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South Side flower shop owner named CNN's Hero of the Year

Quilen Blackwell says he will use the \$100,000 prize to expand his nonprofit Chicago Eco House, which grows flowers on previously vacant South and West side lots, and Southside Blooms, an Englewood flower shop.

By Mohammad Samra | Dec 8, 2025, 11:53am CST

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Quilen Blackwell, president of Chicago Eco House, is shown at his Washington Park flower farm in 2021. He was named the 2025 CNN Hero of the Year. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times file

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Quilen Blackwell, owner of a Chicago nonprofit that employs at-risk youth to turn vacant lots into flower farms, has won CNN's Hero of the Year Award.

Blackwell is CEO of Chicago Eco House, which grows flowers on South and West side lots, and Southside Blooms, an Englewood flower shop at 6250 S. Morgan St.

His organization has been employing at-risk youth, ages 16 to 24, since 2014 at gardens in Englewood, Woodlawn, Washington Park and West Garfield Park.

The award comes with a \$100,000 prize that Blackwell said he will use to convert more empty lots into flower farms.

“This is a big win for the ‘hood — and a big win for Chicago,” Blackwell, 41, told the Chicago Sun-Times Monday.

Blackwell said business is booming, and he needs to grow more flowers to meet demand he expects in 2026. He said he wants to buy more vacant lots from the Cook County Land Bank to expand flower operations. This year, his group converted three lots on the West Side, he said.



Youth employees with Southside Blooms can become floral assistants after training, harvesting flowers from the shop's farms

across the South and West sides to make bouquets | Chicago Eco House/Southside Blooms

Blackwell created Chicago Eco House to help curb violence in the city. The flower shop [Southside Blooms](#) opened in 2020 at the nonprofit's headquarters at 6439 S. Peoria St. The shop moved the following year to its location on Morgan Street.

Blackwell has been profiled several times in the Sun-Times.

In 2021, Blackwell [told the paper](#) that providing work to youth is one way to curb violence.

"It's a national problem that we're talking about, and we feel like we have ... at least an economic solution that can help take a big chunk out of that problem," he told the Sun-Times then.

His organization provides 10-week trainings for some people in the Cook County Juvenile Probation program, he said then. Some of those trainees are hired at \$15 an hour as floral assistants, greeting card assistants or farm assistants, he said.

Mariah Alexander, 24, assistant manager at Southside Blooms in Englewood, makes a bouquet in 2023. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

“A lot of the youth that we work with are kids who are coming off the streets,” Blackwell said then.

In 2022, “The Ellen Show” gifted \$10,000 to Southside Blooms, which was featured on the show.

Eco House had 10 acres of flower farms across the city in 2023. The group even had beehives to make beeswax for natural candles.

Blackwell grew up on Madison, Wisconsin, volunteered in the U.S. Peace Corps in Thailand, then enrolled in 2011 in a school in west suburban Chicago to study ministry. He later tutored at an Englewood high school, according to his online biography.

Blackwell said he was “absolutely stunned” when he learned he won CNN’s annual award.

“We had a lot of stiff competition,” he said Monday.

Blackwell said he is happy the award is focusing attention on a positive effort in the city.

“There’s a lot of good things going on in the city that sometimes get drowned out,” he said.

CNN said the award aims to honor “everyday people who are making extraordinary contributions to help improve the lives of others.”

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