

CENTRAL ILLINOIS Business

October | November 2025

news-gazette.com

2025

FORTY UNDER 40

Recognizing young area professionals for their achievements, leadership and community involvement



Man of the Year

**JOSH
RUND**



Woman of the Year

**SHANNON
McFARLAND**

Sponsored by Central Illinois Business Magazine, The News-Gazette and Busey Bank

From the editor's desk



It's one of my favorite times of year — and not just because football season's

in full swing, the baseball playoffs and hockey season just started, and Halloween's right around the corner.

It's Forty Under 40 time. Seeing each new class of difference-makers, who hail from all over the area and a wide variety of industries and businesses, big and small, always brings with it a nice shot of inspiration.

Over the next 40-odd pages, we'll show why the Class of 2025 is deserving of such an honor and hear from each winner, including our Man and Woman of the Year.

As we've done most years, we're celebrating them at a banquet luncheon set for Oct. 30 at the I Hotel and Illinois Conference Center.

If you happen to see them out and about — and you undoubtedly will, given the important roles they play in the community — be sure to congratulate them on a job well done.

They've certainly earned it.

— Niko

Niko Dugan is Managing Editor of The News-Gazette. Reach him by email at ndugan@news-gazette.com or by phone at 217-393-8253.

8 MEET OUR JUDGES

Tonya Hill, Jenette Jurczyk, Jewell White, Tracy Williams and Mitch Wilson selected Central Illinois Business magazine's Forty Under 40 Class of 2025.

10 WOMAN OF THE YEAR



Shannon McFarland has a lot of irons in her fire — Illinois Soul, First String Little League and her own communications firm, Champion Diaries — and she wouldn't have it any other way.

14 MAN OF THE YEAR

Josh Rund's roots are steeped in agriculture, and through his work at United Prairie and Premier Cooperative in Tolono, he's making sure the industry has a bright future.



19 2024 FORTY UNDER 40 WINNER PROFILES

Hear from each of the winners — and their nominators — about the achievements, leadership and community involvement that has garnered them this honor.

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Our highly-sought-after facts and figures for the greater Central Illinois area.

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Business

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Visit news-gazette.com for updates of business news and event information.

TOP LAWYERS

CHAMPAIGN-URBANA AREA

BASED UPON A SURVEY OF THEIR PEERS



These **LEADING LAWYERS** have been recommended by their peers to be among the **TOP LAWYERS** in Illinois.

Delmar K. Banner	Banner Ford LLP	217.353.4900	Champaign	Agriculture; Close/Private Held Bus; RE: Commercial; RE: Finance; Trust/Will/Estate
Barbra A. Webber	Barbra A Webber Attorney at Law	217.531.1147	Champaign	Family
Jeffrey I. Cisco	Cisco Law PC	217.991.0409	Champaign	Crim Def: DUI; Crim Def: Felon/Misdemean; Nursing Home Neg; PI: Gen; Work Comp
James D. Cottrell	James D Cottrell Law Office PC	217.693.4905	Champaign	Agriculture; Close/Private Held; Land Use/Zoning; RE: Commercial; Trust/Will/Estate
Todd A. Bresney	Kanoski Bresney	217.356.1520	Champaign	Personal Injury: General
William J. Harrington	Kanoski Bresney	217.356.1570	Champaign	Personal Injury: General
Robert M. Javoronok Jr.	Kanoski Bresney	217.356.1570	Champaign	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Kathy A. Olivero	Kanoski Bresney	217.356.1570	Champaign	Workers' Compensation
John J. Waldman	Kanoski Bresney	217.356.1570	Champaign	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Richard P. Klaus	Klaus LeFebvre & Wince LLP	217.337.4700	Champaign	Civil Appellate; Commercial Lit; PI Def: General; Prof'l Malpractice Def; RE: Comm
Thomas B. Borton	Livingston Barger Brandt & Schroeder LLP	217.351.7479	Champaign	Commercial Litigation; Medical Malpractice Defense; Prof'l Malpractice Defense
Nicholas M. Schiro	Schiro & Themer	217.443.1721	Danville	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Rowan E. Themer	Schiro & Themer	217.607.0750	Champaign	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
William A. Peithmann	The Peithmann Law Office	217.586.6102	Mahomet	Agriculture; RE: Commercial; RE: Residential; Tax: Individual; Trust/Will/Estate
Denise Knipp Bates	Thomas Mamer LLP	217.351.1500	Champaign	Elder; Real Estate: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate
Justin N. Brunner	Thomas Mamer LLP	217.351.1500	Champaign	Civil Rights/Constitution; Gov/Muni/Lobby/Admin; Medical Mal Def; PI Def: General
Eric S. Chovanec	Thomas Mamer LLP	217.351.1500	Champaign	Close/Private Held; Employment: Management; Labor: Managmnt; Work Comp Def
James D. Green	Thomas Mamer LLP	217.351.1500	Champaign	Insurance/Insurance Coverage/Reinsurance; Personal Injury Defense: General
Richard R. Harden	Thomas Mamer LLP	217.351.1500	Champaign	Medical Malpractice Defense; Personal Injury Defense: General
Nathan T. Kolb	Thomas Mamer LLP	217.351.1500	Champaign	Civil Appellate; Insur/Coverage/Reins; Medical Malpractice Defense; PI Def: General
Kenneth D. Reifsteck	Thomas Mamer LLP	217.351.1500	Champaign	Civil Appellate; Workers' Compensation Defense
Nathaniel M. Schmitz	Thomas Mamer LLP	217.351.1500	Champaign	Close/Private Held Business; RE: Commercial; RE: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate
John M. Sturmanis	Thomas Mamer LLP	217.351.1500	Champaign	Workers' Compensation Defense
Lott H. Thomas	Thomas Mamer LLP	217.351.1500	Champaign	Trust/Will/Estate
John T. Wozniak	Wozniak & Associates	217.367.1647	Urbana	Close/Private Held Business; RE: Commercial; RE: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate

These **EMERGING LAWYERS** have been identified by their peers to be among the **TOP LAWYERS** in Illinois who are age 40 or younger OR who have been admitted to the practice of law for 10 or fewer years.

Gina Couri-Cyphers	Kanoski Bresney	217.356.1570	Champaign	Civil Appellate; Personal Injury: General
Philip J. Pence	Thomas Mamer LLP	217.351.1500	Champaign	Employment: Management

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Congratulations Monica Shellman!

**We are proud to celebrate your recognition as
one of this year's Forty Under 40!**

**Your leadership, vision, and dedication inspire all of us
and continue to make a lasting impact on our community.**

**With Pride,
Your Don Moyer Boys & Girls Club Family**

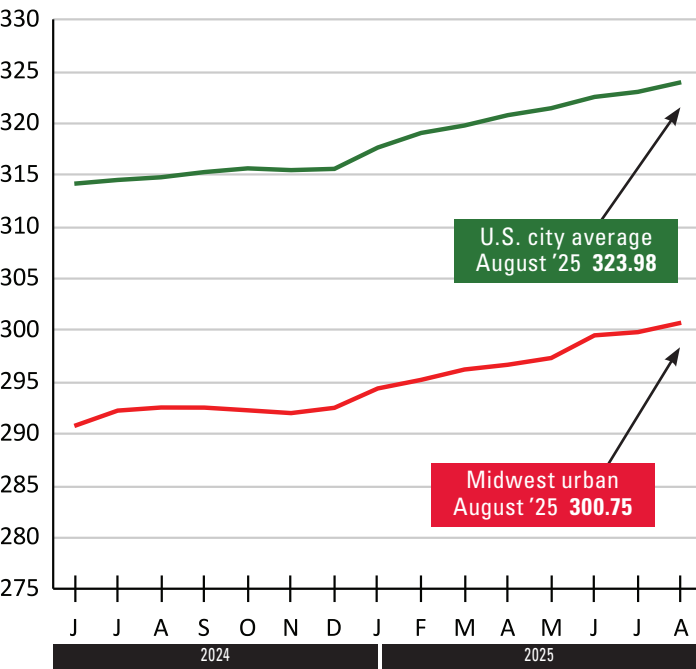


**DON MOYER
BOYS & GIRLS CLUB**

INDICATORS

Consumer price index

The CPI measures average price changes of goods and services over time, with a reference base of 100 in 1982-84. To put that into context, a current CPI of 270.75 means a marketbasket of goods and services that cost \$100 in 1982-84 now costs \$270.75.



Source: U.S. Department of Labor

Hotel/motel statistics

Total amount of revenue generated in Champaign and Urbana by hotels and motels for room rentals only.

TOTAL REVENUE		
August '25	July '25	Change
\$694,804.65	\$500,810.01	▲ 38.74%
YEAR-TO-DATE TOTALS		
2025	2024	Change
\$3,841,963.11	\$3,428,965.42	▲ 12.04%

Source: Cities of Champaign and Urbana

Willard Airport passenger totals

Monthly totals	August '25	August '24	Change
Enplanements	6,959	7,859	▼ -11.45%
YTD totals	August '25	August '24	Change
Enplanements	55,717	54,394	▲ 2.43%
Annual totals	2024	2023	Change
Enplanements	63,128	70,355	▼ -10.3%

Crop progress (latest not available due to shutdown)

Grain	Aug. 10, 2025	2024	Change		
Illinois corn silking	98%	96%	▲ 2%		
Illinois corn dough	68%	67%	▲ 1%		
Illinois corn dented	19%	16%	▲ 3%		
Illinois soybeans blooming	92%	94%	▼ 2%		
Illinois soybeans setting pods	76%	83%	▼ 7%		
Winter wheat harvested	100%	100%	0%		
	VP	Poor	Fair	Good	Xlt
Corn condition	5%	6%	26%	47%	16%
Soybean condition	5%	9%	29%	43%	14%
Pasture/range condition	5%	11%	33%	42%	9%

Source: USDA

Prices at the pump

Average price per gallon of regular unleaded gas as of Oct. 9, 2025.

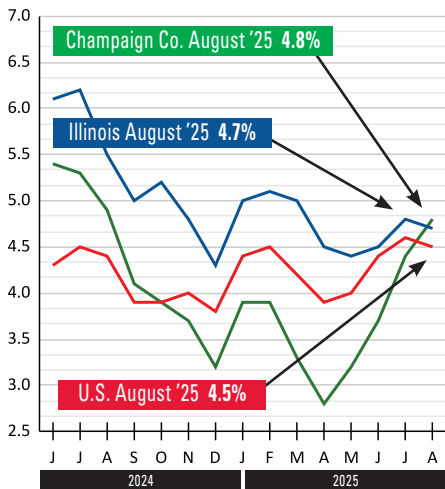
Area	October '25	October '24
Bloomington-Normal	\$3.12	\$3.26
Champaign-Urbana	\$3.16	\$3.24
Chicago	\$3.71	\$3.86
Danville	\$3.14	\$3.30
Decatur	\$3.15	\$3.27
Illinois	\$3.27	\$3.47
U.S.	\$3.11	\$3.20

Source: AAA

Unemployment rates for Central Illinois counties, state and nation

County	Labor Force	Jobless	August '25 (%)	July '25 (%)	August '24 (%)	Change Month (%)	Change Year (%)
Champaign	103,303	4,925	4.8	4.4	4.9	▲ 0.4	▼ -0.1
Coles	22,384	995	4.4	4.4	4.4	0.0	0.0
Douglas	9,877	383	3.9	3.8	3.9	▲ 0.1	0.0
Edgar	7,842	341	4.3	4.2	4.5	▲ 0.1	▼ -0.2
Ford	6,267	293	4.7	4.5	4.5	▲ 0.2	▲ 0.2
Iroquois	11,819	565	4.8	4.4	4.6	▲ 0.4	▲ 0.2
Macon	44,200	2,722	6.2	5.9	5.9	▲ 0.3	▲ 0.3
McLean	93,311	3,930	4.2	4.1	4.3	▲ 0.1	▼ -0.1
Moultrie	7,012	295	4.2	4.1	3.8	▲ 0.1	▲ 0.4
Piatt	8,617	347	4.0	3.7	3.7	▲ 0.3	▲ 0.3
Vermilion	30,036	1,857	6.2	5.9	6.5	▲ 0.3	▼ -0.3
Region	344,668	16,653	4.7	4.5	4.6	▲ 0.2	▲ 0.1
State	6,552,743	306,957	4.7	4.8	5.3	▼ -0.1	▼ -0.6
U.S.	171,035,000	7,747,000	4.5	4.6	4.4	▼ -0.1	▲ 0.1

Source: Illinois Department of Employment Security, U.S. Department of Labor. Figures not seasonally adjusted.

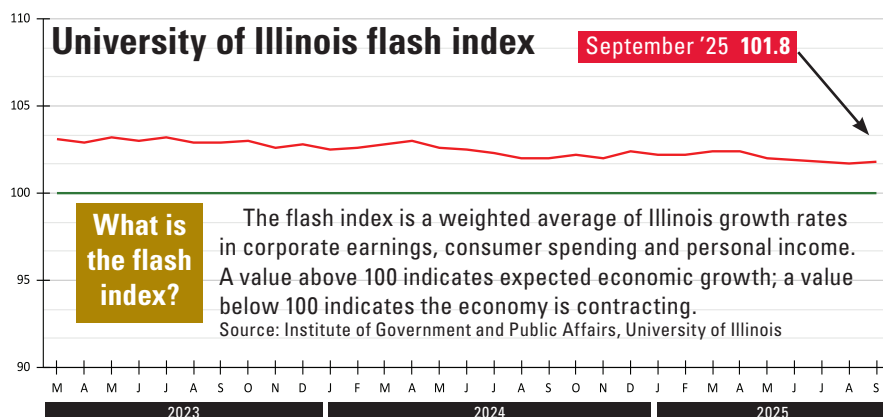


Home sales

Total units sold, including condominiums, by most-recent quarter.

County							Median sales price		
	3Q 2025	3Q 2024	Pct. Change	YTD 2025	YTD 2024	Pct. Change	3Q 2025	3Q 2024	Pct. Change
Champaign	658	654	▲ 0.6%	1,643	1,658	▼ -0.9%	\$249,950	\$240,000	▲ 4.1%
Coles	145	139	▲ 4.3%	349	383	▼ -8.9%	\$142,900	\$133,000	▲ 7.4%
Douglas	41	41	0.0%	116	100	▲ 16.0%	\$165,000	\$154,000	▲ 7.1%
Edgar	30	43	▼ -30.2%	94	114	▼ -17.5%	\$130,000	\$103,000	▲ 26.2%
Ford	42	52	▼ -19.2%	107	140	▼ -23.6%	\$154,250	\$132,750	▲ 16.2%
Iroquois	89	84	▲ 6.0%	199	212	▼ -6.1%	\$160,000	\$140,000	▲ 14.3%
Macon	421	373	▲ 12.9%	1,072	1,003	▲ 6.9%	\$147,000	\$140,000	▲ 5.0%
McLean	571	634	▼ -9.9%	1,495	1,535	▼ -2.6%	\$252,500	\$242,600	▲ 4.1%
Moultrie	27	22	▲ 22.7%	70	57	▲ 22.8%	\$144,000	\$147,450	▼ -2.3%
Piatt	59	58	▲ 1.7%	155	160	▼ -3.1%	\$229,000	\$233,450	▼ -1.9%
Vermilion	174	179	▼ -2.8%	471	517	▼ -8.9%	\$127,300	\$115,000	▲ 10.7%
Illinois	37,504	37,183	▲ 0.9%	101,057	99,636	▲ 1.4%	\$312,000	\$299,500	▲ 4.2%

Source: Illinois Association of Realtors



Primary Mortgage Market Survey

Freddie Mac surveys lenders each week on the rates, fees and points for the most popular mortgage products. The following are the average rates for the week of Oct. 9, 2025, for the U.S. and for the North Central region, which includes Illinois, and the average rates for the U.S. one year ago. The Primary Mortgage Market Survey no longer publishes fees/points or adjustable rates, as of Nov. 17, 2022.

Mortgage type	U.S. Oct. '25	U.S. Oct. '24
30-year fixed	6.30%	6.32%
15-year fixed	5.53%	5.41%

Source: Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corp.

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Congratulations to Illinois Physics Professor Barry Bradlyn on being named one of The News-Gazette's Forty Under 40 for 2025!

Tomorrow's great inventions will be built on the kind of fundamental research you are doing today. Your work in theoretical condensed matter physics — from pioneering tools that predict topological materials to illuminating emergent quantum phenomena in topological phases of matter — is pushing the boundaries of what we know.

Your research achievements have already earned you national recognition, including a Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers, an Air Force Young Investigator Award, a Sloan Research Fellowship, and the McMillan Award.

This 40 Under 40 honor celebrates your brilliance, your dedication, and the promise of even greater discoveries ahead. Whether you're publishing groundbreaking research or mentoring the next generation of scientists, you're making a real impact — here in Urbana and around the world.

Here's to many more breakthroughs and a long, distinguished career!

— Your colleagues in the Department of Physics in The Grainger College of Engineering
at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign



**The Grainger College
of Engineering**

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

MEET THE JUDGES

FORTY
UNDER
40
2025

Central Illinois Business magazine
thanks its panel for its hard work in
selecting the Forty Under 40 Class of 2025



TONYA HILL

Executive Director, Danville Area Community College Foundation

Hill has served as executive director for seven years, managing \$25 million in assets and over 900 scholarships, cultivating new donors and raising funds for scholarships, capital improvement and technology. For the past five years, the foundation has awarded a scholarship to every student that applied and attended DACC. This year, it awarded over 931 scholarships valued at over \$1.1 million.

Hill earned an associate degree from DACC in 1993, followed by a bachelor's in business management from Eastern Illinois University. She also served for three years as a DACC trustee and was a volunteer for the DACC Foundation scholarship selection committee for 10 years prior to becoming director.

Hill has served on multiple boards throughout her career, which fueled her passion for giving back to the community and the nonprofit world. She currently serves on the boards of Danville Rotary, WorkSource Enterprises and Vermilion Advantage.

JENETTE JURCZYK

National Director, The She Said Project

Under Jurczyk's vision, "That's What She Said" has expanded beyond its flagship community of Champaign-Urbana into more than a dozen cities.

Jurczyk is also the producer and co-host of "The She Said Project" podcast and runs the youth-empowerment program "That's What Teens Say."

She has a bachelor's in fine arts and MBA from the University of Illinois and is a recognized motivational speaker and trainer through her consulting company, Key Light Consulting.

In 2024, Jurczyk was recognized as Nexstar Media Group's "Remarkable Woman" and shared her story onstage in TEDx Normal.

Jurczyk also serves as president of The Family Room, the nonprofit she co-founded to provide resources and comfort to foster children and families in her community.

Jurczyk resides in Champaign with her rocket-scientist husband and two daughters.



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JEWELL WHITE II

Assistant Dean of Access and Engagement, UI Gies College of Business

White's responsibilities include building community and assisting under-represented and underserved students to excel in and outside the classroom.

In 1999, he joined the University of Illinois as assistant to the director in the Office of Minority Student Affairs, where he assisted under-represented minority students in making the transition from high school by teaching skills such as time management, organization and career development.

In September 2000, he joined the business school as assistant director of business career services, where his main responsibility was coordinating the internship program. In 2004, White was named assistant dean for admission and recruitment.

White earned a bachelor's degree in finance from the UI and a master's in guidance and counseling from North Carolina Central University. He and wife Tiffany have two children, Julian (24) and Jordan (21), both of whom attend the UI.

TRACY WILLIAMS

Associate Director of Coaching, PelotonU

Williams was born and raised in Urbana, and as one of six children, grew up with a strong sense of family and community that has and will continue to shape her life.

She is a devoted wife to DeShawn Williams, the first African American mayor of Urbana, and a proud mother to Austin and Skylar.

Her upbringing instilled a deep passion for caring for and understanding what it takes to create a strong family foundation, which led her to earn a bachelor's degree in family consumer sciences with a concentration in family development from Eastern Illinois University.

With more than 15 years of experience in education, she is especially dedicated to after-school care and helping children and families build strong, lasting bonds. Beyond her career, she serves as a mentor, a member of the CU One-to-One Mentoring Scholarship Board and an active community member.



MITCH WILSON

Vice President of Mortgage Lending, Bank of Springfield

Wilson was born and raised in Champaign County and after attending Parkland College, went on to earn his bachelor's degree from Eastern Illinois University.

Wilson's career began in banking before he found success in the automotive industry. In 2018, his passion for helping people achieve their financial goals brought him back to banking and residential mortgage lending.

Wilson serves on the board of directors for Crisis Nursery and is an active affiliate member of the Champaign County Association of Realtors, where he was honored as the 2025 Affiliate of the Year. He was also recognized as a member of the Forty Under 40 Class of 2019.

Wilson enjoys spending time with his wife, Sarah, and their two children, Henry and June.



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WOMAN OF THE YEAR

**SHANNON
McFARLAND**

38

Owner,
Champion Diaries Management

Shannon McFarland poses in front of the Hip Hop Xpress Double Dutch Boom Bus Innovation Lab & Data Center, part of her work with Street College. Over her right shoulder is a drawing of its builder and her uncle, the late Will Patterson.

Story Luke Taylor ✎ Photos Robin Scholz

CHAMPAIGN — unless you do.”

With Shannon McFarland’s skill set, she could be working anywhere, but she chooses home. She chooses Champaign-Urbana ... at least for now.

“I’ve always known that I never had to go too far, like whatever is for me is for me,” McFarland says. “So I just keep walking. You know, nothing works

One day, McFarland says, she’ll have multiple houses, multiple athletic facilities and multiple cities where she can make an impact.

“I will need to be in a lot of places with how I envision my life,” she said. “This will always be home to a certain extent, but the same thing that I’m doing here, I want to do that in Miami. I want to do that on the West Coast.”

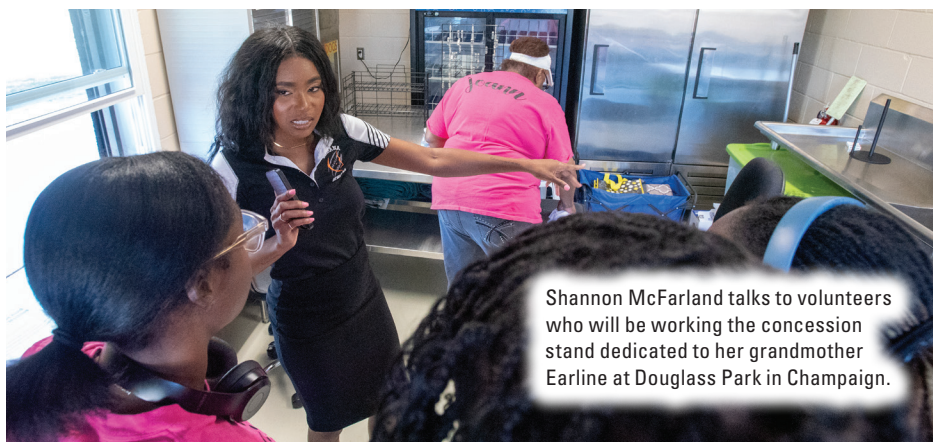
What she's "doing here" is already a broad category.

McFarland is a publicist for Illinois Soul, a faculty member at Street College, a board member at First String Little League and the founder of Champion Diaries, her own communications agency.

"I don't really have a normal job. I moved to where I need to be, which is why I'm able to be contracted and not really work for one person," McFarland says. "All of these are like full-time responsibilities. I wouldn't be able to say yes, but because I have a team to support me, I'm just able to be flexible and prepare and plan and manage."

She earned her bachelor's degree from Clark Atlanta University and her master's from Florida International University in Miami — so she's already had a chance to try living in different areas around the country.

On top of academics, McFarland



Shannon McFarland talks to volunteers who will be working the concession stand dedicated to her grandmother Earline at Douglass Park in Champaign.

was an athlete, playing volleyball at Clark Atlanta.

Sports have been a major part of her life from the start, thanks in part to First String, where she's been playing since she was around 8 and volunteering since only a year or two later.

Her father, Peter McFarland, founded First String in the early 1990s to provide an activity for young kids in the area that would offer mentorship, advocacy and support and bring the

community together.

Today, kids play baseball at Douglass Park at a field that straddles the Champaign-Urbana line. Shannon often volunteers at the nearby concession stand named after her grandmother.

"We were going after the marginalized students in the first place, but the fact that we don't have to deny whether they're in Champaign-Urbana is kind of the ticket for us to reach whoever that we need," she says.

Shannon,

**We are so proud of you
for being selected as the
2025 Forty Under 40
Woman of the Year!**

**May your words and beauty
light every room, basketball
court, and baseball
diamond you walk into.**

**Your Family,
First String Board Members**



She might be a member of the First String board today, but even back when she was a player, people in Shannon's life saw potential in her.

Joe Stovall, a family friend for more than 50 years who grew up down the block and has known Shannon her whole life, says he's always thought "There's no ceiling for Shannon McFarland."

"Uncle Joe" says he's seen Shannon as a kind of visionary, someone who could do anything she put her mind to.

"She's not an 'A to B' type person," he says. "She's very abstract, and she has a forward vision that very few people have, so she can see things that us commoners — I'll say it that way — just can't comprehend initially. But then when it comes to fruition, then you're like, 'Oh, that's what she was talking about.' She's always just been somebody who's super creative and always is looking for the next big thing."

While sports were an important part

of her life when she was young and still are, Shannon says she always dreamed of doing something in media, inspired by her father's career.

Peter was an engineer at WCIA for 43 years, so Shannon grew up watching people work in the field both in front of and behind the camera.

She had her first experiences in front of one at age 7, acting in a TV commercial promoting safe habits to other kids.

"It was riding bikes with helmets — which I never did — wearing knee pads — which I never did before the commercial," Shannon says.

She also modeled for Human Kinetics, posing for photos to illustrate various books.

"When I got to college, this book was there. The football players were hunting me down one day, saying, 'Oh, we saw you in our book,'" Shannon says. "It was so embarrassing. I was in high school, and I had a cup that they use and like

gauze around my head for a safeguard for my eye. It was terrible."

That interest in media only grew, and she would start dressing up as Oprah Winfrey for career days or similar school events.

"But I didn't want to be Oprah," she says. "I didn't want to be on television, but I just didn't know any other Black woman in media as a point of reference."

As she got older, Shannon started to get a concept of roles she could take in media that didn't require being on camera, though she does still do some modeling.

As a professor at Clark Atlanta explained different tracks for mass-media students, she realized that she needed to go into public relations.

Even though her dad worked at the TV station, Shannon had only had a vague idea of how people ended up on television; the idea that she could be the one helping to make that happen was intriguing.

Congratulations Shannon McFarland!

TOP 5 REASONS WHY ILLINOIS SOUL ROCKS WITH SHANNON:

1. She's Urbana Home Grown
2. She's Community Driven
3. She's an Influencer
4. She's a Creative Force
5. She's our *Soul Mate!!!*



Shannon,
Congratulations to the
2025 Forty Under 40
Woman of the Year!

With Love,
Street College Team



"I do enjoy sharing the story, making sure that it is publicized," she says. "I think what matters to me more is 'What's the story that we need to share?' — more than my face. I feel like I always look the same from day to day. I mean, I might glam up a little bit, but people don't need to see me all the time if there's another way to connect. That's it for me; it's about connection."

That desire to help share stories would lead her to create *Champion Diaries*, her own communications agency where she works as a publicist with a special focus on sports, education, venture capital and general public-relations coaching.

She calls it her "baby."

Stovall recalls Shannon presenting *Champion Diaries* about a decade ago to a potential partner that had been excited about the prospect of working together.

He was present for, essentially, a job interview in which she was presenting her company. Shannon openly admitted she wasn't sure if she would be around after the next three or four years.

Stovall thought she had sabotaged herself, but years later, he laughs about it.

"That was super refreshing, but super hilarious at the same time, that she can sit there with the comfort of 'I need a job, but I really don't need a job, because if I don't get this, I'll just do something else,'" Stovall says. "And I think that's how she's always been. Regardless of what it is, she always finds something else to do."

That seems to be why something like running *Champion Diaries* alongside her various other positions is so ideal for Shannon.

She said that having a team to work with to support her means that she can be flexible and manage all of her responsibilities and passions.

"I don't really have a normal job," Shannon says. "I move to where I need to be."

Still, her ability to manage all of it is a mystery even to some of her



From the nominator

"Shannon exemplifies the true spirit of leadership, service and strength. Her unwavering commitment to youth development through sports and cultural empowerment makes her a standout figure for Woman of the Year. She has also become a creative and strategic force with *Illinois Soul*, while staying deeply rooted in the needs and values of the communities that she serves." — **Jill Clements**, *station manager, Illinois Soul*

closest friends.

"She does a lot of things. I'm still trying to figure it out," said Krysten Gardner, who met Shannon through a mutual friend and grew close over the years.

Today, Gardner says she hopes her own kids will participate in some of the youth programs Shannon has been involved with.

"You very rarely see her without a smile on her face," Gardner says. "If you need a good time on the friend side, she's good to go and just hang out with. If you need advice on something that's practical, more just everyday life, she's great at that. She's just good people to know."

"If there's something that you ask her and she can't help you, she knows somebody that can get you that information, and she'll make sure she'll connect you with them too," she adds. "She's just very well connected, very eloquent and very passionate about everything that she does."

Alongside her work on the First String board and coaching young athletes almost year-round, Shannon

works with young people by managing programming at Street College.

She and the others at Street College are following in the footsteps of the late Will Patterson to engage local kids, including students at Champaign and Urbana schools and at the Champaign County Juvenile Detention Center.

The idea, Shannon says, is to get out in the streets and reach those young people where they are.

Illinois Soul may not be aimed at youth, but it's another way of reaching out to people where they are, pushing to engage the Black community with a radio station that's one of a kind — and it's one more way Shannon gets to help tell stories.

That's something she didn't see in Champaign-Urbana growing up, she says, and she's proud to be a storyteller in her community — and, perhaps one day, all over the world.

"I brought that here," she says. "I knew that I was doing something different, and I was going to be in a new lane that I could create." 



MAN OF THE YEAR

JOSH RUND | 39

Employee Relations and Compliance Manager,
United Prairie

Employee Relations Manager,
Premier Cooperative

Josh Rund watches from the dugout as he coaches son Harrison's fall-ball game at West Side Park in Tolono.

Story Jana Wiersema ☞ Photos Robin Scholz

TOLONO —

Josh Rund comes by his love of agriculture honestly. His father is a farmer, as were both of his grandfathers.

“It’s just part of what’s in my DNA, to be honest with you,” he said. “I can’t think of doing anything else.”

During high school, Rund helped haul grain and work the family farm, while also chipping in at his friends’ family farms.

The 2004 Unity grad has lived in Tolono for almost his whole life, except for a five-year stint teaching agriculture at Tri-Valley High School in Downs after college.

He’s still rooted in agriculture today as the employee services and compliance manager at local ag retailer United Prairie, where he handles safety and human-resources matters such as recruitment and retention. He’s also the head of marketing and works with Premier Cooperative as well.

“Josh has done a lot for both companies to really get our name out to the next generation of employees at the high school level, at the college level as well,” said Curt Miller, CEO of United Prairie. “He does a lot with the FFA, 4-H groups — and not just about United Prairie and Premier, it’s really advocating for all ag businesses.”

Rund's passion for promoting agriculture and ability to engage with young people were among the reasons cited by those who nominated him for Central Illinois Business Magazine's Forty Under 40 Class of 2025.

He has been chosen as 2025 Man of the Year — and just in time, too, since he turns 40 in December.

"Josh's true passion is helping young people discover their career goals," Premier Cooperative CEO Tim Hughes wrote in his nomination. "He is a tremendous advocate for agriculture and connects extremely well with showing (youth) the many options for a rewarding career in ag."

Rund attended Parkland College for two years before transferring to the University of Illinois, where he earned a degree in agricultural education.

He's been with United Prairie for a little over 11 years and is in his third year at Premier Cooperative, where he

works in recruitment, retention and employee relations.

Rund explained that Premier Cooperative is one of United Prairie's owners.

"Premier is the cooperative, the grain and energy and grain-marketing side of our business, and United Prairie is the agronomy, the research, the custom-application side of that business," he said. "And so I'm able to double-dip with both, because we're both very closely related."

"Josh has a great talent for connecting with high school- and college-age students and introducing them to the opportunities in agriculture," said Hughes, who was CEO of United Prairie when Rund was hired. "I think it started with his experience as a high school ag teacher, and he has a real passion for helping young people discover a career path in ag."

In addition to Hughes, Rund was also nominated by someone else he's known for a while: his wife.

"He just loves what he does for his job," Ellen Rund said. "He loves the ag community. He loves our kids. He loves us. And so it's definitely something that he pursues passionately, and being able to receive an award like this I know means a lot to him, and it just kind of solidifies that he's on the right track. He's doing what he needs to be doing."

The couple married in 2015 and has two kids: Harrison, 8, and Charlotte, 6.

Josh was still a teacher at Tri-Valley, where he also served as an assistant football coach, when he and Ellen first began seeing each other.

"He was very involved, very caring about his students and about how they would succeed in the FFA and all that kind of stuff," she said. "And so because he was the FFA adviser, he spent more time with the kids kind of outside of school. And so, by default, kids are nosy, and so they would pry about what he had going on."



Consequently, when Ellen went to a football game, she noticed that all of the kids — and some adults — were on the lookout for her.

“They knew who he was, and they wanted him to find someone and to be happy,” she said. “And so you could tell that this whole kind of community was invested in him as a person.”

Josh recalls being “extremely nervous” when he made the switch from teaching to working at United Prairie, as he wondered if he’d still be able to make an impact on the lives of others in his new career.

A little over a decade later, he feels that he’s been able to do this by promoting ag and ag retail jobs to young adults.

“Not a lot of folks were talking about ag retail or ag retailers as a good place or a place that they wanted to come and work,” he said. “And I’m hoping I’ve changed that in the last 11 years, working very closely with local FFA groups, the Illinois state FFA association and them allowing me to come into classrooms and talk to students about agriculture, about a career in ag at United Prairie or Premier Cooperative. I really enjoy that.”

Hughes said Josh has been responsible for recruiting “several quality employees” and has also been “one of the drivers in a very successful internship program.”

When asked what the key to recruiting is, Josh replied, “I think you have to be passionate about what you do and passionate about the place that you are, that you’re recruiting for. ... I’m an all-in type of person.”

Hughes said Josh always has “a great attitude” and is “willing to do whatever is needed to get the job done.”

His work is also marked by the care he has for all employees, as well as the way he navigates difficulties and disagreements, Miller said.

“He just can bring a positive light no matter what the circumstance is,” he said.



Josh Rund walks with son Harrison to the outfield during his fall-ball game at West Side Park in Tolono. Josh has coached his son since his days in T-ball.

From the nominator

“Whether he’s coordinating large-scale employee-appreciation events or showing up to judge an FFA interview contest, Josh brings the same passion, humility and excellence to everything he does.” — **Ellen Rund**, wife

Additionally, Miller said Josh brings a sense of humor to his work.

“He definitely brings a smile and brightens everybody’s day,” he said. “And he’s always the one that’s going to play a joke on somebody else in the office, even if it’s me.”

Josh typically organizes employee events for United Prairie, including a yearly trip to St. Louis, where the company takes its employees and their families to a Cardinals game and holds a gathering that includes years-of-service awards.

Ellen noted in her nomination that employee-appreciation events for both United Prairie and Premier Cooperative are “large-scale, with hundreds of people in attendance.”

“Whether it be a weekend in St. Louis for a Cardinal game or an Illini tailgate and football game, he takes the lead and hosts outstanding

events each year,” she said.

Outside of work, Josh is very involved in his community and said that he and Ellen both learned this from their parents, who were “very involved in what we did at school.”

“My wife and I have coached T-ball with the kids,” he said. “... Now I’ve coached my son, helped coach him in Coach Pitch, and now this is our first fall with Kid Pitch, with baseball. So helping the team out, helping the coach and having United Prairie and Premier sponsor teams that my kids are on, trying to stay involved and learn that way, because I am not a baseball player and so I sometimes learn just as much as the kids do.”

Ellen said that juggling everything can be “stressful” and recalled that she and Josh spoke about this on their way to St. Louis for the annual employee-appreciation trip.



“He just knows how important it is to be active and to be part of a community that you’re proud of or that you want to be proud of,” she said. “... It’s up to you to be able to make it the way you want to make it. And so he’s very good at scheduling. He has a calendar he keeps up with much better than I do, and he just makes it work.”

Josh’s community involvement also includes:

- Serving on the board of the Champaign County Farm Bureau Foundation as scholarship chair and secretary.
- Being a board member at the Illinois Agribusiness Network.
- Being a member of the Unity FFA Booster group, where he previously served as president.
- Volunteering his time to judge competitions for several FFA groups across central Illinois.
- Serving on Parkland College’s agricultural advisory board.

→ Being involved with the Unity West Elementary PTO, of which Ellen is president.

→ Volunteering at St. Thomas Catholic Church in Philo, where he is a member.

“I want to be as involved and in the know as I can be,” Josh said.

Additionally, he still helps out on his father’s farm when he’s able, though it can be difficult because harvest time is busy for both the farm and Josh’s employers.

Still, he said that his bosses are good about giving him time to help out his father, who is on the board at Premier Cooperative and is a customer of both companies.

“Josh is good about balancing his family life and his work life,” Miller said.

The key to making it work, Josh said, is having a “supportive family.”

For instance, there was one night where he had a farm bureau event to attend and Ellen had a PTO meeting to run, so Josh’s sister-in-law took their daughter to soccer practice.

Ellen described her husband as dependable, passionate, uncompromising when it comes to his values and “a fierce supporter of his family.”

“He truly is just a fantastic partner,” Ellen said. “He’s caring. He’s considerate. He’s just an all-around great person, and I’m super lucky.”

She added that Josh is very deserving of this honor.

However, Josh said that he wouldn’t be who he is without his family — or his job.

“My home life is my home, and work is work, but there is a very big part of who I am that’s ingrained in both of those things,” he said. “And I enjoy that. I like that it’s like that. ... I’m not allowed to be Man of the Year, I’m not allowed to participate in everything that we do if my wife isn’t there, if my family isn’t there, if United Prairie and Premier Cooperative don’t allow me to do and operate, do things that we do as a company and allow us to be involved in the community. You know, I’m just another guy.” 

Congratulations



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Past District Governor Janet Ellis-Nelson • Past District Governor Mike Martin
District Governor-Elect Deb West • District Governor-Nominee Bill Malone

SEAN ATER | 37

Sergeant, Champaign Police Department

Community involvement: I am the program manager for the Safety Assessment Management and Mitigation team, I provide active-threat training and ongoing support to city council members, and I teach at Parkland College to provide active-threat training all over the state, including numerous businesses and organizations within Champaign, through grant-funded assistance to help small businesses receive proper and quality training.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Becoming certified as a master trainer for the Department of Homeland Security in threat evaluation and reporting, then using that education to create the first-ever multi-jurisdictional threat-assessment team in Illinois to operate on a cross-boundary level.

I attribute my success to ... the work ethic instilled in me by my family.

Best advice given or received? Always push forward, no matter the obstacles or the challenges; always push toward your goals.

The most important lesson I've learned in my professional career is ... Learn to be uncomfortable. Taking on challenges can seem scary and hopeless at times, but if you trust in your ability, you can make it through any challenge a career will throw at you.

What's your one unbreakable rule? Never give up. When things are challenging and sometimes seem impossible, that is the time to push on; that is how you grow as an individual.

From the nominator: "Sean has demonstrated leadership, innovation and a commitment to community safety and development. His proactive approach to threat assessment, emergency-response planning and active-threat training showcases his dedication to mitigating risks and ensuring the well-being of both organizations and communities." —

Timothy Tyler, Champaign police chief



Winners' portraits by **Robin Scholz**

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FOR UNDER 40 2025



Congratulations, David Palmer, Chief Deputy Treasurer, Champaign County, on being named a 2025 Forty Under 40 honoree! Your leadership, innovation, and dedication to serving Champaign County make a difference every day. We're proud to have you on our team and to celebrate this well-deserved recognition!

KATIE BICKERS | 38

Community Outreach and Wellness Coordinator, **Urbana Park District**



Community involvement: I try to be involved in anything I can to make positive change based on my strengths and knowledge I can bring to the table. I have three kids who are all at different schools, so I try my best to be involved in school events and committees, along with developing community programs and attending (and making the most of) outreach opportunities.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Working my way into my current position without a college degree. It's a good reminder that determination, a strong work ethic and developing and applying your strengths in meaningful ways can be just as impactful as a formal education.

I attribute my success to ... There are many layers to the people and experiences that contributed to my success. One of the most important factors was learning how to turn my ADHD diagnosis into a strength, and ultimately using it as a tool to my advantage. Also, the support of my family, co-workers and community we serve have been extremely impactful to the passion I put into everything I do.

Best decision you've ever made? Staying in the community I grew up in. I wanted to be part of making things better and help make it a place people want to stay and grow their roots in.

What's your one unbreakable rule? Something that has been instilled in me by my mom. She not only told me but also showed me how to treat everyone I meet with kindness and respect, no matter who they are or what role they play.

To relax, I ... This is important. You can't truly be there for others if you don't take care of yourself. I have a lot of ways to unwind, but my go-to is putting on Billie Holiday and spending time in the garden. I also find cleaning surprisingly therapeutic to help me reset and recharge.

From the nominator: "Katie has a strong commitment to working with youth in the community, especially with those who have experienced trauma. She is constantly reaching out to teens to listen to their feelings and ideas, and she uses the information that she acquires to provide more appropriate programs to meet their needs." — **Sheri Langendorf**, *former teacher*

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BARRY BRADLYN | 38

Associate Professor of Physics, University of Illinois

Community involvement: Outside of my role as an educator (where I get to teach some incredible students from across the state and country), I've volunteered writing postcards encouraging people to vote in state and local elections, and shared my story and perspective on local panels in support of reproductive rights.

I attribute my success to ... stubborn curiosity, and the support of my family and mentors.

Something you may not know about me is ... I'm a big fan of Broadway musicals.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years? Ideally, here in Champaign-Urbana, in the classroom teaching physics to the next generation of students.

The most important lesson I've learned in my professional career is ... to never accept something as true based only on the authority of the speaker. I find that we often learn the most by questioning received wisdom and finding the places where assumptions were made that might not always be true. Everybody, no matter how smart, makes mistakes, and that's OK!

To relax, I ... read, play video games and spend time with my wife and our dog.

From the nominator: "Barry represents the best of Champaign-Urbana's local 'industry' — higher education. He is a passionate, highly effective teacher, a world-class researcher who addresses critical, fundamental problems in science and engineering that have immediate, real-world applications, a trusted mentor, and a kind and supportive friend. He makes Champaign-Urbana such an exceptional, vibrant, caring community. We are lucky to have him!" — **Celia Elliott**, *co-worker*



Congratulations to Mindy Hewkin,
Darcy Sandefur, and Greg Ray
on being selected to the
Forty Under 40 Class of 2025!

FORTY UNDER
40 2025



BRITT CAIN | 34

Community Health Worker Supervisor, **Carle at the Riverfront, Danville**



Community involvement: Our team provides one-to-one support and resources for individuals in the community facing care gaps and barriers. Our aim is to help our clients increase their health literacy and to better improve their health outcomes. I have also been a St. Jude runner for the past eight years. If you go to any Illini games, stop by our St. Jude stand, say hi and help us support St. Jude Children's Hospital by buying a beverage from us!

Proudest professional accomplishment: Our team being awarded the "CHW Employer of the Year" award by Illinois Public Health Association this year. It's my proudest accomplishment because our team earned and won this award collectively. I'm very honored and proud to be working with the amazing team I get to work with.

I attribute my success to ... hard work and learning from my mistakes. It's important to take calculated risks and to learn from the opportunities taken.

Best advice given or received? To be an effective leader, you need to lead by example. Be the change you want to see in your community. If you don't step up to the plate, how are you going to expect others to step up?

What's your one unbreakable rule? Treat everyone with dignity and respect.

To relax, I ... run. I am a nature enthusiast and love to be outdoors, running the local trails or throughout Danville. I love my running community and the friends I have made along the way.

From the nominator: "Brittany is a devoted resident of Vermilion County who desires to help improve the lives of those that live here. She has an extremely kind spirit and truly cares for others. She is always seeking ways to improve the community and serve those who are in need." — **Gregory Scott**, *manager*

ANDREAS COLEMAN | 37

Production Supervisor, **Gatorade**

Community involvement: I am the president of the Danville Seahawks youth football and cheerleading program. I am also the president of Hustle Hoops youth basketball and an assistant men's basketball coach at Danville Area Community College. I also help out with the DREAM program in various different roles.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Starting the Danville Seahawks football and cheerleading and Hustle Hoops programs in Danville, to give back to local youth.

I attribute my success to ... my parents. They have been my biggest supporters and have always corrected me when I did things the wrong way. Over the years, they have taught me what to look out for in different situations because everyone doesn't want you to be successful. They also taught me how to keep my head up high and to keep rolling when things don't go my way. My parents for sure helped mold me into the man that I am today.

Best advice given or received? Never settle and don't give up! Every "no" gets you closer to that "yes"!

Best decision you've ever made? Betting on myself! Everyone has dreams and goals, but no one will believe in you if you don't believe in yourself!

From the nominator: "Andreas is incredibly humble, hard-working and selfless. He sacrifices countless hours of his personal time to create safe spaces, build meaningful programs and open doors of opportunity for young people. He believes in his community, even when others might not see its full potential, and he nurtures that same belief in every young person he meets." — **Lindsey Prunkard**, *friend/colleague/employer*



SARAH DALY | 39

Associate Director, Rape Advocacy, Counseling & Education Services

Community involvement: When I was young, with aspirations of travel beyond what was practical at that time, my Uncle Tony told me to be a tourist where I live. This ended up being the best advice. Everywhere I've lived, I've found a sense of place and community by exploring all the local treasures. In the Champaign-Urbana area, that looks like visiting local farms like Prairie Fruits Farm to feed goats, Triple M Farm to pick strawberries or TM Horse Haven to help groom horses; attending local festivals like the Sunflower Celebration at Clearview Farm or Vermillion County Pride Fest; eating at interesting restaurants like Yoder's in Arthur or Timpone's in Champaign; attending shows at Krannert Center or the Virginia Theatre; and enjoying the nature and beauty at Japan House, Meadowbrook Park or the Anita Purves Nature Center.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Despite being in an administrative and leadership role at my organization, the direct service I still get to do is what really fuels me. People come to us on the worst day of their lives, and getting to be present for their healing is such an honor and privilege. Being able to provide information and support so that complex systems like courts, hospitals and/or police departments become real options for sexual-assault survivors who are facing so many barriers gives me a chance to feel like I am really having an impact. Having the chance to correct a social stigma or myth that an adolescent believes about themselves due to an assault can literally change the trajectory of their healing.

I attribute my success to ... I've had so many amazing people show up for me throughout my life, personally and professionally. I grew up in Southern Illinois and went to undergrad in northern Wisconsin. Sometimes it feels like my heart is spread across the country, but I feel so fortunate to have these beautiful little pockets of home in so many places.

From the nominator: "Sarah is a leader who cares. That may sound simple, but it is no small thing. She cares about our clients, she cares about our staff, and she is dedicated to making a difference in our community." — **Jaya Kolisetty**, executive director, RACES



JACOB DICKEY | 32

Meteorologist, WCIA-TV



Community involvement: In my role with WCIA, I visit schools and civic groups around East Central Illinois and have organized the “Community Spotlight” feature highlighting local events/charities/groups. I also spotlight local small businesses on my Facebook page. I am also a board member of the Community Foundation of East Central Illinois and a member of the Champaign County Farm Bureau and Young Farmers and Ranchers program and Champaign-Urbana Jaycees.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Hearing the stories of people who took my warnings seriously and it saved their lives. One lady told me she never goes to the basement during a tornado warning, but because we actually showed the tornado on TV, she knew it was different and sheltered. Her home had its roof ripped off, and the spot where she was sitting was covered in debris, but she went to the basement and survived. That was humbling to hear.

The most important lesson I’ve learned in my career is ... social science is more important than science. I can be as scientifically accurate as I want with all the technical jargon and lingo, but communicating it and being relatable in how I communicate weather is way more important. Even how we do the seven-day forecast is more of an art than a science, because people experience weather differently even in the same town. A great example is snowfall totals. If I say there’s going to be 6 to 10 inches of snow, people will grab on to the 10-inch number and say we were wrong if we get 7. Scientifically, that was a great forecast, but social science would say we were wrong. So, I really focus more on “impact based” forecasting. How will the snow affect you? What type are we getting? What impacts will the precipitation have on roads?

From the nominator: “Jacob is community focused and takes to heart his responsibility to keep people safe in bad weather. To do that, he has built credibility with the audience on air and online. It’s not enough to know the science or meteorology. Jacob is experienced at keeping people informed on a level that everyone can understand.” — **Gabrielle Martin**, *friend*

KENTON ELMORE | 36

Data Operations Manager, WEX Inc.

Community involvement: I am a member of Champaign West Rotary, where I served as president in 2022-23 and have been assistant district governor since 2023. I am a 2019 graduate of the United Way Emerging Community Leaders program and was a member of the Champaign Police Department’s Use of Force Review Committee from 2017 to 2020 and the Champaign Human Relations Commission from 2016 to 2019.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Adapting to change, particularly that brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. I never thought I would work from home or build a career with a company based outside East Central Illinois. But go figure — I have been working from home for over five years and my employer is based in Maine. Despite not having a large local footprint professionally, one thing that will not change is my continued engagement in our community.

Best advice given or received? Never put yourself in a situation where you could wind up ashamed in an emergency room.

What’s your one unbreakable rule? Rules are meant to be broken. It has been said that there can be no innovation without disobedience. So if there is a rule to always follow, it is simply this: Do not be unbreakable.

The most important lesson I’ve learned in my career is ... be ready to fail. In fact, be *eager* to fail. When you prioritize avoiding failure, you often lead yourself away from success. The reality is many failures are still productive and, if managed properly, can be celebrated as a step closer to success. Because how often is a great accomplishment achieved right out of the gate?

From the nominator: “Kenton is extremely intelligent and conscientious and demonstrates this in his deep involvement and commitment to the community. His clear desire to remain in Champaign and continue to contribute to its well-being make him a worthy candidate.”

— **Don Elmore**, *father*



KAITLIN FISHER | 36

Lieutenant, Champaign Police Department

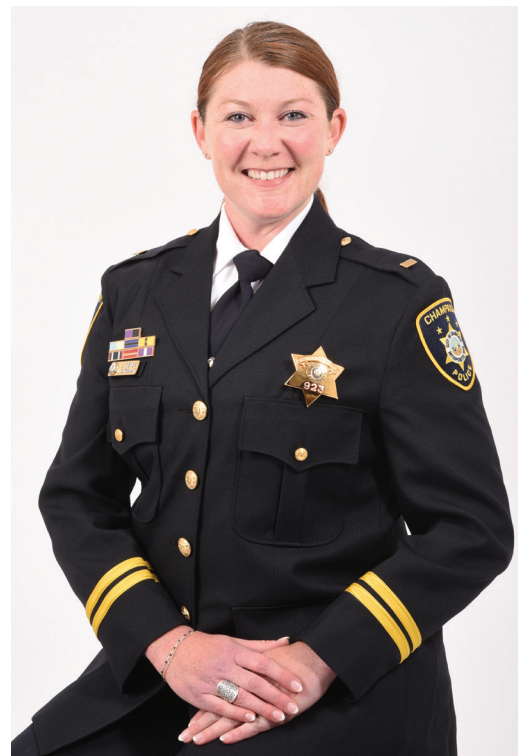
Community involvement: I regularly participate in efforts to get to know the residents within the two districts I oversee, which allows me to not just be visible but also approachable and trusted. I participate in youth-engagement opportunities. I have a background working with the Champaign County Children's Advocacy Center and routinely attend events at schools in my districts. I assist in public education and crime prevention by attending community and neighborhood meetings. I provide and educate the public on crime trends, crime prevention, safety tips and emergency preparedness. I participate in community outreach events such as neighborhood block parties, parades, charity events, Coffee with a Cop and similar events. I collaborate with local organizations, faith groups and shelters to help the homeless, victims of domestic violence and those struggling with addiction. I also serve as a mental-health advocate and connect those in mental-health crisis with much-needed resources.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Receiving the VFW Lee Bensyl Award recognizing my work strengthening ties between law enforcement and the community. It was an honor to be named alongside past recipients whose commitment to service I have long admired.

Best advice given or received? Never settle for comfort or ease. Growth begins when comfort ends. Push beyond what is easy. Comfortable leads to average; challenge leads to progress.

What's your one unbreakable rule? Love God and love people. Loving God is about being grounded in the understanding that life is not about you and ensuring you have faith, pray, trust and show obedience. Loving people means treating others with basic dignity, which in turn builds trust, defuses conflict and reflects integrity.

From the nominator: "Kaitlin's career with the Champaign Police Department demonstrates a consistent commitment to excellence and community service. Her blend of professional excellence, continuous development and community involvement makes her an ideal candidate for this award." — **Timothy Tyler**, *Champaign police chief*

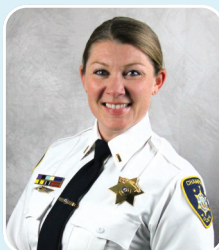


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Kaitlin Fisher



Danielle Griffet



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DANIELLE GRIFFET | 33

Officer, Champaign Police Department



Community involvement: I've volunteered for over 20 years with Shop with a Cop and have coordinated the program for several years. I've helped hundreds of children during the holidays through the actual event, as well as children in foster care. I volunteered at Special Olympics events over the years as well.

Best decision you've ever made? Choosing to stay home with my children.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... how incredibly blessed I am. Had I not worked in law enforcement, I would not have the same appreciation for life, family and friends. There were plenty of heartbreaking situations I've seen and assisted with, and that really put things in a new perspective.

My partner/best friend/mom would describe me as ... When I asked my husband, he described me as "the most selfless woman I have ever known. A person truly full of love, compassion, honesty, humbleness and gratitude. A woman of pure heart and a blessing to have in this world."

To relax, I ... love to read, mostly fiction, though I have branched out into some nonfiction novels. I also enjoy playing outside with my kids, and in the summer, I like to spend time in the pool. I love to shop, mostly on Amazon, but I do love a good Target run.

From the nominator: "Danielle has deep compassion and an unwavering commitment to serving others, especially those who are underserved or marginalized in our community. She is incredibly detail-oriented, thoughtful in her approach, and always goes the extra mile to ensure that others feel seen, safe and supported. Whether in uniform or as a mother and volunteer, she consistently shows strength, empathy and integrity." — **Alejandra Griffet**, *stepmother*

DeANDRE HENDERSON | 37

Director of Alternative Programs, Rantoul City Schools District

Community involvement: I primarily work with under-resourced youth in Rantoul. We work to put on family-friendly community events, provide resources and services for families in need, and help to intervene with systemic barriers to access that many of our families face. This includes being involved in after-school programs, access to mental-health services, and food insecurity.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Being able to start an alternative school in the Rantoul City Schools district that focuses on whole-child development and access to mental-health services and is community centered.

I attribute my success to ... the way I was raised. My parents are both heavily involved in the community and youth. When I was younger, every Saturday, I was in a youth program that my dad started for underprivileged youth in my hometown.

Best advice given or received? Quit taking it personal.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... You never know what someone else is going through. Treat everyone with compassion and grace.

To relax, I ... take off on my motorcycle for some wind therapy.

From the nominator: "DeAndre is a visionary leader who embodies courage, empathy and an unwavering commitment to equity in education. His calm-yet-assertive leadership style creates a foundation of trust and accountability, especially for students who have historically been marginalized. He believes in restorative practices, trauma-informed care and meeting students where they are. DeAndre's strength lies in his ability to turn systemic challenges into opportunities for transformation — whether by building programs from the ground up or navigating difficult decisions with grace and conviction." — **Scott Woods**, *superintendent*



MINDY HEWKIN | 38

Administrative Assistant to the Executive Office, City of Urbana

Community involvement: I am the assistant Scoutmaster for Troop 103 in Mahomet, I regularly volunteer with Cub Scout Pack 25 in Mahomet, and I am the parent rep for the Mahomet Mavericks 9U baseball team. I have also volunteered at the Mahomet Public Library.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Helping the city of Urbana through the COVID-19 pandemic as a police services representative. Things were constantly changing during that time and my fellow representatives and I were available to the entire community.

I attribute my success to ... my work ethic and independence.

Best advice given or received: “No” is a complete sentence.

Best decision you’ve ever made? Professionally, joining the military after graduating college. I was able to gain work experience to assist me in the applicant pool during my journey to becoming a police officer. Personally, without a doubt, marrying my best friend, Krysten!

The most important lesson I’ve learned in my career is ... how to prioritize my tasks throughout an ever-changing day.

To relax, I ... enjoy reading books or napping.

From the nominator: “If Mindy isn’t physically involved with people she serves, then she finds a way to support those organizations and groups that help others. She is involved with kids, vets, first responders, scouts and our staff at the city of Urbana. But beyond that, she lends support to those that support others: the United Way, the Urbana Neighborhood Connections Center, the Salvation Army and the list goes on. Mindy goes above and beyond to be that change we need today in our community and world. I am so honored to know this young woman.” — **Bridget Broihahn**, *colleague and friend*



CONGRATS TO OUR 2025 FORTY UNDER 40 WINNERS!



Laura Wright

Consultant, Labor and
Employee Relations,
Human Resources

Cayla Waters

Contract Training and
Professional Development,
Community Education



BRYNN HOWARD | 37

Senior Provider Recruiter, Graduate Medical Education Recruitment Coordinator, **Carle Health**



Community involvement: I serve as the co-vice president of the PTA at Westview Elementary in Champaign, a board member of the Ironwood homeowners association and a troop leader for Girl Scout Troop 2068. I belong to a wonderful local group called the League of Women Lamplighters, who are committed to strengthening the local community through connection and volunteer opportunities. I am the chair for Carle's Rewards and Recognition Committee.

Proudest professional accomplishment: I was the inaugural winner of Carle's yearly Way to Be award in 2015 — it was such an honor! The Way to Be program is Carle's peer-to-peer program that recognizes team members across the enterprise who live the values of accountability, compassion, excellence, inclusivity and integrity.

I attribute my success to ... having a wonderfully supportive partner and the best kiddo in the world. I couldn't be as involved as I am without their love, help and support — they are my biggest cheerleaders, and I am so lucky!

Best decision you've ever made? Moving to Champaign to get my master's degree at the University of Illinois 15 years ago. My now-husband and I didn't know a soul here, and now this is our home. We have a wonderful community and some of the best friends in the world here.

The most important lesson I've learned in my professional career is ... to never be too busy to help someone. A simple minute of active listening and support can mean the world.

What's your one unbreakable rule? Our family motto that I tell our daughter every day is "be a best friend, tell the truth and leave people better than you found them."

From the nominator: "In a world where people find health care disheartening and stressful, Brynn has a special gift to cut through any situation with a calming spirit and sunshiny disposition. She makes people feel seen, heard and welcome. Not only is her recruiting work crucial, but she also is heavily involved in event planning." — **Katie Wachala, friend**

FLIGHTSTAR

Allyssa VanMeter
First Officer

**Congratulations on being named to the
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Captain Kenyon Sivels
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for his leadership and dedication
to the Salvation Army*



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VILMA HOWARD | 38

Owner/CEO, Howardhold Insurance Group

Community involvement: Between founding the Fathers Reading Club, serving as a Chamber of Commerce ambassador, participating in Rotary, being Eastern Illinois prom king, volunteering with our elderly, coaching football and soccer, and recently accepting a board member role with the Don Moyer Boys and Girls Club, I'm pretty involved in the community.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Creating Intentional Networking Group, where members can connect and partner with other local entrepreneurs to grow their business.

I attribute my success to ... a willingness to learn and adapt. The world is constantly changing, and being able to pick up new skills and adjust my approach has been crucial. I would also attribute some to being resilient and learning from mistakes.

Best advice given or received? "Shut up and listen." You can learn a lot by listening!

Best decision you've ever made? Buying my house. I love turning it into a home for my boys and learning the ins and out of maintaining the property.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... people in business are just like people you meet in normal life. Not everyone is for you!

What's your one unbreakable rule? Never make a decision in anger.

To relax, I ... love taking my puppy on walks with an audio book in my ear, completely oblivious to everything but the book; playing games; or watching a movie with my family.

From the nominator: "Vilma takes on every project and challenge with a positive attitude and contributes to the greater Champaign-Urbana area with everything that he does. He is definitely a mover and a shaker who has dedicated his life to helping others." — Dana Schaumburg, colleague



Congratulations!

We are delighted to honor
the Forty Under 40
Class of 2025!

Your dedication and hard
work have truly resonated
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Illinois Business Forty Under 40
Awards will open in early April.**

Details on how to nominate will be in
the pages of The News-Gazette and
news-gazette.com in late March.

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JESSICA McCLELLAN | 36

Owner, **Grit and Grace Therapy**



Community involvement: I work closely with first responders, military members, veterans and their families by providing specialized mental-health services. I co-founded a local nonprofit that offers peer support trainings for first responders, and I volunteer my time providing critical-incident debriefings. I've also partnered with a local church to expand access to mental-health care within the church. Previously, I served as a Family Readiness Group Leader for my husband's military unit before his retirement, supporting service members and their families. I sponsor youth sports in Champaign and Mahomet to encourage connection and resilience, and I've spoken with middle and high school students about the importance of mental health and recognizing when someone is struggling.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Creating a practice where law-enforcement officers and other first responders feel safe, understood and accepted in seeking mental-health care. This was always a core goal of mine, as police officers are often overlooked or misunderstood in traditional mental-health spaces. Alongside this, I am proud to mentor and support younger clinicians, watching them grow into compassionate, skilled professionals who carry forward this mission of inclusivity and understanding.

I attribute my success to ... my grandmother who raised me. At 55 years old, very limited finances, and an incredible amount of heart, she took me in and put herself through college so she could properly care for me. She never gave up on me, and in doing so, she taught me never to give up on myself. Her strength, sacrifice and unwavering love are the foundation of everything I've accomplished.

From the nominator: "Jessica strives to be one of the most supportive, compassionate, inspiring and dedicated leaders in mental health. She fosters a workplace where her staff feels valued and seen on a daily basis. She is determined to make the mental-health world more accessible and mental health normalized for first responders and veterans." — **Kyndra Middleton**, *employee*

CONGRATULATIONS!

2025 Forty Under 40 Honoree

Stephanie Menold-Smith



Thank you for supporting our students, staff,
families and community.

Stronger Together. Leading for the Future

LAWANDA McGEE | 38

Founder, Envisage Counseling Services

Community involvement: I'm passionate about connecting with the community in meaningful ways. I partner with local agencies that serve at-risk and underserved populations, participate in mental-health fairs and volunteer to bring education, resources and hope to those who need it most.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Two stand out: building Envisage Counseling from the ground up as a safe and welcoming space for BIPOC communities, and helping develop programs for the University of Illinois School of Social Work's Provider Assistance and Training Hub that strengthen Illinois' mental-health workforce. Both have been labors of love and are deeply rooted in my commitment to breaking down barriers to mental-health care.

I attribute my success to ... resilience, community and a deep belief in growth. Starting a private practice as a woman of color came with unique challenges, but I've been surrounded by a strong support system and a determination to make mental-health care more accessible. My journey has been a blend of hard work, faith and staying rooted in my "why": serving people who deserve to feel seen and supported.

What's your one unbreakable rule? Prioritize mental health; yours and others'. Whether it's creating space for rest, seeking support or simply pausing to breathe, mental well-being is non-negotiable.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... meet people exactly where they are. True growth starts with empathy, and sometimes the most healing thing we can do is offer unconditional support while walking alongside someone at their pace.

From the nominator: "Lawanda embodies excellence, service and leadership in every aspect of her work. Her passion, resilience, and unwavering commitment to making a difference truly set her apart. Lawanda doesn't just do the work — she lives the mission of empowerment and transformation every day." — **Christina Poe**, *friend*



STEPHANIE MENOLD-SMITH | 39

Social Worker, Urbana Middle School



Community involvement: I have come to love Urbana as my home. Our family spends a lot of time supporting local businesses, participating in local events, such as activities hosted by the Uniting Pride, and financially giving to individuals and organizations in our community as much as we are able. In my role at the middle school, I am connecting students and families to local organizations that can help meet their needs, and networking to make sure I am accessing all possible resources to get the needed support.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Seeing students who have left Urbana Middle School come back and tell me all they have accomplished — how they have persevered and healed traumas, kept continually growing and became more of their beautiful, unique selves.

Best advice given or received? 1. "Seek patience and passion in equal amounts. Patience alone will not build the temple. Passion alone will destroy its walls." — Maya Angelou
2. That sadness, fear, and grief are not our enemy. They are part of our humanity. We must become comfortable with difficult emotions —to not suppress them or fight them if we want to grow and heal. And to question most things.

Best decision you've ever made? To be bold enough to always be true to myself. To listen to what my heart and soul is telling me, even if it's tough.

From the nominator: "Stephanie is one of the most compassionate, dedicated and selfless people I have ever known. Her unwavering commitment to the well-being of children and families is inspiring. She brings empathy, patience and resilience to her work every day. She's a natural leader, a fierce advocate, and someone who quietly, consistently makes a difference. Her ability to balance emotional labor with professionalism — all while being a supportive partner and community member — is something I deeply admire." — **Sam Smith**, *husband*

MONICA MILES | 31

COO, Don Moyer Boys & Girls Club



Community involvement: I have joined the Champaign County Community Coalition and have had the opportunity to run the its Summer Initiatives program, which supports the work of 12 grassroots community initiatives during the out-of-school months. From 2020 to 2024, I coached volleyball at Unity High School, and while I am not currently coaching, I am still very connected to the program and my athletes.

I attribute my success to ... The first thing that comes to my mind is my family; specifically, my mother, father and brother. Everyone who really knows me knows my mom is my best friend. Before she was my best friend, she was my role model. Every positive characteristic I have as a human but especially as a professional came from watching her. Growing up, she was almost superhuman to me: kind, creative, brilliant, selfless and dedicated. My dad has always been my biggest fan. He taught me to be a fierce competitor and tenacious and believe in myself, all characteristics that I truly believe have pushed me to and through all of the things I have accomplished. My brother is my partner in crime. He has always known and seen the core of who I am and championed that. He has never allowed me to take myself too seriously and is truly one of the most intelligent people I know.

Best advice given or received? "Sometimes the fear won't go away, so you will have to learn to do it afraid."

From the nominator: "Monica is a transformative leader who combines compassion, innovation and strategic vision to create lasting impact. Her ability to see beyond surface behaviors and address the underlying needs of youth is unparalleled, and she has built a culture of growth and understanding that empowers both the youth and her team. Monica doesn't just dream of change — she makes it happen. Monica is not only shaping the future of the youth she serves but also setting a powerful example of what compassionate, strategic leadership can achieve." — **Amy Brown**, co-worker



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Mr. Henderson!**

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Congratulations

40 UNDER FORTY

**Sarah Daly
Kenton Elmore
Mindy Hewkin
Vilma Howard
Matthew Sullard
Allyssa VanMeter
Cayla Waters
Laura Wright**

**Congratulations
to all the
honorees
especially our
Emerging
Community
Leader graduates.**



ANNIE MONYOK | 35

Founder, **Monyok Leadership**

Community involvement: I serve as a board member, past president and past campaign co-chair for United Way of Danville Area. I am also board president of the Danville Sanitary District. I lead the Vermilion Advantage Leadership Tomorrow Program and volunteer with Festival of Trees, Balloons Over Vermilion and other community events. I'm a member of Danville Noon Rotary and a Paul Harris Fellow, and I'm an active member of St. Mary's Catholic Church.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Owning and growing my small business. I'm proud to employ three team members who provide human-resources, marketing and consulting services to clients regionally and nationally.

I attribute my success to ... my parents. My dad is my sounding board, voice of reason and true north for professional ethics. My mom showed me that you can have a rewarding career and a strong family — and be excellent at both. Together, they've modeled what a marriage grounded in faith and grown in partnership can yield.

Best advice given or received? Be kind anyway.

Best decision you've ever made? Marrying my high school sweetheart, George Monyok. We've grown up together, and at every step, he has supported me, pushed me and been my most steadfast and honorable partner.

From the nominator: "Annie possesses a rare talent for making complex information accessible and engaging, creating a personalized learning experience even in group settings. Her intellectual curiosity is matched by her courage to embrace challenges, demonstrating both competence and confidence in her leadership. What truly sets her apart is her balanced approach — while extraordinarily knowledgeable across diverse subjects, she listens attentively and responds thoughtfully rather than reactively." — **Jenni McConkey**, *employee*



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UNNATI NARANG | 35

Assistant Professor of Business Administration, **University of Illinois**



Community involvement: I believe in building strong communities, both in Champaign-Urbana and in my profession. I'm active in the local Indian and Jewish communities, volunteering at cultural and literary events, hosting gatherings and supporting women through mentorship and connection. I contribute to the literary community through events at the Champaign Public Library and UI-based writing groups, such as the Off Campus Writers' Workshop. In my work, I mentor students directly on research and academic projects, and I've organized mental-health-awareness talks for graduate students.

Proudest professional accomplishment: My students' successes. It is not common in my field to take on the responsibility of advising a Ph.D. student early in one's career, but I did not shy away from this role, mentoring an international Ph.D. student in marketing for five years on his dissertation research. With both our persistence, he achieved his dream of securing a tenure-track job in the U.S., and I'm deeply proud to have played an instrumental role in his journey. I'm also proud of my own research, including publishing my dissertation in top academic journals, which reflects years of dedication and consistent effort to advancing knowledge in my field despite setbacks.

I attribute my success to ... My early life in India grounded me and taught me to never take anything for granted. I am fortunate to have parents, teachers, Ph.D. advisers and role models who supported me and accepted me for who I was, allowing me to become the person I am. My husband and daughter continue to be my pillars of strength. I also credit the critics and naysayers — their doubts in me motivate me and help me develop a stronger inner anchor.

From the nominator: "Dr. Narang is constantly trying to build a better life for herself, her family and her community. She leads by example in all domains of her life and has long demonstrated excellence. She is a kind, funny and brilliant human who I am fortunate enough to call my friend." — **Vidya Haran**, *friend and colleague*

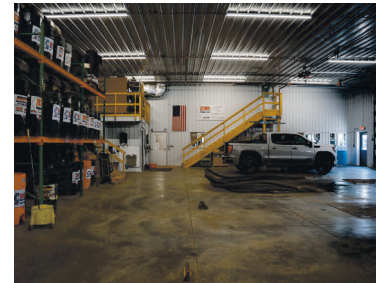
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DAVID PALMER | 39

Chief Deputy Treasurer, Champaign County Treasurer's Office

Community involvement: I coach youth sports, including flag football and basketball.

I attribute my success to ... my parents instilling the ideas of hard work and perseverance. These are what helped me along the way.

Best advice given or received? There is never a time when hard work doesn't pay off. It may not be how you want or when you want, but it will pay off, so stay dedicated to the work and the process and not just the outcomes.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years? Hopefully getting ready to send my son to college and preparing for my daughter's final years of high school. Nothing is more exciting to me than being with my kids and watching them develop.

Best decision you've ever made? Asking a girl to go hang out after work. Sounds cheesy, but she is my biggest fan and my support system, pushing me to grow and allowing me to be myself.

What's your one unbreakable rule? Bring objectivity with you everywhere you go. Bias can be blinding; using a little objectivity can help you understand someone's point of view better.

From the nominator: "David brings integrity, innovation and compassion to everything he touches. He's not just fulfilling the duties of a public office; he's redefining them. He's unafraid to challenge outdated systems when they no longer meet the community's needs, and he does so with humility and a relentless focus on the public good. His commitment to the well-being of our community, its people, its systems and its future is evident in both his work ethic and his heart. In both his personal life and his professional roles, he's always focused on how whatever platform he is given can be used to help others and uplift the community." — **Byron Clark**, Champaign County treasurer



LISA PAUL | 37

Senior Vice President of Member Experience, U of I Community Credit Union



Community involvement: I currently serve on the board of directors at Allerton Park & Retreat Center and am actively involved in supporting community organizations. Over the years, I've volunteered with initiatives including Financial Literacy at Research Park, the United Way, Crisis Nursery, the Eastern Illinois Foodbank, ShredAPalooza, the Make-A-Wish Foundation and Champaign County CASA.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Launching our digital-first branch in Mahomet. Working alongside my incredible team, we took the concept from vision to reality — piloting new technology and rethinking the member experience from the ground up. By integrating innovative tools like interactive teller machines, we created a branch that not only improves operational efficiency but also delivers a more modern, accessible and personalized experience for our members.

I attribute my success to ... I have great parents who taught me to work hard and gave me unwavering support. Now that I'm raising my own children, I have an even bigger appreciation for the sacrifices they made and the love they continue to show me today.

Best advice given or received? Success comes from amplifying your strengths, not obsessing over your weaknesses.

What's your one unbreakable rule? Never take life so seriously that you forget to laugh. Joy and humor are what keep me grounded and connected to the people around me.

From the nominator: "What truly sets Lisa apart is her kindness and approachability. She has cultivated an environment where team members feel valued, heard and empowered to contribute their best. Her approachable demeanor and genuine care foster a positive, supportive workplace culture that radiates outward to benefit our entire credit-union community." — **Chris Harlan**, supervisor

GREG RAY | 38

Firefighter, Urbana Fire Department



Community involvement: I am the assistant chief of the Philo Volunteer Fire Department and I work for Philo Township.

Proudest professional accomplishment: My time in the United States Marine Corps. I was fortunate enough to attend a lot of different schools and experience a lot of different parts of the world. Coming from a small town, that was exciting and very humbling.

I attribute my success to ... the way I was raised; good moral and ethical values. I would also have to say my time in the Marine Corps, as well as all the people I have worked with as a laborer and in the fire service.

Best advice given or received? Take something from everyone; whether that's something good or bad. Nothing gets better with a lie. You're never wrong to do that right thing.

The most important lesson I've learned in my professional career is ... Hard work will take you far. Surround yourself with good people who work hard, and the job/mission/goal will always get accomplished. If you surround yourself with good people and don't care about titles, then everyone will succeed.

From the nominator: "Greg is the most humble person I have ever worked with. He never takes credit for any accomplishments that he makes and truly wants no recognition. Greg is the most deserving person of the greatest form of recognition in the local community that he helps to protect." — **Jerry Camardelle**, *co-worker*

Congratulations!

Unit 4 Schools Celebrates
Melissa Shungu
40 Under 40 Winner!

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40 2025

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DARCY SANDEFUR | 28

Clerk, City of Urbana

Proudest professional accomplishment: Being elected to serve on the executive boards of both the Municipal Clerks of Illinois and Central Illinois Municipal Clerks. It is a tremendous honor to be able to give back to the organizations that helped my professional development.

I attribute my success to ... my mentors. Thank you for teaching me and taking me under your wings.

Best advice given or received? People will forget your work, but they will never forget how you make them feel.

Best decision you've ever made? Entering public service.

What's your one unbreakable rule? Always try, especially when it's scary.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... to ask questions. By taking the time to ensure understanding, we can save added stress.

To relax, I ... enjoy spending time with my family in nature.

From the nominator: "For such a young woman, Darcy is so mature and knowledgeable. I really enjoy knowing her and working with her. We have worked on civic projects together and it's always quite enjoyable to team up with her. Her knowledge of municipal records, the Open Meetings Act, the Freedom of Information Act, parliamentary procedure, municipal codes, resolutions and laws is astounding. The mere fact that Darcy was certified before she took office and took office at the age of 26 years (and made history doing it) is amazing to me. She is wonderful. She deserves this recognition for her public service and more! —

Bridget Broihahn, colleague and friend



**Congratulations,
Stephanie Silver,
on being named a
2025 Forty Under 40
honoree!**

**We are so proud of
you and appreciate
everything you do!**

**– The Staff at
Champaign-Urbana
Public Health District**



DARYA SHAHGHEIBI | 29

Executive Director, **Greater Community AIDS Project of East Central Illinois**



Community involvement: My family and I volunteer with community cleanups and with local organizations such as C-U at Home and the Champaign Park District. Beyond direct service, I am an active part of the local art scene. I have designed stickers, T-shirts and prints for businesses and organizations — you may have seen my “What the Health” T-shirt at Pride Fest a few years ago! My commitment to the community also extends to my role on the board of directors for the Independent Media Center. Most importantly, I am a frequent volunteer at my daughter’s school. You won’t find a field trip I haven’t chaperoned or a school party I haven’t assisted with. My involvement in her education is paramount, and there’s nothing better than walking into her school and hearing the harmonious cry of “It’s Violet’s Mom!”

Proudest professional accomplishment: The strategic and financial turnaround of the Greater Community AIDS Project. When I joined, the organization was facing significant challenges, but with hard work, we stabilized our finances and expanded our services to reach a wider population. We’ve grown from one grant to three, doubled our staff size and are now operating with a near-tripled operating income.

I attribute my success to ... my perceived failures. The most important lesson I’ve learned is that we are not simply helpless characters in our life story; we are also the authors. I realized that while it’s easy to feel powerless in the face of life’s unpredictable events, I have the power to reframe my own story. This realization has allowed me to see myself not as a victim of my experiences, but as a champion of my trials, transforming moments of despair into stepping stones toward a better future.

From the nominator: “Darya is the definition of a ‘go-getter.’ There is no problem she is not ready to face, and she will exhaust all options to find a solution. She has built a fantastic network of connections in our community and having those strong partnerships helps those she serves.”

— **Stephanie Silver**, colleague and fellow member of the Forty Under 40 Class of 2025

MELISSA SHUNGU | 39

Multilingual Learner Teacher, **Kenwood Elementary School, Champaign**

Proudest professional accomplishment: I still keep in touch with a number of families whose children I taught years ago. When families keep in contact and I get to witness their children grow up, it shows me I played an important role in their child’s life.

I attribute my success to ... my parents and the education I was able to receive — preschool through graduate school. Each opportunity opened a door for the next. My parents ensured I had access to these opportunities and provided me with a strong community and loving foundation.

Best advice given or received? Let someone else say no — you have the power to put yourself out there by applying for opportunities. While hearing no can be difficult, learning how to manage disappointment is a critical life skill.

Best decision you’ve ever made? Returning to my hometown, Champaign, with my husband and children. It has been a fantastic place to raise our family — rich in arts, cultural diversity, and educational opportunities. My mom was right; it was a good choice. :)

The most important lesson I’ve learned in my professional career is ... meet people where they are. This goes for students, families, and colleagues.

To relax, I ... enjoy running, spending time as a family at home or going out to hear my husband play live music in the community!

From the nominator: “Melissa demonstrates empathy and kindness to some of our most vulnerable families, recognizes their needs and is always willing to find ways to seek out resources to support. She embraces challenges and is always looking at ways to problem-solve situations with her colleagues.” — **Trevor Nadrozny**, supervisor



STEPHANIE SILVER | 35

Care Coordinator, Champaign-Urbana Public Health District

Community involvement: I serve as president of the board of directors of Rape Advocacy, Counseling and Education Services in Urbana.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Creating (in collaboration with a few colleagues at the health district) the Bridge Counseling Program, which provides interim mental-health support for patients in our Teen & Adult Services Division while we work to find counseling and therapy resources that accept their insurance in the community.

I attribute my success to ... the support of the people around me. I've accomplished many things, but most of it was not by myself.

Best advice given or received? Do what's right, even if it scares you.

Best decision you've ever made? Professionally, deciding to volunteer at RACES. I found a passion I didn't realize I had. I had the privilege of serving survivors as a staff member and remain connected to the agency 15 years later as a board member.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... People are resilient, but they shouldn't have to go it alone. There is nothing more rewarding than walking alongside someone in their journey and being a source of support to get them there.

From the nominator: "Stephanie is dedicated to compassionate, trauma-informed care for those who have been assaulted. She has dedicated her personal and professional career to helping survivors of sexual assault for 15 years. She is dedicated, kind, committed, hard working, a critical thinker and a problem solver." — **Belinda De La Rosa**, *colleague and RACES board member*



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dedication, and the lasting
impact you've made on your
profession and to our community.



40
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Congratulations, Annie Monyok!

2025 News-Gazette 40 Under 40 Honoree

Your leadership, creativity, and dedication continue to inspire us. As a past president and current board member of the United Way of Danville Area, and through your outstanding work in marketing, you've made a lasting impact on our mission and our community. We're proud to celebrate you!



KENYON SIVELS | 37

Corps Officer, Salvation Army of Champaign County



Community involvement: I am a Rotarian; I am involved in collaborative community groups; I served the most vulnerable through my role with the Salvation Army; I have hosted an emergency pop-up shelter; I mentor and help lead 55 youth weekly; and I lead and pastor a local congregation.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Helping to re-establish strained or non-existent community relationships to revive and further the work of the Salvation Army.

I attribute my success to ... Jesus first, my family second and our amazing team here.

Best advice given or received? Remember Jesus; stay humble; be teachable; keep learning.

Best decision you've ever made? Accepting Christ and saying yes to His calling.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... communicate well and always try to learn something new.

My partner/best friend/mom would describe me as ... "a human exclamation point."

From the nominator: "Kenyon serves those most in need in our community with hard work, professionalism, humility and integrity. He is the youngest officer to serve the Champaign County Corps, a captain following a long line of majors. He leads from the front, never afraid to get his hands dirty working beside while supporting and mentoring staff. Kenyon deserves recognition because he doesn't seek it, often attributing success to the support of his accomplished and hard-working wife. He does much with little noise and good nature."

— **Holly Thompson**, board member, Salvation Army of Champaign County

CHERRISSE SMITH | 33

Coordinator for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Education, University of Illinois College of ACES

Community involvement: I am a member of the Theta Lambda Zeta chapter of the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc.; a frequent volunteer at Urbana Neighborhood Connection; and a staff adviser for the National Association of Colored Women's Club: Women of Nobility Chapter.

Proudest professional accomplishment: The work I've been able to do alongside students, faculty and staff to foster belonging and inclusion. In particular, my time as assistant director at the Bruce D. Nesbitt African American Cultural Center was deeply meaningful — the relationships I built and the students I supported there will always have a special place in my heart. I am equally proud of my current work in the College of ACES, where I help advance inclusive intelligence and create spaces where all members of our community can thrive.

I attribute my success to ... the unwavering support and lessons of my late mother, Darlene Johnson, who taught me resilience, empathy and what it means to be a true servant leader in every sense of the word. I also credit my niece Diamond Johnson and my husband, Michael Smith, who continually inspire me to be my best self while reminding me to stay grounded in where I come from.

Best advice given or received? Don't lose yourself in work or your career. You are so much more than your job title, and you deserve to live a full, meaningful life outside the office. When you prioritize life beyond work, you create space for balance, joy, and true fulfillment.

Best decision you've ever made? Marrying and starting a family with the love of my life, Michael Smith. He is the true definition of a life partner and helpmate.

From the nominator: "Cherrisse is intentional about providing opportunities for UI students to be involved in the Champaign-Urbana community. She has a strong work ethic and strives to promote equity and inclusion in her everyday life." — **Michael Smith**, husband



DEXTER SMITH | 33

System Administrator, **State Universities Retirement System**



Community involvement: I stay connected through my fraternity, the Sigma Xi Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc., where I actively participate in programs like organizing blood drives, supporting service initiatives such as Jettie Rhodes Day and Adopt-a-Highway cleanup, promoting youth engagement, and assisting with voter-registration efforts. I also contribute to Champaign's Community Gun Violence Reduction Blueprint by helping evaluate programs that strengthen neighborhoods and create meaningful impact. I also make it a point to support others informally — whether through a quick word of encouragement or sharing knowledge in passing — because giving back to others is something I carry into every space I'm in.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Becoming a system administrator. Since my freshman year of college, chasing this role was how I navigated throughout my collegiate and professional experience. Every step I took — from internships to professional roles — was designed to align with that vision. Achieving this milestone was not just a career move, but the realization of a dream I had been working toward since the start of my journey.

I attribute my success to ... above all, my faith. It gives me the confidence that no matter what I face — good or bad — it will ultimately work out according to God's plan. My community has also played an important role in shaping who I am today. From Roseland, the South Side Chicago neighborhood where I grew up, to my elementary and high school teachers and peers, to the Champaign-Urbana community that has supported my professional and civic growth, to my family who grounds me — I am here because of the people who poured into me at every stage.

From the nominator: "In a world where technical expertise is often siloed from human connection, Dexter brings both. He's building resilient systems and resilient people. It would be an honor to have him join the ranks." — **Tekita Bankhead**, colleague and member of the *Forty Under 40 Class of 2018*

WHITNEY STEWART | 34

Engineer, **Champaign Fire Department**

Community involvement: I lead a local Girl Scouts summer camp called Camp Fury that is led by first responders and aims to allow young women to experience careers in law enforcement, firefighting, EMS and other related professions.

I attribute my success to ... my drive, my determination and my family's support. I like to show my kids that anything is possible.

Best advice given or received? If you want something, go after it. It may take time, but time will pass anyway.

Best decision you've ever made? Starting a family with my husband. We are blessed with two amazing kids.

What's your one unbreakable rule? Be honest.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... find a career you love and surround yourself with people who support you.

From the nominator: "Whitney is deeply passionate about her career, her family, and serving the community. As a trailblazer for female first responders, she has helped open doors and break down barriers for others in the field. Her confidence is matched by her compassion—she consistently steps up to support others and strengthen the fire department as a whole. She is a source of encouragement and guidance for fellow female first responders, aspiring firefighters, and firefighter spouses, recognizing the unique challenges that come with these demanding roles. Her leadership and generosity continue to make a lasting impact." — **Lisa Rector**, friend



MATT SULLARD | 37

Assistant University Counsel, **University of Illinois**; District 5 Representative, **Champaign County Board**



Community involvement: My entire career has been in public service at the county, municipal, and state levels. My wife, Elizabeth, and I moved to town in fall 2018. We both immediately got involved with the Young Professionals of Champaign-Urbana and were both selected to serve on its board of directors in 2019. I served as secretary that year, followed by a term as president in 2020-21. I graduated from the United Way of Champaign County's Emerging Community Leaders program in 2019. I was appointed as a precinct committeeperson for the Champaign County Democratic Party in summer 2020 and elected in 2022 and 2024. I have served on the party's executive committee since 2022, first as secretary (2022-24) and now as second vice chair (since 2024). I completed the United Way's Equity Challenge in 2021. I was appointed to the Champaign Citizen Review Subcommittee in February 2023 and elected to a term as chair from July 2023 to June 2024. In 2024, I was elected to the Champaign County Board.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Passing the bar exam.

I attribute my success to ... being motivated by my family to succeed, thrive and advance to help provide the life we want for our children and ourselves, and having a strong support system around me.

Best advice given or received? Have a strong plan for the future complete with tangible steps to get there, but don't forget to live in the present.

Best decision you've ever made? Asking my wife to marry me; deciding to focus on my studies in undergrad and law school; moving to Champaign.

From the nominator: "Matt is a very intelligent, fair and active person. He will always stand up for all and tirelessly works for the better of his community. He is an extremely dedicated husband, father and public servant, and truly strives to make his community better through his public-service work professionally and personally." — **Elizabeth Sullard, wife**

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JAZMINE THOMPSON | 36

Associate Director, **University of Illinois Jeffries Center for Access and Academic Success**

Community involvement: I have a specialized interest in working with formerly incarcerated adults and the challenges of re-entry. I served three years as a member of the Education Justice Project, a comprehensive college-in-prison program based at the University of Illinois, where I worked on the Re-entry Guide Initiative, producing re-entry guides and resources statewide and beyond. I am a proud member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc., where I'm committed to Zetas Helping Other People Excel. As a member of this illustrious organization, I uphold and foster the ideals of scholarship, service, sisterhood and finer womanhood.

Proudest professional accomplishment: In April, my team and I received the UI Student Affairs Outstanding Program Award for our work in the Advising & Mentoring Program. Achieving this recognition after serving as director of the program for less than two years made the accomplishment even more meaningful.

I attribute my success to ... my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, a strong family and work support system.

Best advice given or received? Trust your journey, resist the urge to compare yourself to others and hold on to the reminder that challenges don't last — everything will be OK."

What's your one unbreakable rule? Treat everyone with respect, no matter their role or background.

From the nominator: "Jazmine has already mastered complex roles and systems, successfully leads teams and programs, and is building a deep reservoir of institutional knowledge that will benefit future generations. She exemplifies consistent servant leadership, combining influence and impact with a steadfast commitment to both her own growth and the development of others. Jazmine is not only a dedicated professional — she is a true role model."

— **Kimberly Alexander-Brown**, *supervisor*



ALLYSSA VanMETER | 37

Pilot, **Flightstar**



Community involvement: This year I had the privilege of participating in the United Way's Emerging Community Leaders program, which introduced me to several incredible organizations, including Salt & Light, Sola Gratia Farm, and Big Brothers Big Sisters. I've also found a meaningful place of connection and service through Copper Creek Church. I am also especially passionate about supporting our veterans, and I volunteer with both dream flights and Honor Flight, which I find truly rewarding.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Attaining my Airline Transport Pilot license. I never thought in a million years I would be flying airplanes, let alone corporate jets.

I attribute my success to ... hard-working parents who always encouraged me to follow through on things I set out to accomplish.

Best decision you've ever made? Pursuing my career change. I was a cosmetologist for 16 years full time and co-owned a salon. I started flying for fun in 2017 but quickly found my passion in the skies.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... the power of networking. In the aviation industry, I've had the privilege of connecting with a wide range of individuals, from renowned experts to everyday professionals, all of whom have shared invaluable advice and support. These connections have not only opened doors and created opportunities but have also provided guidance and mentorship that have been crucial to my growth.

From the nominator: "Allyssa seems to pack more into a day than most people I know. She is working or volunteering or making art or spending time with others. The grass does not grow under her feet! Our community needs people like Allyssa. When I interact with her, I leave with a sense that the world has a chance of being a better place. I'm inspired to do more myself." — **Erin Tarr**, *friend*

CAYLA WATERS | 37

Associate Director, Contract Training and Professional Development, **Parkland College**



Community involvement: I am a member of the Executive Club of Champaign County, Central Illinois Human Resources Group, Champaign County Regional Planning Commission's East Central Illinois Business Team and the Parkland College Women of Impact Planning Committee.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Joining the team at Parkland in 2022. As an alum, Parkland has always had a special place in my life. I grew up tagging along with my mom to her night and weekend classes while she worked on her degree. I also attended College for Kids as a child. Now my daughter is attending College for Kids, making everything come full circle. I am Parkland Proud and love to give back to the place that shaped so much of my life.

I attribute my success to ... the love and support of my family, especially my Grandma and Grandpa Newt.

Best advice given or received? How you do anything is how you do everything.

What's your one unbreakable rule? Always tell the truth, even if it's difficult.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... the value of kindness. Treating people with respect and empathy creates stronger partnerships and more effective teams. Kindness builds trust, and trust is what allows people to share ideas, collaborate and move through challenges successfully.

From the nominator: "Cayla Waters is a visionary leader, collaborative problem-solver and community advocate who is shaping the future of workforce development in Champaign County. What sets Cayla apart is her ability to lead with both heart and hustle. She is a dedicated mom, farm wife and co-owner a family farm. Her grounded leadership, deep community ties, and unwavering drive to serve others makes her a standout candidate for this honor." — **Lesa Brandt**, *colleague, mentor and friend*

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LAURA WRIGHT | 38

Labor and Employee Relations Consultant, **Parkland College**

Community involvement: Currently, I volunteer for Feeding Our Kids and do volunteer work at my church. I have volunteered with the Christie Clinic Illinois Marathon for the past two years and plan to continue. I have also had the opportunity to volunteer in various organizations such as Crisis Nursery and the Eastern Illinois Foodbank.

Proudest professional accomplishment: This came when I was a school social worker. At that time, I saw children facing food insecurity in the district I was in and I was able to connect with Feeding our Kids so that students had meals for the weekend. I know Feeding Our Kids is still working with the school district and I take pride in connecting generations of students with resources and helping to fight community food insecurity.

I attribute my success to ... my family, friends and colleagues who have served as incredible mentors throughout my life and continued to challenge me, encourage me and help me grow.

Best advice given or received? Treat others with kindness. This doesn't mean that you can't disagree or say no or have boundaries, but leading with kindness costs nothing and builds trust, respect and long-lasting relationships.

What's your one unbreakable rule? Show up authentically. You may not always be prepared for what happens in any given situation, but if you show up and do your best at the moment, you build trust in yourself and in others to know that you consistently give your strongest efforts.

From the nominator: "Laura Wright is a quiet powerhouse. She brings a principled, professional and people-centered approach to every endeavor. Her ability to lead with both intellect and heart sets her apart. Laura is not just building a career — she is building a better workplace, a stronger campus and a more connected community." — **Angela Jancola, Stephanie Davingman and Kathleen McAndrew, colleagues**



JON PAUL YOUAKIM | 39

Pediatrician, Assistant Medical Director of Ambulatory Children's Services, **Carle Foundation Hospital**



Community involvement: I have been an outpatient pediatrician at Carle for the past 10 years, working closely with families to support the health and well-being of children in our community. I also serve as lead physician in caring for all infants born to mothers with HIV, ensuring that they receive proper treatment and thorough testing to prevent infection. In addition, I helped with deciding the design of the Healthy Beginning's mobile clinic before assisting as one of their medical providers. I am also a member of the Champaign County Mental Health Board, serving two terms as vice president and one as president. I also serve as a member of the Champaign Zoning Board of Appeals.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Fulfilling the role of Assistant Medical Director of Ambulatory Children's Services at Carle, where I have had the privilege of supporting and guiding a team of outpatient pediatricians and nurses in delivering high-quality care to children and families.

I attribute my success to ... being an open and active listener. Whether in the exam room or at a board meeting, I've learned that leadership isn't about having all the answers, but instead learning and taking a collaborative approach to find them. I'm deeply grateful for those who've helped shape my journey, including mentors, colleagues and community members, especially those who've challenged me to listen more closely and lead more thoughtfully.

Something you may not know about me is ... both of my parents are from Palestine, making me a first-generation American.

From the nominator: "Jon has had a meteoric rise as a medical and community leader in Champaign-Urbana. It is astounding how much he has accomplished in these roles throughout his 20s and 30s. I am so grateful to have him as a fellow care provider in this community." — **Molly McLay, fellow member of the Champaign County Mental Health Board and member of the Forty Under 40 Class of 2023**

CHARLES 'JARREL' YOUNG JR. | 36

Foster Care Supervisor, **The Center for Youth and Family Solutions**; Therapist, **Envisage Counseling**



Community involvement: I stay plugged into my community in ways that are both structured and organic. I coach youth football with the Central Illinois Youth Football League, where sports become a tool for mentorship and life lessons. I've worked with the Illinois Summer Youth Hip Hop Camp to help young artists find their voice. Through the Champaign school district's Operation Hope program, I've mentored high school students preparing for life after graduation. And most recently, I've stepped into civic leadership as a candidate for the Champaign school board — because I believe our schools are the heartbeat of our community.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Releasing my third studio album, "Full Custody," after a five-year hiatus. It wasn't just music, it reflected surviving and growing through divorce, a custody battle, graduate school and the realities of social injustice. That project proved to me that healing and artistry can coexist, and that transparency can inspire others to keep pushing. On the professional side, stepping into foster-care supervision and leading a team dedicated to protecting and uplifting children in care has also been a milestone I hold close.

Best advice given or received? Don't water yourself down to make others comfortable. Your authenticity is your superpower, and if people can't handle the real you, they aren't for you.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... that leadership is not about titles — it's about how you show up. People don't remember every detail of your work, but they remember how you treated them, how you advocated for them and whether you listened or not.

From the nominator: "Jarrel is a servant leader who never looks to get something in return for what he gives so many. His work centers around bringing people together, making our community a better place, and impacting others so they turn around and serve as well. Jarrel represents what we hope our community is about!" — **Barry Houser**, *Marching Illini director, colleague, friend, collaborator*



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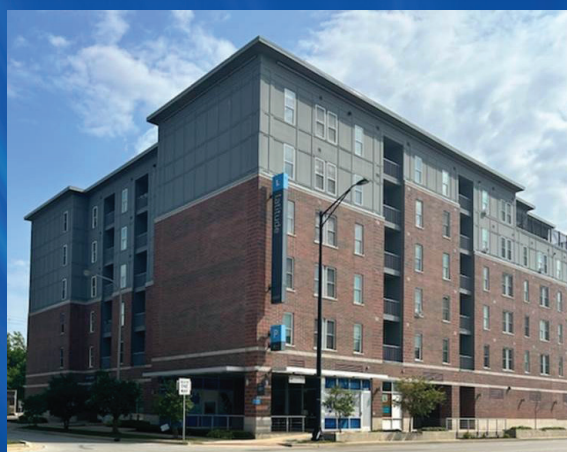
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