider, cultural level, I'd like to think we're ready to discuss pay equity across industries. But sadly, I think small business owners will take the brunt of this responsibility, because large corporations — where boards and owners are pulling in hourly what their staffs pull in yearly — simply have no incentive to change their practices. The pandemic certainly didn't slow them down.

**If you could transform anything in Denver with the flick of a switch, what would it be?** Oh Denver, stop trying to force those blue skies and the mountain backdrops into homogeneity. Embrace your neighborhoods, their differences, their funk, their beauty!

High-rises and Amazons don't shape greatness — it's the little businesses, the innovators, the food, the drink, the woman on the ground who builds the foundation of a great city.

Oh. And for God's sake, provide shelter to those in need.

**Transformational life experience:** Two years into our marriage, and seven months into my second pregnancy, my husband's business partner, Doug Fleischmann, was killed by a drunk driver on his way home from work. Initially, I stepped in to help my husband with his business, and quit teaching to do the job at hand — the job of overcoming heartbreaking loss while keeping our business afloat. I learned how to keep books, and pay the taxes and hire and fire and then I was designing restaurants and creating training manuals.

**Proudest 2020 accomplishment:** The Colorado Symphony played a rooftop concert with Mizuna food on the roof above Osteria Marco.

**No. 1 piece of advice for emerging leaders:** Own your power. Throw love. 🚩

# Priya Naidu Burkett

**Title:**  
Investor

**Organization:**  
Burkett Family Foundation

**Industry:**  
Nonprofit

**Location:**  
Five Points



**Pandemic transformation:** Even before the pandemic began, I had begun a transformation. The pandemic served to validate my direction. In 2018, my grandmother, who raised me, passed away of cancer, and two months later, my little brother passed after a long battle with mental illness. The following summer, I decided to retire from corporate life.

The pandemic validated for me that life is short and confirmed that if there was ever a time to figure out a path that would truly fulfill me, it is now. Drawing on my interest in fashion and beauty, combined with my business background, I opened a hair and beauty salon, On Point Beauty Bar. I also started a pop-up market and consignment boutique called The Remix. Both businesses are based in Five Points and support BIPOC- and women-owned small business.

**Permanent workplace transformations:** I think we'll see more hybrid and flexible working arrangements. With this shift, I believe we'll see more engagement between people and their local communities and businesses.

**Permanent cultural transformations:** The world is even more aware of America's great disparity between white communities and communities of color. And it's not just policing, as we saw with the murder of George Floyd. The disparities are evident in the dispro-

portionate impacts of the pandemic on communities of color. As a result of the growing awareness, I believe we will see a greater, more meaningful focus on supporting efforts and initiatives presented by people of color.

**If you could transform anything in Denver with the flick of a switch, what would it be?** The light rail on the Welton Corridor passes mere feet from the storefronts and is quite dangerous for those who come to shop, eat and support the businesses. I would move the train off the sidewalk and turn Welton into a two-way street.

**Transformational life experience:** I created a network group called The Fly Ladies. What started as a way to coordinate fly-fishing trips has organically evolved into a personal and professional support group.

**Proudest 2020 accomplishment:** Opening a hair and beauty salon that serves my community.

**No. 1 piece of advice for emerging leaders:** Be true to yourself and the rest will follow. It comes with prayer, hard work and a little luck, and you will never regret it.

**Hashtag that describes your year:** #MakItHappen

**No. 1 pandemic escape:** Working out at Bodies by Perseverance. 🏋️‍♀️

Congratulations to this year's honorees for

## Outstanding Women in Business

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