

30

IN THEIR
THIRTIES

The 2020 Class of 30 in Their Thirties dug deep for an extra measure of fortitude to meet the outbreak of COVID-19 and, along the way, developed new products and services, sought out cutting-edge business models, and pivoted into uncharted waters.

PROFILES BY DAN CALABRESE, TIM KEENAN, R.J. KING, TOM MURRAY, AND GRACE TURNER

📷 MARTIN VECCHIO

MICHELLE
ARISTEO
BARTON

35

PRESIDENT • ARISTEO CONSTRUCTION, LIVONIA • EMPLOYEES: 700
REVENUE: \$470M • COLLEGE: DUKE UNIVERSITY (B), UNIVERSITY OF
MICHIGAN ROSS SCHOOL OF BUSINESS (MBA)

TAKING OVER A FAMILY COMPANY THAT HAS GROWN TO MORE THAN 700 EMPLOYEES poses a unique challenge that includes maintaining a supportive, small-business feel despite having a workforce that has technically outgrown the definition.

Michelle Aristeo Barton, president of Aristeo Construction since 2018, strives to grow the business while maintaining the spirit of the company's humble roots. Her grandfather and father founded the company in 1977 with one pickup truck and a \$10,000 loan. Today, Aristeo offers end-to-end construction and does as much of its own work as possible to maintain quality and safety.

Barton grew up with the company, answering phones on the weekends as a 7-year-old, helping in the office through high school, interning in college, and eventually being hired. She always knew she wanted to work with the company, and started her full-time career in the human resources department.

"Over my 13 years at Aristeo I've worked closely with leaders across the company and led a variety of cross-functional teams. That's allowed me to gain a deep understanding of the complexities of our business and how we operate," she says.

As president, Barton is responsible for profit and loss, sets the company's direction, and makes sure it delivers on its promises. She also ensures her team has the tools and training they need to succeed, so they feel recognized and appreciated in an industry that often requires long hours and is physically demanding.

"When you have committed individuals at all levels of your team who are truly living, breathing, and embodying the company's values and culture, then those values naturally permeate throughout the organization," she says.

Barton is also preparing the company for the next generation of leadership. The company is the largest Women's Business Enterprise National Council-certified general contractor in the country. The certification means the company is majority female-owned and has female executives. ■ — Grace Turner

FOUNDER AND CEO • START MY WELLNESS, TROY • EMPLOYEES: 15
REVENUE: \$750,000 • COLLEGE: MICHIGAN PSYCHOANALYTIC INSTITUTE (B),
WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY (M), SMITH COLLEGE (PH.D.)

LIFE CAN BE STRESSFUL ENOUGH AS IT IS. THEN COVID-19 ARRIVED ON THE SCENE IN

March, which explains why Dr. Anton Babushkin is an exceptionally busy man these days. "Yes, there's certainly been a lot more calls," Babushkin says. "I don't know if it's the pandemic or good marketing or word of mouth, maybe all the above, but people are stressed and they're looking for help."

Babushkin, a psychoanalyst with a Ph.D. in clinical social work, is founder and CEO of Start My Wellness, a diverse collection of therapists who provide support for individuals, couples, and families, as well as a critical, previously overlooked segment of the population: employees. "We specialize in employee wellness, and the best thing for us is that more companies are recognizing the need for helping their employees more in this kind of way," he says.

For so long, the topic of mental health could be a source of shame. Not anymore. "The reality is mental health is part of everybody's life," Babushkin says. "It's a matter of are you able to take care of things on your own, or do you want some help?"

Although Start My Wellness offers traditional, in-person sessions for employees at their office, online sessions are far more popular. "It's like 95 percent of what we do," Babushkin says of virtual communication, adding that he's eager to expand his business model far beyond Michigan.

"I'm working on a directory of clinics and therapists nationwide who are able and willing to provide this kind of emotional health care to employees," he says. "We're going to build out a national network of these providers that employers can find and source through our directory, so employers can come to us and find out who's really good in New York or California, and we can help them find those providers. Basically, Babushkin concludes, "it's going to be like Airbnb, except instead of rooms we're going to have high-quality providers and guide more people to the help they need." ■ — Tom Murray

ANTON
BABUSHKIN

37



MIKE
BUTCHER

38



PRINCIPAL • STARK ENTERPRISES, LIVONIA
EMPLOYEES: 120 • REVENUE: \$30M

MIKE BUTCHER'S FORMAL EDUCATION WAS ADMITTEDLY EARNED THROUGH THE SCHOOL of hard knocks, but he's determined to forge a career path for others interested in working in the construction trades.

His Stark Enterprises, a five-year-old subcontracting business, is planning to open a school by 2022 called Stark University. There, high school graduates will be able to prepare for careers in plumbing, electrical, carpentry, flooring, or mechanical systems — all of the services Stark offers his clients.

"Our goal for the future is to get the school up and running so we can take kids right out of high school, bring them into a job, and give them a career," Butcher says. "The school will be free for employees and will allow them to learn about any area of the business."

Recruited out of high school to design truck parts for Ford Motor Co., Butcher left after a year to join AT&T for a 10-year stint in positions ranging from lineman to installing fiber optics and doing repairs. While at AT&T, he moonlighted by remodeling houses and selling them for a profit.

"When I started my side business, I knew I didn't really want to have to work 80 hours a week to provide for my family," Butcher says. This is the same sales pitch he used to recruit other trades to join Stark Enterprises, including Douglas Mechanical, Eco Painting, and Resurrection Carpentry.

"The only reason a lot of smaller subcontractors aren't bigger is because they don't have enough time to work on projects, run the business, and grow the business," he explains. "They're stuck with a five- to 10-person company and making a good living, but they're working 80 hours a week."

"We guarantee to take (a partner company) from an 80-hour workweek to more of a 40- or 50-hour workweek, and from \$1 million in (annual) revenue to \$5 million. By taking care of all the business (operations), the partners become more efficient with their time and they're able to manage more projects." ■ — Tim Keenan

CFO • FARBMAN GROUP, SOUTHFIELD • EMPLOYEES: 200
REVENUE: NA • COLLEGE: ADRIAN COLLEGE

ONE MIGHT BELIEVE THAT THE 35-YEAR-OLD CFO OF THE FARBMAN GROUP PROPERTY

management company in Southfield might have aspirations of a similar role at a larger company. One would be wrong.

"Without a doubt, this is the best career move I ever made, coming here. There's nowhere else I'd rather be and nowhere else I envision myself being," says Chris Chesney, when asked what the future holds for him. His goal, he says, is "Continuing to grow and help us get to 40-plus more years in addition to the 40-plus we've already had, and see where it takes us."

Chesney's career started in 2006 after graduating from Adrian College. First, he was a clerk at a Detroit company, and then joined a now-defunct startup property management firm where he began as a staff accountant and rose to the position of senior accountant.

In 2012, he joined Signature Associates in Southfield as a senior accountant and worked his way up to director of accounting before joining the Farbm Group in 2014 as accounting supervisor.

In his current role as CFO, he oversees the financial department, works with staff accountants to ensure the company adheres to all internal controls, and reports properly to internal and external clients. He works closely with Andy Gutman, president of Farbm Group, on various business and financing issues. He's also responsible for the company's tax returns, tax projections, and audit functions of the firm and its related entities.

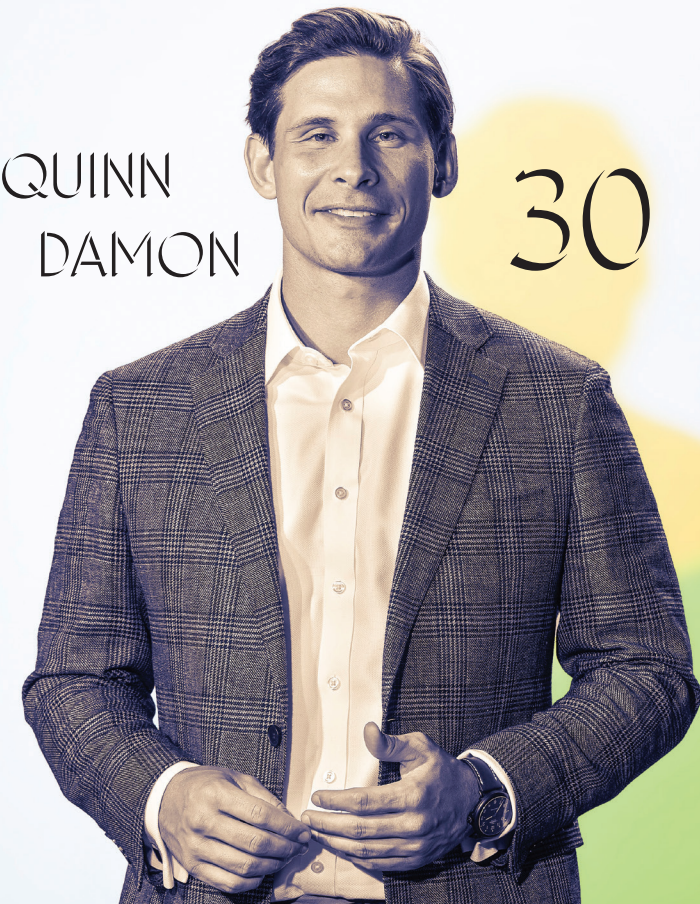
"I've always enjoyed the challenge of working with numbers and working through complex problems and finding the solutions," says Chesney who started college as a psychology major. "I realized after my freshman year that business really interested me."

When not working, Chesney coaches his 11-year-old son's travel baseball team as well as his 8-year-old's baseball team. ■ — Tim Keenan

CHRIS
CHESNEY

35





PARTNER, VICE PRESIDENT • LOCKTON COS., DETROIT
EMPLOYEES: 7,500 • REVENUE: \$1.9B • COLLEGE: UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI

QUINN DAMON LIVES BY WHAT HE CALLS HIS “ROCKING CHAIR” PHILOSOPHY — HE makes decisions based on whether he thinks he’ll regret a missed opportunity when he’s old and sitting in his rocking chair.

This methodology brought the Kansas City, Mo., native, a partner and vice president of Lockton Cos., to Detroit in January to help build a brick-and-mortar presence in Michigan. Lockton, based in Kansas City, is a global risk management and employee benefit consulting firm that also offers retirement services.

“We’re all about organic growth,” Damon says, adding that Lockton has never made a domestic acquisition.

Damon joined Lockton as an intern in 2011, shortly before he graduated from the University of Missouri with a degree in finance. The company acts as a middleman between companies and their insurance providers to negotiate contracts.

For a period, Damon worked with clients in construction and manufacturing. After building a book of business valued at more than \$1 million, he was promoted to vice president and partner. He transitioned into his new position and was asked to move to Detroit around the same time.

The next step is to grow everything in Michigan: the company’s client base, workforce, and presence in the market. Damon’s goal is to triple Lockton Michigan’s revenue in the next five years. Already, the firm has more than 150 Michigan customers.

In addition to his objectives for growth, Damon wants to make Lockton a place where insurance professionals want to work. He says part of the firm’s draw is its straightforward and supportive workplace culture. The company has offices in Detroit and Birmingham, and is planning to open one in Grand Rapids.

“Our goal is to be the place to do insurance in Michigan,” he says. ■

— Grace Turner



PRESIDENT AND CEO • SPIN TECH INC., BINGHAM FARMS • EMPLOYEES: 8
REVENUE: NA • COLLEGE: NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY (B),
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN (MBA)

WHEN HE’S NOT SAILING THE GREAT LAKES AND HOSTING THE MONTHLY “GREAT LAKES Now” program on Detroit Public Television, metro Detroit native Ward Detwiler is working to revolutionize the medical imaging industry.

As president and CEO of Spin Tech Inc. in Bingham Farms, Detwiler is raising capital, developing business and marketing strategies, and navigating FDA approval for MRI imaging software that he says is 40 percent faster and offers “a significant amount more data of the brain itself” than what currently is available.

Detwiler’s journey to medical entrepreneurship started as an undergrad at Northwestern University in Chicago, where he launched an advertising technology business. He also assisted a professor with starting an analytics company that included health care clients. “That was really my introduction to the startup world in terms of raising venture capital and trying to build a real technology company,” Detwiler says. “It was a tremendous experience.”

He came back to Michigan to complete his MBA, and following graduation he set up a Detroit office for U3 Ventures, a Philadelphia-based firm that helps large industrial landowners with development strategy and operational needs.

One of U3’s first projects was assisting Henry Ford Health System in Detroit set up its innovations program on the main hospital campus to commercialize ideas from employees. Eventually, Detwiler joined HFH as director of digital health innovation, where he spent nearly five years.

“Being a startup guy at heart, I got the itch to get back into the operational world,” Detwiler says. So he and Wayne State University professor and researcher Mark Haacke decided to form Spin Tech to commercialize Haacke’s inventions. “There are a lot of great ideas that never make it out of the lab,” Detwiler says. “A lot of times, how you bring that idea forward is as important as the invention itself.” ■

— Tim Keenan

DIRECTOR OF NURSING AND CLINICAL SERVICES
AMERICAN ADVANTAGE HOME CARE INC., DEARBORN • EMPLOYEES: 30
REVENUE: \$1.2M • COLLEGE: MOTT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

FOR AS LONG AS SHE CAN REMEMBER, SARAH DE SONIA KNEW SHE WANTED TO PROVIDE direct care to patients — but the health care industry had bigger plans for her.

De Sonia, a registered nurse, was hired to work in quality assurance at Dearborn-based American Advantage Home Care Inc., a home care company with offices in Dearborn and Flint, in August 2019. By April, she was promoted to director of nursing and clinical services.

The story has taken a similar turn almost everywhere De Sonia has worked — she’s been asked to take on a management role after just a few months. She even left management positions a couple of times to pursue patient care before being promoted again. “I’ve just accepted it’s my gift,” she says.

In her current role, De Sonia is in charge of compliance and quality review, education and training for clinical staff, and supervising case management.

She says she wasn’t afraid to take the reins during the COVID-19 pandemic, developing emergency preparedness plans, increasing staff education, and securing personal protection equipment, all while taking infection control into consideration. “Really, we’re doing all the same things we’ve done all along,” she says.

De Sonia started her career in a skilled nursing facility where she saw more than 20 patients each day. She says she didn’t think she had enough time with each patient to truly make sure they were on their way to recovery.

Through home care, nurses can see what challenges patients face at home. Frequently, the challenges can be serious. Patients may not have a working stove, or they might need help applying for Medicaid. “Home care gives you the opportunity to see and treat the entire patient,” De Sonia explains.

De Sonia’s future plans include preparing a licensing application so American Advantage can offer hospice and accredited private duty services, which help clients with nonmedical home care needs. ■ — Grace Turner



MANAGING DIRECTOR/PRESIDENT • FINANCE MICHIGAN/MARKETPLACE
HOMES, DETROIT • EMPLOYEES: 1,000+ • REVENUE: NA
COLLEGE: KALAMAZOO COLLEGE (B), UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS (M)

WILL DICKSON IS NO STRANGER TO MANAGING MONEY. AT AGE 13 HE STARTED TRADING stocks, and used the proceeds for spending and travel needs.

“I would read weekly research reports from Value Line and make a decision on whether I liked the companies, and then I would buy the stock,” says Dickson, managing director of Finance Michigan in Detroit. “I’d come out ahead around 25 percent each year. My big win was an investment in Blue Rhino, which got acquired by another company. I made over 100 percent on that trade and was hooked.”

Dickson, a CPA, still makes investments as part of Trowbridge Trading, which is a member of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, New York Mercantile Exchange, and Chicago Board of Trade. At Finance Michigan, he oversees financing and support for entrepreneurs throughout Michigan with his father, Stan Dickson Jr., a CPA and lawyer. The pair operates from two side-by-side mansions and a carriage house along Jefferson Avenue just east of downtown Detroit. One of the homes, the Charles Trowbridge House, was built in 1826 and is the state’s oldest residential structure.

The mansion serves as a calling card for Marketplace Homes, another family company that offers virtual home tours in 35 states. Founded in 2002, the enterprise was one of the pioneers in developing non-contact tours of homes using software and hardware like cameras and microphones. Currently, 1,000 homes are being marketed. “The virtual tours have been a real nice offering in the age of COVID-19, and the company was really ahead of the curve,” Will Dickson says. “With Finance Michigan, we’re always looking to partner with entrepreneurs, and we have capital and services to help companies grow.”

The Dicksons run several other companies including First National Bank in Howell, Corcoran Global Living, and Happy Howie’s, among others. “We’re running out of room, which is a good problem to have,” Dickson says. ■ — R.J. King





ELISE
FIELDS
34

COO • MIDTOWN DETROIT INC., DETROIT • EMPLOYEES: 10 • REVENUE: NA
COLLEGE: MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS INCREASED THE IMPORTANCE OF ONE ASPECT OF THE work Midtown Detroit Inc. does: helping small businesses. The nonprofit community and economic development organization serves the Midtown and New Center neighborhoods by striving to improve and build community spaces, supporting small businesses and real estate development, and creating marketing and events, says its COO, Elise Fields.

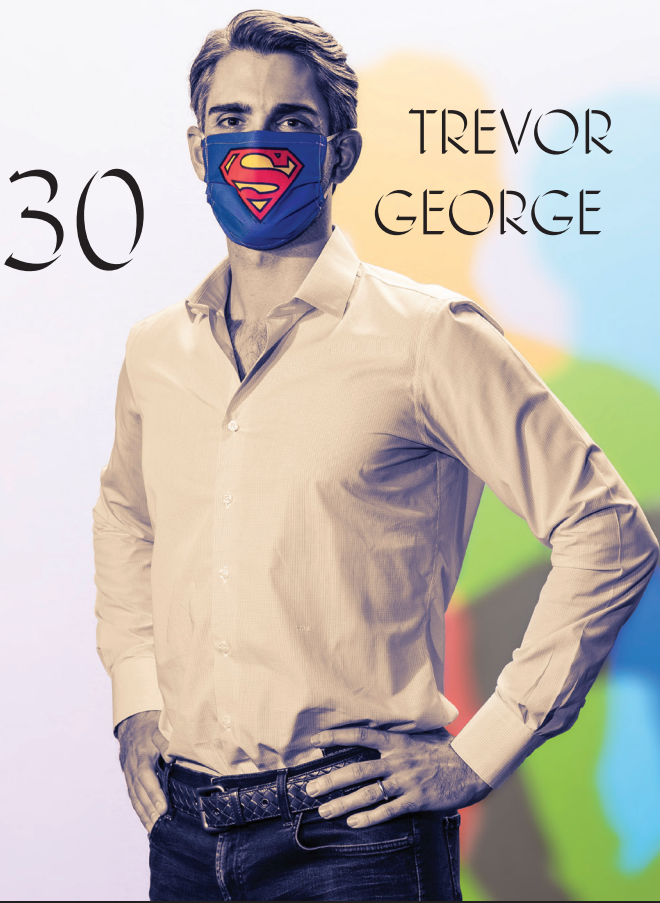
Fields, who was promoted to her current position in 2019, says her role has evolved along with the nonprofit since she was hired in 2008. Today the organization is finding ways to accommodate new needs created by the pandemic.

Some small businesses in the area have been able to pivot, offering alternate methods for shopping or services, Fields says. Others are still working to get back on their feet. The organization has helped these companies find resources and has reallocated its funds to help them with rent and other expenses.

"We've always been a very responsive ... organization," says Fields, explaining that Midtown Detroit Inc. is able to quickly change directions so it can help businesses, nonprofits, residents, and visitors as needed.

Some of the organization's plans have been delayed. In 2018, JPMorgan Chase & Co. selected Midtown Detroit Inc. for a five-year mentorship program. The nonprofit is using the support to weigh the benefits of turning the Midtown area into a business improvement district in which tax dollars paid by commercial property owners would be captured to support initiatives chosen by the community.

The next steps for the initiative include community education, soliciting feedback through a survey, and eventually conducting a formal vote among the commercial property owners. Fields says the organization hopes to pick the project back up this fall. Major players in the area include Wayne State University, the College for Creative Studies, Little Caesars Arena, Henry Ford Health System, the Detroit Medical Center, and many of Detroit's museums. ■ — *Grace Turner*



30
TREVOR
GEORGE

CEO • TREVCO, MADISON HEIGHTS • EMPLOYEES: 120 • REVENUE: NA
COLLEGE: UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

ONCE AN ENTREPRENEUR, ALWAYS AN ENTREPRENEUR. GROWING UP, TREVOR GEORGE sold Beanie Babies, cleaned cars, and fixed yo-yos. While attending the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, he hosted concerts for up to 5,000 people while overseeing a staff of 22 interns.

Following college, he joined his father, Jim George's, company. After learning the business side of Trevco, which at the time produced branded apparel and other items that were sold at wholesale prices to retailers and distributors, he spotted an opening for a new direction. "After learning and studying the business, I saw that we could sell branded items directly to consumers," George says. "My dad agreed, and (we've been) able to triple the business (since 2015), and now we're 95 percent direct to consumer and 5 percent wholesale. I also launched Blue Wheel Media in Birmingham; today it's a 50-person digital marketing services agency."

Both businesses expanded steadily until March, when the outbreak of coronavirus brought on stay-at-home orders. "I will never forget COVID-19," George says. "I was watching the analytics in real time on my computer screen, and our sales fell 60 percent. We had to reduce our workforce and, for the next two to four weeks, it was all I could do to keep the ship from sinking."

As he sought to work his way out of the jam, his wife, Morgan, suggested printing some of the company's popular licensed brands — Superman, Hello Kitty, Harry Potter — on face masks. At first, George wasn't sure. But when he struggled to convince his young son to put on a mask, Morgan persuaded him the process would be easier if there was a superhero on the front.

"We didn't have the rights (for face masks), we didn't have sewing machines, but we had our digital platform and we figured it out," George says. "The whole thing went viral almost overnight. We've been able to donate 250,000 masks to first responders through our buy one/give one (sales) model. We also brought everyone back, and we hired more people." ■ — *R.J. King*

OWNER/CEO • GENESIS IN-HOME CARE/ODYSSEY LOGISTICS, WATERFORD
TOWNSHIP • EMPLOYEES: 100/150 • REVENUE: \$4M/\$2.5M
COLLEGE: OAKLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE

ONLY 32, PAUL GALLAGHER IS ALREADY OPERATING TWO SUCCESSFUL COMPANIES.

Odyssey Logistics, launched in 2019, has 150 employees and delivers packages to residents and businesses in the greater Detroit area.

His other startup, Genesis In-Home Care, is closest to his heart. Long before he started the business in 2012, Gallagher was already on a path toward helping people who need extra care and attention. "Even before I was an adult, I had family members with disabilities," he says. "My uncle was intellectually impaired, my mom has been dealing with childhood trauma for many years, and my sister suffers from schizoid affective disorder, which is a form of schizophrenia."

He also had a friend in high school who was autistic. "I used to call it 'artistic,' because I didn't understand autism," Gallagher says.

By the time he was 18, Gallagher was working as a caregiver for the disabled, which led to his first business. "We provide support and services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in their home and in the community," he says. "In some cases, those individuals may live with parents at their home, but in most cases it's one, two, three, or sometimes four people living together in their own house or apartment receiving care from us."

The people in the Genesis program have a range of disabilities, but all are the beneficiaries of Gallagher's singular approach, which he calls "the culture of gentleness."

"It's really a methodology focusing on connecting with the people we serve, and not restraining or trying to force them to do certain things that won't work," he says. "Most important is making sure they feel safe in the relationship."

Gallagher has a personal philosophy, as well: "I want to just continue to add value to the world and to make an impact, whatever that means, which I try to define every single day," he says. ■ — *Tom Murray*



PAUL J.
GALLAGHER JR.
32

PROJECT ENGINEER • MEANS GROUP, DETROIT • EMPLOYEES: 10
REVENUE: NA • COLLEGE: HOWARD UNIVERSITY (B), (MBA)

LAUREN KING WANTS TO BE AN INSPIRATION TO OTHER WOMEN OF COLOR WHO WANT

to get into the real estate development field. "I'm really interested in becoming a developer/owner myself," says King, who has completed her first year as a project engineer for Means Group in Detroit. "I really want to be a symbol for people like myself, to show that it's possible to add diversity to what's happening in Detroit."

"I really want to have a hand in the landscape of the city, especially since there aren't a lot of minority women in the industry. Often, I'm the only woman, and the only minority woman, in the room."

King says she didn't have that experience at Detroit-based General Motors Co., where she started her career in the automaker's purchasing department.

At Means Group, King leads the Eastern Market Metro Accelerator project, a 15,000-square-foot building that is being partitioned off to create several commercial kitchens. "I have no problem getting my hands dirty," she says. "I've picked up a caulking gun on the site to make sure things get done on time. Getting those small businesses in there is really important to me."

She's also project engineer for the Cambria Hotel development, a 158-room lodge now under construction at 600 W. Lafayette Blvd. at Third Street that will include an adaptive reuse of the historic former home of WWJ studios.

King says she's known since her last year at Howard University that she wanted to be involved in commercial real estate development. "I love the process of building and I love construction."

She has been doing residential redevelopment with a partner, having flipped seven homes so far.

"I was comfortable at GM, and joining (Means Group) was really a leap of faith in an area that I really knew nothing about but was willing to learn with my feet to the fire," she says. "I've learned a lot and gained a lot of experience in the field." ■

— *Tim Keenan*



LAUREN
KING
30



32

CLINT
LAMANEN

PRESIDENT • LAMANEN CONSTRUCTION, BRIGHTON
EMPLOYEES: 6 • REVENUE: NA

IN BUILDING CUSTOM HOMES THAT RANGE IN PRICE FROM \$800,000 TO \$5 MILLION, Clint Lamanen, sometimes consults with his father, Steve, who started Lamanen Construction in Brighton 25 years ago. Now retired, the patriarch early on offered his two sons — Kyle serves as vice president — sound advice in dealing with clients.

“He said: ‘Always remember we’re here for our clients, and not the other way around,’” Clint says. “‘Be honest, tell them what you can do, not what they want to hear. And make sure you don’t overschedule things. Our clients have enough to worry about, so make sure you’re on time and you deliver what you promised.’”

While COVID-19 stay-at-home orders impacted the construction industry in Michigan for a few weeks, Clint says business has never been better. In addition to building custom homes in Ann Arbor, the Grosse Pointes, and the Bloomfield communities, the company undertakes home residential and landscaping projects — hardscapes in construction parlance.

“People are more at home now, and they’re more focused on improving their living spaces,” explains Lamanen. “Today, the trends we’re seeing are bigger windows, folding glass walls, infinity pools, home offices with green screens, home theaters, large, heated garages, wine rooms, in-law suites, and golf simulators.”

Working almost exclusively with Lou DesRosiers, principal of DesRosiers Architects Inc. in Bloomfield Hills, Lamanen says it can take two to three years to design, build, and deliver a custom home. “We mostly do traditional and contemporary homes, and our work is split evenly between building and renovations,” he says.

The latter work centers on redoing kitchens, bathrooms, and basements. “Where before we relied on people looking to build a new home, in the last two years people have stayed in place and taken on a renovation or a large addition,” Lamanen says. “That’s brought more work our way, which is why we’re moving into hardscapes.” ■ — *R.J. King*



35

MATT
LOUSSIA

PRESIDENT AND CO-OWNER • VALUE WHOLESALE DISTRIBUTORS, OAK PARK
EMPLOYEES: 60 • REVENUE: NA

MATT LOUSSIA KNEW WHEN HE JOINED HIS FATHER’S COMPANY FOLLOWING HIGH school that he would likely be groomed to one day lead it. He also knew, as the son of the boss, it could be difficult to be accepted by the company’s employees.

For that reason, along with a desire to learn the business from the ground up, Loussia decided that he wanted his job at the company to be, well, everything.

“I spent the first four years doing the real dirty work,” says Loussia, president and co-owner of Value Wholesale Distributors in Oak Park. “The sweeping, the cleaning, the orders, stocking the shelves, unloading semi-trucks.”

He even obtained a commercial driver’s license so he could personally handle food deliveries to grocery and convenience stores, service stations, schools, military facilities, and more.

Unfortunately, by the time Loussia turned 30, his father, John, had passed away. As he took the reins of the company sooner than he had anticipated, he used everything his dad taught him and applied it with some of his own thinking.

“I took risks that, if my dad were alive, he and I would have gone to war over,” Loussia says. “I was young enough that if I made a mistake, I could have recovered from it and it wouldn’t have destroyed my life.”

Loussia also faced a challenge in leading the company through the COVID-19 shutdown, and he was determined to ensure that every customer would be adequately supplied. “We were fighting tooth-and-nail with our vendors to get product,” Loussia says. “As you can imagine, we’re not Costco or Spartan Nash or Meijer or Kroger. We’re the last on that list to get product. We were creating extra purchase orders, paying for product in advance, and sending our own trucks to pick up product as often as we could.”

It paid off, and Loussia now looks to the future with the recent acquisition of Warren-based Liberty Wholesale. He hopes to use the acquisition to expand into new demographic groups — particularly Hispanics. ■ — *Dan Calabrese*

PRESIDENT • LAU & LAU ASSOCIATES, BLOOMFIELD HILLS • EMPLOYEES: 13
ASSETS UNDER ADVISEMENT: \$1B
COLLEGE: DEPAUW UNIVERSITY (B), THE AMERICAN COLLEGE (M)

JONATHAN LAU CAN’T PINPOINT THE MOMENT HE REALIZED HIS CAREER PATH WAS already essentially determined.

“From my earliest memory I looked up to my dad greatly, and saw other people looking up to him,” says Lau, president of Lau & Lau in Bloomfield Hills. “I was hanging around the office and going in with him on weekends. It was always kind of my assumption that I would end up working with him.”

Lau’s grandfather, Donald, started the financial services firm in 1940. He was joined by his son, David, in 1973, and after another three decades Jonathan became the third-generation family member of Bloomfield Hills-based Law & Lau Associates. “My dad passed away very suddenly last October,” Lau says. “I had 15 wonderful years working with him.”

Lau’s firm specializes in wealth management for private investors, along with offering an array of services for corporate clients. Not surprisingly, maintaining long-established relationships is a major focus for the firm.

“When a person passes away, the odds of keeping that family as a client are very low,” Lau says. “The statistics are pretty abysmal. And that’s kind of our niche. We’ve worked with specific families for three generations.”

The firm’s reputation is its calling card. “We don’t advertise, and we’re not on the radio trying to attract customers,” Lau says. “If we’re meeting with a prospective client, they’ve been referred to us by someone.”

Most firms that offer similar services for high-income clients require a minimum amount to invest before they can even get in the door. “We don’t do that,” Lau says. “We’re looking for serious-minded professionals, executives, and business owners who care deeply about their financial future and that of their family.”

Speaking of family, is there a fourth-generation Lau already in the on-deck circle? “I have two kids, ages 9 and 4,” Lau says. “Too soon to say.” ■ — *Tom Murray*



JONATHAN
LAU

38

FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT • DETROIT WING CO., EASTPOINTE
EMPLOYEES: 135 • REVENUE: NA

AS A RESTAURANT OWNER, GUS MALLIARAS HAD TO JUGGLE CLOSING AND THEN REOPEN- ing nine Detroit Wing Co. locations in the region, all the while working with suppliers to ensure there was a steady source of chicken wings from poultry producers.

“Chickens grow very quickly and must be processed at the right time,” says Malliaras, founder and CEO of Detroit Wing Co. “It takes about 13 weeks to go from an egg to a chicken, and with COVID-19, we wanted to ensure there weren’t supply disruptions once we reopened.”

“It was a balancing act. We have good volume and buy wings by the truckload, but we had to go to our suppliers and say, We’ll pay for a truck upfront, no matter what. There were also a lot of price fluctuations. It was week to week. Through a great partnership with Atlas Foods in Detroit, the majority of our (supply) concerns are largely gone now.”

Still, a location at the MGM Grand Detroit was slow to reopen due to state restrictions on operating casinos during the pandemic. At the same time, Malliaras is planning to add locations near Mack Avenue and Moross Road in Detroit, and in East Lansing. To help bring more consistency and efficiency to the operation, Malliaras is revamping how the company makes its handmade sauces. Every location creates more than a dozen offerings each morning, including Cajun, lemon pepper, teriyaki, Asian orange, and sweet heat flavors, but the effort is time-consuming.

“Initially, making the sauces at the stores made sense, but now we’ve found it’s a lot of labor for the stores,” Malliaras says. “We (realized) it would be easier to open restaurants and staff them if we could create one commissary kitchen and headquarters, and make all of the sauces at one location. We’ll still be making all of our sauces by hand, but in larger volumes — plus, with the consistency we want.”

The company plans to invest \$2.5 million to \$3 million to build out an existing 18,000-square-foot facility. A final location will be selected shortly, and the goal is to open the commissary kitchen next year. ■ — *R.J. King*



GUS
MALLIARAS

36



FOUNDER AND CEO • GAYANGA CO., DETROIT • EMPLOYEES: 50
REVENUE: \$10M • COLLEGE: WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

IN 2017 BRIAN MCKINNEY SOLD BENJII, HIS HOUSTON-BASED FINANCE TECH FIRM, AND decided to chase a dream he'd been contemplating for a long while — moving back to his hometown and starting another company focused on infrastructure, road, and utility construction.

It's worked out well so far; since its initial launch, McKinney's Gayanga Co. has razed close to 1,000 structures in Detroit. The business has grown from a \$400,000 startup to a thriving contender for a wide array of jobs all over the city, with more than 50 employees and revenue exceeding \$10 million.

His efforts led to McKinney finding himself front and center in July during negotiations for Proposal N, which deals with fixing Detroit's longstanding blight problem. The \$250 million bond proposal on the November ballot will allow city voters to determine whether they want to stabilize 8,000 vacant but salvageable houses and demolish another 8,000 that can't be saved. It also prioritizes Detroit-based companies and employees, helping to level the playing field for Black and minority-owned businesses like Gayanga.

"If we ever want to participate on freeway projects and large water infrastructure projects, we have to build capacity," McKinney says. "This was an opportunity to do it in our neighborhood. By and large, the majority of the federal funds to demolish structures in highly impacted African-American community strongholds went to large suburban white companies that didn't hire anyone who looked like the people in the community."

Soon after Mayor Mike Duggan finished hammering out the final touches on the legislation, he singled out McKinney, in particular, for his efforts in getting it finalized. "It was definitely a labor of love, and one of the most rewarding experiences in my life, to be part of the solution in blight — but, equally as important, to create economic opportunity for African-American businesses. I've never been a part of anything that has the potential for that kind of impact." ■ — *Tom Murray*



CO-FOUNDER AND CHIEF TECHNICAL OFFICER • DUO SECURITY, ANN ARBOR
EMPLOYEES: 900 • REVENUE: NA • COLLEGE: UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN (B), (M), (PH.D.)

JON OBERHEIDE SPENT HIS COLLEGE YEARS HACKING INTO COMPUTER NETWORKS.

He expects to spend the remainder of his career keeping others from doing the same.

"I was always passionate about security," says Oberheide, co-founder and chief technology officer at Duo Security in Ann Arbor, now part of Cisco Systems Inc. in San Jose, Calif. "I'm very interested in how things work and how to break them."

In fact, Oberheide met his business partner, Dug Song, while both were working at Arbor Networks during a college internship. Oberheide had a position as an offensive security researcher, more commonly known as a hacker.

"Breaking in is the easy part," he says. "Trying to figure out how to build a secure defense system is the really hard part. You're trying to build a defense and there are smart humans on the other end trying to figure out where you made a mistake."

In 2010, after Oberheide completed his doctorate, he and Song launched Duo Security in Ann Arbor. They were so effective at cybersecurity that Cisco Systems acquired the firm in 2018 for nearly \$2.4 billion, making it the largest exit ever for a Michigan-based software company.

"I've always had a nontraditional career path," Oberheide says. "I feel like I only had one real job in my life — making beautiful submarine sandwiches at Quiznos during high school."

That's not all he did in his teenage years, though. Together with a partner, Oberheide ran a business that did web hosting, along with web programming and design. "That's how I first got the entrepreneur bug. It was good money for being in high school, but it wasn't what I would call a serious business," he says. "I did learn a lot about taxes, financial planning, and supporting customers, even if it was just two high schoolers working in the middle of the night." ■

— *Tim Keenan*

EQUITY SHAREHOLDER • BUTZEL LONG, DETROIT
EMPLOYEES: 200+ • REVENUE: NA
COLLEGE: NORTHWOOD UNIVERSITY (B), AVE MARIA SCHOOL OF LAW (JD)

THERE'S THE PRACTICE OF LAW AND THE BUSINESS OF LAW. THEY'RE TWO DIFFERENT

skillsets, and it's not always easy for an attorney to excel at both.

At Butzel Long, a law large firm in Detroit, Paul Mersino transcends between the two disciplines, all the while raising five children along with his wife, Erin, who he says is "the best lawyer in the family."

A 2008 graduate of the Ave Maria School of Law, Mersino has known no other professional home. He served Butzel Long as a summer associate the year before he graduated. Upon passing the bar, he was offered a full-time position with the firm and he hasn't looked back.

"Once you've been doing this, even just a few years at a big law firm, you get head-hunters calling you just about every day," says Mersino, chair of Butzel Long's litigation department. But the calls don't interest him, as he enjoys the firm's atmosphere and the freedom he has to focus on his family.

A business litigator with a specialty in noncompete agreements and trade secret law, he enjoys the particular challenges of intellectual property law. "Things in the law tend to go slowly," Mersino explains. "The neat thing about trade secrets and noncompetes is, when someone has a noncompete and they leave, or steal your secret, you've got to be in court the next morning. It's a fire drill that's both stressful and exciting."

Mersino, who earned a business degree from Northwood University in Midland, has come to master the balance between client service and business results, such that his fellow shareholders voted him to the firm's board of directors this year. He sees the board slot as an opportunity to bridge some generational gaps.

"I think I can connect the two as we get more shareholders who are in their 30s and early 40s, as opposed to those in their 60s," Mersino says. ■

— *Dan Calabrese*



OWNER • STONEFIELD ENGINEERING AND DESIGN, SHEWOLF PASTIFICIO
AND BAR, DETROIT • EMPLOYEES: 150/70 • REVENUE: NA
COLLEGE: WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

WHEN HE'S NOT OVERSEEING STONEFIELD ENGINEERING AND DESIGN, WHICH HE OWNS,

Timothy Ponton can be found "hanging out" at the SheWolf Pastificio and Bar, which he also owns. Both are located in Detroit.

Stonefield, a civil engineering company with offices in New York City, Tampa, Boston, and Princeton, N.J., is a nontraditional firm, Ponton says.

"We're more about mentoring people, providing economic opportunity, and accelerating young peoples' careers," Ponton explains. "A lot of our competitors make people climb the ladder that goes by number of years of experience, not necessarily performance and learning."

"The motto of our company is to 'replace yourself,' so we're trying to take (college graduates, have them) grow organically, and replace ourselves with them. What ends up happening is they're even better than us. Then we encourage them to branch out and start their own office with their own teams. If you focus on the people, then the business grows with them."

Ponton started his career at a civil engineering firm in New Jersey in 2007, before joining a group of colleagues who wanted to strike out on their own in 2010. Stonefield now has 150 employees. The Detroit office opened in 2014.

The restaurant, which made its debut in Detroit's Midtown district in 2018, is the dream of Ponton's childhood friend, Chef Anthony Lombardo. Ponton takes care of SheWolf's business and Lombardo handles the cuisine.

Ponton, a Sterling Heights native, says his role at Stonefield has evolved over the years as the industry has changed. "The first five or six years it was strictly engineering," he says. "Once we got to a point where we had a handful of different offices and more employees, I had to start focusing more on the business side. I still go to planning commission meetings and am involved on the design side, and mentoring the younger staff." ■ — *Tim Keenan*



ALEX RILEY 32



MANAGING PARTNER • TK FUND, DETROIT • EMPLOYEES: 3 • REVENUE: NA
COLLEGE: UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

SINCE HIS COLLEGE YEARS, ALEX RILEY, HAS BEEN STARTING BUSINESSES, DOING ALL the hard setup work, then leaving them in someone else's hands as he moves on to the next endeavor. He, and especially his wife, hopes the TK Fund will be the last business he starts.

Riley, managing partner of the Detroit-based real estate development and private equity firm, says his earlier efforts involved a staffing company that supplied construction workers to contractors, and the Detroit Training Center, which fills a void for skills training in the construction industry.

"About a year after we started the staffing company, we saw the need for vocational training in construction, particularly with Detroiters who had some kind of barrier to employment like a criminal history or a low education level," Riley says. "So we launched Detroit Training Center, a licensed vocational school that covers everything from asbestos and lead abatement training to equipment use and commercial driving."

In late 2019, a friend from college asked him to start a real estate development company focused on Detroit. They put a group of investors together and TK Fund was born.

"I've loved the city of Detroit since I moved here from Ann Arbor in 2011," Riley says. "I've been around real estate for the last 10 years while staffing construction companies and training workers, so it seemed like a fit. It's using a combination of all my skill sets."

TK Fund's first project is the 40,000-square-foot 2000 Brooklyn building in Corktown, the former brush factory turned loft living space that Riley intends to redevelop as commercial space, apartments, and a production studio.

"In the beginning I wanted to build the biggest company possible with the most revenue," Riley says. "I've gotten away from that. Now I want to set things up and have freedom and flexibility." ■ — *Tim Keenan*

GREG SCHWARTZ 39



CO-FOUNDER AND COO • STOCKX, DETROIT • EMPLOYEES: 800
TRANSACTIONS: \$1B • COLLEGE: UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

STOCKX SALES ARE SOARING HIGHER THAN THE MODEL ROCKETS FOUNDER AND COO Greg Schwartz launches with his son on weekends. The Detroit-based company, an e-commerce business that connects buyers and sellers using stock market mechanics, was the brainchild of Dan Gilbert and is executed by Schwartz.

StockX, which started with listing custom and sought-after sneakers, has grown and now handles streetwear, collectable items, and electronics. The exchange reaches customers in 200 countries. Schwartz, with Gilbert's backing, launched StockX in 2015 after working in New York on the digital strategy team at Warner Music Group. He moved back to Detroit to start Upto, a mobile calendar app in which Gilbert was a lead investor.

"I've always liked building things," says Schwartz, whose first foray into apps was a mobile checkbook platform that he devised while studying at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. "I really liked the fact that the mobile checkbook app was helping people avoid overdrafting their accounts. This was in the days before iPhones, Androids, and mobile banking that we know today."

He was just about to sell Upto and move to the West Coast when "Dan had the idea of a stock market mechanics system to sell sneakers," Schwartz recalls. "That conversation led to the incubation of StockX in 2015. The next Monday morning we were putting together a team to build StockX."

The company's differentiator from other e-commerce platforms is that it authenticates every item that is purchased. "We have six authentication centers globally," Schwartz says. "And we physically verify the condition, authenticity, and size so the buyer has peace of mind when they're purchasing on StockX."

What does the future hold for Schwartz and StockX? "We're really doubling down on globalizing the experience for these customers, not only in Europe, where we're seeing explosive growth, but in Japan, Canada, and China. It's a major priority of ours right now." ■ — *Tim Keenan*

CEO • C3 INDUSTRIES INC., ANN ARBOR • EMPLOYEES: 175 • REVENUE: NA
COLLEGE: UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN ROSS SCHOOL OF BUSINESS (B),
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN LAW SCHOOL

AFTER SPENDING FIVE YEARS IN NEW YORK CITY AS A CORPORATE ATTORNEY AND INVESTMENT banker, Ankur Rungta moved back to Ann Arbor, where he had attended the University of Michigan, to jump into an entirely new business opportunity. In 2016, along with his brother, Vishal, and a longtime friend, Joel Ruggiero, Rungta launched C3 Industries Inc., a cannabis production and retail operation.

"We didn't ease our way into the business; rather, we first applied for and received a growing license in Oregon," says Rungta, CEO of C3 Industries. "It was an advanced market, so we had to really prove ourselves. It's a huge badge of honor to us ... that we came in late to what was a competitive market and succeeded."

When Michigan opened up cannabis sales last year following voter approval of a statewide referendum, C3 Industries applied for and received a license to grow and sell cannabis products throughout the state. Eager to control production quality, the company opened a state-of-the-art, 37,000-square-foot facility in Webberville, near Lansing. A neighboring 70,000-square-foot growing complex will be added next year.

On the retail side, the enterprise's High Profile stores sell a variety of cannabis products including C3's own brands, Cloud Cover Cannabis and Galactic Meds — flowers, edibles, vaporizers, concentrates, topicals, and tinctures. Overall, the product line is available in 75 stores in Michigan. In addition, next year the company will enter the cannabis market in Massachusetts with growing facilities and a retail footprint.

"In the cannabis industry we bring discipline to a range of activities, including efficient costs of production, consistency, and quality," Rungta says. "We have passed all of our targets in (cannabis) testing with third-party labs. We plan to have between 12 and 15 (High Profile) stores in Michigan, and we're approved to enter the cannabis market in Missouri." ■ — *R.J. King*

ANKUR RUNGTA 37



SENIOR DEVELOPMENT MANAGER • THE PLATFORM, DETROIT • EMPLOYEES: 20
REVENUE: NA • COLLEGE: UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA (B), WALSH COLLEGE (M)

ALTHOUGH ANDREW SHERMAN GREW UP BIRMINGHAM AND BLOOMFIELD VILLAGE, HIS mind was elsewhere.

"I was really looking for an urban atmosphere," Sherman says. "When I started to look for colleges, I became extremely focused on cities instead of college towns. That's how I ended up in Philadelphia. I fell in love with the University of Pennsylvania and the idea of being on a college campus within an urban core. Being able to explore that city was everything I dreamed of."

Sherman's affinity for all things urban makes him a perfect fit for his job as senior development manager at The Platform, a private real estate company based in the Fisher Building in Detroit — one of 16 city properties the company is either developing or leasing.

"We like to say we're developers trying to do good in Detroit," Sherman says. "We believe Detroit's turnaround cannot be deemed successful without the neighborhoods rising with the rest of the city."

In recent months, Sherman has overseen the acquisition of 411 Piquette, more commonly known as the Ford Piquette Avenue Plant. Designed by Albert Kahn for Henry Ford, the three-story historic structure was the birthplace of the Model T.

He also supervised the revival of 6001 Cass, another Kahn creation, built in 1920. The building sat empty for decades but is now a vital part of TechTown, with 113,500 square feet of fully leased office space. Sherman managed the \$40 million overhaul from the start, negotiating the contracts and leases for all tenants, including WeWork and the North American headquarters for Tata Technologies.

He's now overseeing the \$16-million redevelopment of Chroma, a vacant nine-story cold-storage building in Milwaukee Junction (near I-75 and I-94). Already, he's lined up what he describes as three "key" tenants. "There's definitely a lot left to do in the city, and (it needs to be done) the right way," he says. ■

— *Tom Murray*

ANDREW SHERMAN 34





CO-OWNER AND CFO • OAKPOINT, BIRMINGHAM • EMPLOYEES: 30
REVENUE: \$5M • COLLEGE: MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

ERIK STRANG HAS LEARNED HOW TO OVERCOME HARDSHIPS. HE LOST BOTH PARENTS before his 13th birthday, and credits an aunt — who took him in and became another mother to him — for the success he enjoys today. “I look at COVID-19,” Strang says. “Many businesses were closed for three months. Things come at you. But if I could recover from the loss of my parents, have a career, and raise a family, I could overcome any curveball that comes my way.”

In the field of dentistry, Strang noticed an opening. Like many specialty fields, dentists can excel at taking care of oral health, but they may struggle with running the back office operations. Strang saw that clearly during a four-year stint as corporate director of development at Great Expressions Dental Centers in Southfield, which operates 300 dental locations.

The Ernst & Young veteran — Strang worked for the multinational professional services firm before and after his time at Great Expressions — saw an opportunity to assist dentists.

Along with CEO Mick Janness, the pair launched Oakpoint in 2019. In essence, Oakpoint invests in individual dental practices — acquiring 60 percent to 70 percent of the business while the respective dentist maintains the rest. As part of the deal, Oakpoint oversees payroll, human resources, IT, regulatory compliance, and marketing.

“We help dentists grow,” Strang says. “The doctor still has a lot of autonomy in their practice, but they still get to pick our brain a lot.”

Typically, Oakpoint will assign at least two points of contact for each dental practice — one for operations and one for finance. Oakpoint meets monthly with each dentist to review profit/loss and other key operational issues.

“I was very involved with EY’s Entrepreneur of the Year process, and I always knew I wanted to be part of growth companies,” Strang says. “When I got recruited by Great Expressions, I learned the dental industry.” ■ — *Dan Calabrese*



MANAGER OF DEMAND MANAGEMENT AND CAPACITY PLANNING
HEALTH ALLIANCE PLAN, TROY • EMPLOYEES: 1,100 • REVENUE: \$2B
COLLEGE: CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

THE HEALTH INSURANCE SECTOR IS HIGHLY REGULATED, LEAVING FEW OPTIONS TO offer new services, handle special requests, or manage unforeseen issues. However, Matthew Tebbe’s focus is a little different. He’s concerned with how people utilize health care, while looking for ways to make that utilization more efficient.

As manager of demand management and capacity planning at Health Alliance Plan, an HMO owned by Henry Ford Health System in Detroit, Tebbe is pursuing innovative and unconventional approaches to get people the best possible health outcomes without forcing everything into traditional models.

“Finance people will hate me, but if we can break even but show improved health outcomes, I’m OK going with that,” Tebbe says.

His boss will not hate him. HAP’s new CEO, Dr. Michael Genord, assumed his position this year. According to Tebbe, Genord is always pushing those in the company to do things differently in ways that benefit its members first.

It’s an idea Tebbe has already pursued successfully. Prior to joining HAP in 2017, he worked at the Detroit Medical Center managing a \$10-million grant from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid. He considers his work with that grant his “pride and joy.”

Specifically, Tebbe addressed the problem of people going to emergency rooms for issues that should have been dealt with via primary care. The solution: Tebbe and his team established primary care centers within ER facilities — two at Detroit Receiving Hospital, and one each at Sinai Grace and Children’s Hospital.

“The goal was to give people the right care at the right time,” Tebbe says. “We had a large interdisciplinary team that truly took care of their needs, including social work, behavioral health, nurses, and pharmacists. It was all-encompassing.”

From there, Tebbe moved to HAP, where he found an environment receptive to driving the same kinds of reforms. ■ — *Dan Calabrese*

MANAGING DIRECTOR • ACCENTURE, DETROIT • EMPLOYEES: 1,300 (DETROIT)
REVENUE: \$43.2B (GLOBAL) • COLLEGE: UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

THE FIRST THING CORIEL TAYLOR DISCOVERED ABOUT THE PROFESSIONAL SERVICES field is that it’s not about what someone already knows. It’s about what that person is willing and able to figure out. Hired by Accenture straight out of the University of Michigan in 2005, Taylor showed up armed with a degree in engineering and a readiness to guide clients in her various areas of business knowledge.

“We were helping a client with an M&A doing data integration work,” Taylor says. “I’d never done that before — merging two different systems of records for customer continuity.”

Exploring new opportunities has been Taylor’s strength since her days at Cass Technical High School in Detroit, which she attended as a lifelong Detroit east-sider. From there she attended the University of Michigan, where in addition to her academic achievements, she helped establish a program for underrepresented students. It was through this program that she landed an internship at Accenture, which led to her full-time job.

When the firm decided in 2017 to establish the Detroit Digital Delivery Center, Taylor jumped at the chance to become its managing director. “It was the perfect storm for me,” Taylor says. Since taking the helm of the new Detroit studio, Taylor has enjoyed the opportunity to hire and work with diverse talent within her hometown, as well as being part of the rebranding of Detroit.

“It’s really part of the process of thinking of (Detroit) as a top-tier talent for technology, helping people think of us differently,” says Taylor, who recently explained to a new hire that Accenture’s business model isn’t that people have to know everything; it’s that they have to be able to figure it out.

“For me, a young black woman from the inner-city who made it to the University of Michigan, it’s important to go back to my high school and talk to students about college and career, and at the University of Michigan to stay connected to that studio that helped me land my job,” Taylor says. ■ — *Dan Calabrese*



CO-FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT • DETROIT LABS, DETROIT • EMPLOYEES: 150
REVENUE: NA • COLLEGE: CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

DAN WARD, CO-FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT OF DETROIT LABS, MAY HAVE EARNED A history degree from Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, but he felt like he earned his master’s and doctoral degrees in business from “the school” of Dan Gilbert.

An admitted party guy while at Central, Ward says his first job out of college was as a computer support technician at Quicken Loans Inc. That led to a place on the company’s Z Team, which assists the company’s executives with technical issues. Through that role, he became Gilbert’s dedicated support person.

“It started off as technical support, helping him with his technology at home and at the office to design work on his presentations,” Ward says. “Then I had an opportunity to go with him to New York City. The trip went well, and I found myself going on 80 percent of his trips, acknowledging that I had an interest in all of the meetings he was attending. Sometimes I was there to help, sometimes to observe.

“I got to learn, see, and witness so many things,” Ward says. “I was very much a sponge when I worked for him.”

While there, Ward pitched his idea for Detroit Labs to one of Gilbert’s early venture companies, where he was introduced to Paul Glomski, Nathan Hughes, and Henry Balanon, who had even bigger plans for Ward’s brainstorm.

That idea became a custom software development company that designs and builds mobile apps and web products for clients including Domino’s, General Motors Co., Bosch, Volkswagen, Jimmy Johns, and others.

“It’s not like I grew up saying I wanted to be an entrepreneur,” says Ward, who spent his high school years focused on sports, particularly hockey. “I honestly didn’t really know what I wanted to do. I knew that I just wanted to work at a company where I had some control, and just wanted to come in to work every single day.” ■ — *Tim Keenan*



ASHLEY M.
WILLIAMS

31



FOUNDER AND CEO • RIZZARR INC., DETROIT • EMPLOYEES: 8 • REVENUE: NA
COLLEGE: UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

AFTER A CAREER IN JOURNALISM THAT TOOK HER TO NEW YORK, CALIFORNIA, SPAIN, and South Africa, where she worked for the likes of NBC, MSNBC, Good Morning America, the BBC, and *USA Today*, Ashley M. Williams returned home to launch Detroit-based RIZZARR, a content creation company that helps national brands reach millennials and Gen Z customers.

Williams' love for content creation began when she was a student involved with Southfield-Lathrup High School's television station and worked on documenting challenges faced by teenagers. After graduation she headed to the University of Southern California to study journalism. As a freshman at USC, she managed to land an internship usually reserved for juniors and seniors. She graduated in 2011 and pursued a career in journalism until she founded RIZZARR in 2014.

Her company has two segments. The first part is a free platform where more than 5,000 young content creators can build portfolios showcasing videos, photos, articles, and podcasts they've developed. RIZZARR then pulls the best of the content creators to do paid work for brands that are looking to understand and reach younger generations.

"We're unique because of how we've been groomed, and we're so used to digital," Williams says of millennials and Gen Zs. It can be difficult for companies to keep up with the quantity and quality of work required to have a solid presence on all of the channels through which young consumers engage.

Quicken Loans, Microsoft, Michaels, the American Heart Association, DTE, LinkedIn, and Glassdoor, among other companies, have used RIZZARR's services.

The company is in the midst of a \$2.5 million seed round that will be used to further develop the company, scale the team, and redevelop the platform. Williams' goal is to change both how brands see themselves as they evolve to meet the needs of younger generations, and how content creators see themselves as they build portfolios they can show to potential employers. ■ — Grace Turner

DIRECTOR OF CONSTRUCTION • BEDROCK, DETROIT • EMPLOYEES: 3,100
REVENUE: NA • COLLEGE: MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

"I WAS A LEGO KID WHO THREW THE INSTRUCTIONS AWAY," SAYS BRETT YUHASZ, director of construction at Bedrock in Detroit, when asked when he first thought about a career path. "I always knew I wanted to go into some type of construction."

He started working in residential building while in high school and studied construction management at Michigan State University, where he was counseled that the commercial sector was the best path to follow.

Yuhasz's first job out of college was a four-year stint as a project engineer at Auch Construction in Pontiac. Then it was on to Bedrock as a project manager, followed by a position as a senior project manager before assuming his current position in January.

As director of construction, he manages the process from the time Bedrock acquires a building or a piece of land to the final outcome. Along the way he works with internal and external teams to guide a project through design, programming, architecture, and construction.

"I went to work for Bedrock in 2015 and it's been like drinking out of a fire hose ever since," he says. "We move very quickly and we're good at what we do but you have to be nimble, thick-skinned, and be able to manage your own projects and destiny. It's been a really exciting, rewarding, and challenging situation."

Since he's been at Bedrock, Yuhasz has left his mark on some 60 projects, including moving the financial firms Ally and UBS into their current buildings along Woodward Avenue in downtown Detroit, relocating a Microsoft Technology Center from Southfield into its new Detroit home, and redeveloping the Shinola Hotel.

"That was my baby for three years," he says of the Shinola Hotel. "It was the most challenging thing I've done and probably will ever do in my career. There was no playbook. We had two historic, landmark structures, we knocked down two buildings in between, and built a (connecting enclosed skywalk) across a public alley. It was complicated and extremely rewarding." ■ — Tim Keenan

31

BRETT
YUHASZ

