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Tavia Cathcart Brown: 2026 Tony Cotten Woman of Distinction

BY ERA STAFF

Creasey Mahan Nature Preserve's Executive Director Tavia Cathcart Brown told the large audience in attendance at last week's Oldham Chamber's Celebration of Women luncheon: "I am happiest when my hands are in the dirt ..."

Her love for nature combined with her dedication to the community is why she was named the 2026 Tony Cotten Woman of Distinction at the annual Celebration of Women event on March 19 at CityPlace in La Grange. The annual award is named in memory of former Oldham Era Publisher Tony Cotten who helped found the event.

Each year, the event's theme changes. This year, it was "Bloom where you are planted."

"Gardening is actually about hope," Brown said during her speech, "and so is working as a part of a team; an organization like Creasey Mahan Nature Preserve. It's about hope, it's about building community and connecting on a one-on-one basis with each other."

Brown, who recalled first loving flowers and nature as a toddler playing in her grandmother's zinnias, started working at Creasey Mahan Nature Preserve during the



Photo by Grant Gerstner

Creasey Mahan Nature Preserve's Executive Director Tavia Cathcart Brown shares her love for nature and the community after being named the 2026 Tony Cotten Woman of Distinction on March 19.

2008 market crash. She was the third full-time employee of the 170-acre preserve in Goshen that is a donor-supported public charity serving 60,000 annual visitors free of charge, every day from sunrise to sunset. Under Brown's tenure, Creasey now has 24 full- and part-time employees.

With vision and support from her board of directors, staff and volunteers, Brown created what is now known as the Mac & Marla Barr Woodland Garden. This two-acre destination features thousands of native wild-

flowers and ferns and is one of 12 gardens featured on Kentucky's Garden Trail. It has become a favorite place for events, weddings and Creasey's Butterfly Ball fundraising gala held every May.

Brown also led the charge to add a 15,000-square-foot ADA-accessible Forest Friends Playground, family picnic pavilions and miles of new trails. In addition, over 8,000 trees have been planted, as part of an ongoing reforestation project. With the goal of bringing back grassland nesting birds, such as the Eastern Meadowlark,



Photo by Jane Ashley Pace

Tavia Cathcart Brown poses for a photo with her Creasey Mahan staff and friends after being named the 2026 Tony Cotten Woman of Distinction.

15-acres of mowed grass was transformed into native wildflower meadows.

Brown partnered with Ryan Devlin to create the area's first all-outdoor nature-based preschool, Thrive Forest School, that has served thousands of children and is now used as a model for others.

In her remarks Thursday, Brown shared how she recently observed a child watching an ant for 10 minutes straight and how seeing a child engage with nature is what motivates her:

"In this day and age, 10 minutes for a little 3-year-old watching a tiny little six-legged bug? Now granted, he did accidentally almost try to kill it because he wanted it to go on a stick, but the ant persevered — the ant was OK ... But a child spending 10 minutes watching an ant is our future; we need kids with focus ...

"The little things piece together and make big things happen ... Every little thing in nature and with human connection matters."

Brown also highlighted the importance of places like the preserve: "Our founders, Virginia and Howard Mahan, knew 51 years ago that we would become a green island — that's what we are today because we are surrounded on all sides by subdivisions ...

"We are a stopover for migratory birds, who need a place to rest and refuel. We have the only wild, growing marsh marigold in the entire state of Kentucky — it's endangered, and it's found at Creasey Mahan ...

"I encourage you to go visit — we have exciting things happening," Brown said, adding that she recently signed a contract for the renovation of the preserve's 1828 dairy barn that the Oldham County Public Library's Goshen Branch used to call home.

Brown was also the host, writer and garden consultant of the Emmy-award winning, "Kentucky's Secret Gardens," which is now in reruns on KET. Brown took viewers into nine private gardens chosen from across the state, including Sue

Grafton's, as well as her own, to reveal gardeners' inspirations and the pleasing results.

She also created a 49-segment video series called "Take a Walk with Tavia" covering Kentucky's native wildflowers, which may be viewed from Creasey Mahan's website or YouTube page.

As an author, Brown co-wrote the best-selling field guide "Wildflowers of Tennessee, the Ohio Valley and Southern Appalachians," covering 16 states and 1,250 wildflowers. This Native Plant Society sponsored-guide demonstrates her specialties of "flora-lore," mythology, and medicinal uses. She also co-authored and was the lead photographer of Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest, winner of a Gold Nautilus Book Award.

A lecturer and educator, Brown often shares her love of plants and pollinators, giving presentations to regional and national groups, and at conferences. As a frequent visitor to the Monarch sanctuaries in the mountains of central

Mexico, her presentations are described as “mesmerizing and entertaining.”

Brown and her husband, Matthew Brown, share a love of gardening to attract pollinators and grow their own herbs and vegetables, especially Brandywine tomatoes, which she processes into homemade juice to last until the first summer harvest. They can be found enjoying the beauty of Oldham County’s byways and enjoying the trails, often accompanied by their shy pup, Corabelle.

Brown also took the opportunity Thursday to thank many of the preserve’s supporters, including their Volunteer Board of Directors and 2025 Oldham Countians of the Year Ken and Nancy Dahlgren.

“There are many more, of course,” she added, but without them, “Creasey Mahan wouldn’t be serving our community as much as we are ...

“I thank you from the bottom of my grass-stained heart,” Brown said to the event’s attendees in concluding her speech.

In addition to recognizing Brown, the annual luncheon featured a tablescaping contest around this year’s theme, “Bloom Where You Are Planted.”

Contest winners included Best Representation of a Business, PNC Bank; Most Creative, Encompass Develop Design & Construct; Best Representation of the Theme, Baptist Health La Grange; and People’s Choice, Project Guild of La Grange.

The featured speaker was Hope Gardiner, a former recipient of the Woman of Distinction Award and local horticulturist with Oldham County Extension, who also provided a floral demonstration.



Photo by Grant Gerstner

Hope Gardiner provides a flower demonstration during Thursday’s Celebration of Women event at CityPlace in La Grange.



Photo by Grant Gerstner

The Encompass Develop Design & Construct chat at their table before the luncheon. They won Most Creative tablescaping at the Oldham Chamber Celebration of Women event. The theme for the event was “Bloom Where You Are Planted.”



Photo by Jane Ashley Pace

Karen Black and Jamie Harvey decorated a table for the Oldham Chamber Celebration of Women event held March 19 at CityPlace in La Grange.