

CENTRAL ILLINOIS Business

October | November 2023

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2023 FORTY UNDER 40

RECOGNIZING YOUNG AREA PROFESSIONALS FOR THEIR
ACHIEVEMENTS, LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT



MAN OF THE YEAR
BREADEN
BELCHER



WOMAN OF THE YEAR
JA'NAEA
MODEST

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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.

Jeffrey I. Cisco	Cisco Law PC	Champaign	217.991.0409	Crim Def: DUI; Crim Def: Felon/Misd; Nursing Home Negligence; PI: Gen; Work Comp
John L. Barger	Craig & Craig LLC	Mattoon	217.234.6481	Agriculture; Gov/Muni/Lobby/Admin; RE: Comm; RE: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate
Robert G. Grierson	Craig & Craig LLC	Mattoon	217.234.6481	Agriculture; Banking; Close/Private Held Business; RE: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate
R. Sean Hocking	Craig & Craig LLC	Mattoon	217.234.6481	Personal Injury Defense: General; Products Liability Defense
J. Patrick Lee	Craig & Craig LLC	Mattoon	217.234.6481	Criminal Defense: DUI; Criminal Def: Felonies/Misdemeanors; Family; PI Def: General
John F. Watson	Craig & Craig LLC	Mattoon	217.234.6481	Insurance/Coverage/Reinsurance; Medical Malpractice Defense; PI Defense: General
Bruce L. Bonds	Heyl Royster	Champaign	217.344.0060	Employment: Management; PI Defense: General; Workers' Compensation Defense
John D. Flodstrom	Heyl Royster	Champaign	217.344.0060	Workers' Compensation Defense
Keith E. Fruehling	Heyl Royster	Champaign	217.344.0060	Employment: Mngmnt; Med Mal Def; PI Def: General; Prod Liab Def; Prof'l Mal Def
Joseph K. Guyette	Heyl Royster	Champaign	217.344.0060	Personal Injury Defense: General; Prof'l Malpractice Def; Workers' Compensation Def
Renee L. Monfort	Heyl Royster	Champaign	217.344.0060	Health; Medical Malpractice Defense
Brian M. Smith	Heyl Royster	Champaign	217.344.0060	Civil Rights/Constitutional; Commercial Litigation; Employment: Management
Toney J. Tomaso	Heyl Royster	Champaign	217.344.0060	Workers' Compensation Defense
Kenneth R. Torricelli	Heyl Royster	Champaign	217.344.0060	ADR: Personal Injury
Daniel P. Wurl	Heyl Royster	Champaign	217.344.0060	Commercial Litigation; Insurance/Coverage/Reinsur; Medical Malpractice Defense
James D. Cottrell	James D. Cottrell Law Office PC	Champaign	217.693.4905	Agriculture; Close/Private Held; Land Use/Zoning; RE: Commercial; Trust/Will/Estate
Larry A. Apfelbaum	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Workers' Compensation
Todd A. Bresney	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Personal Injury: General
William J. Harrington	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Personal Injury: General
Robert M. Javoronok Jr.	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Kathy A. Olivero	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Workers' Compensation
John J. Waldman	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Workers' Compensation
Richard P. Klaus	Klaus LeFebvre & Wince LLP	Champaign	217.337.4700	Civil Appellate; Commercial Litigation; Personal Injury Defense: General
Thomas B. Borton	Livingston Barger Brandt & Schroeder LLP	Champaign	217.351.7479	Commercial Litigation; Medical Malpractice Defense; Prof'l Malpractice Defense
Kevin M. Toth	Livingston Barger Brandt & Schroeder LLP	Champaign	217.351.7879	Commercial Litigation; Medical Malpractice Defense; Prof'l Malpractice Defense
Joseph R. Wetzel	Livingston Barger Brandt & Schroeder LLP	Champaign	217.351.7479	Commercial Litigation; Medical Malpractice Defense; Personal Injury Def: General
David M. Moss	Moss & Moss PC	Clinton	217.935.8341	Workers' Compensation
Nicholas M. Schiro	Schiro & Themer	Danville	217.443.1721	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Rowan E. Themer	Schiro & Themer	Champaign	217.607.0750	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
William A. Peithmann	The Peithmann Law Office	Mahomet	217.586.6102	Agriculture; RE: Commercial; RE: Residential; Tax: Individual; Trust/Will/Estate
Denise Knipp Bates	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Elder; Real Estate: Residential
Justin N. Brunner	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Civ Rts/Constitution; Gov/Muni/Lobby/Admin; Med Mal Def; PI Def: Gen; Prof'l Mal Def
Eric S. Chovanec	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Employment: Management; Labor: Management; Workers' Compensation Defense
James D. Green	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Insurance/Coverage/Reins; Personal Injury Defense: General
Richard R. Harden	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Medical Malpractice Defense; Personal Injury Defense: General
Kenneth D. Reifsteck	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Civil Appellate; Workers' Compensation Defense
John M. Sturmanis	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Workers' Compensation Defense
Lott H. Thomas	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Trust/Will/Estate
John T. Wozniak	Wozniak & Associates	Urbana	217.367.1647	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	Champaign	217.356.1570	Personal Injury: General
Charles W. Sprague	Livingston Barger Brandt & Schroeder LLP	Champaign	217.351.7479	Medical Malpractice Defense
Nathan T. Kolb	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Civil Appellate; Insurance/Coverage/Reins; Medical Mal Def; PI Defense: General

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**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 2023 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 Oct. 19 at the I Hotel and 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 the Managing Editor of The News-Gazette. Reach him by email at ndugan@news-gazette.com or by phone at 217-393-8253.



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



CHAMPAIGN COUNTY
REGIONAL PLANNING
COMMISSION

www.CCRPC.org

Toriana Rhone

Congratulations, Toriana, on being named a Forty Under 40 winner by Central IL Business Magazine!

The Champaign County Regional Planning Commission appreciates your 15+ years of service and leadership that has culminated in being a state-wide recognized leader in workforce development program management.

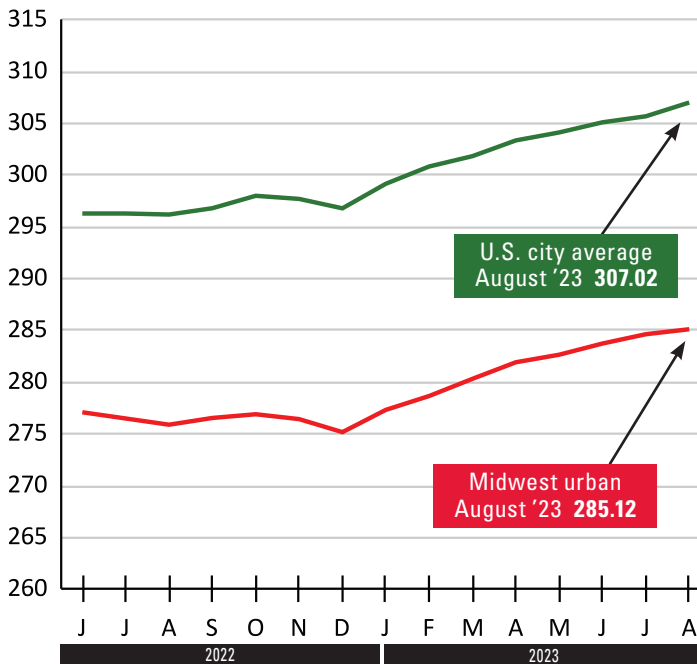
Thank you for making a positive impact
in our five-county service area.

- Dr. Justin Arnold and the Workforce Development Staff at RPC

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.



Hotel/motel statistics

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

TOTAL REVENUE		
August '23	July '23	Change
\$469,413.78	\$538,065.02	▼ 12.76%
YEAR-TO-DATE TOTALS		
2023	2022	Change
\$3,523,862.74	\$3,017,899.70	▲ 16.76%

Source: Cities of Champaign and Urbana

Unemployment rates for Central Illinois counties, state and nation

County	Labor Force	Jobless	August '23 (%)	July '23 (%)	August '22 (%)	Change Month (%)	Change Year (%)
Champaign	108,094	6,034	5.6	5.0	4.1	▲ 0.6	▲ 1.5
Coles	22,552	1,330	5.9	5.6	4.6	▲ 0.3	▲ 1.3
Douglas	10,251	464	4.5	4.4	3.4	▲ 0.1	▲ 1.1
Edgar	9,529	431	4.5	4.2	3.5	▲ 0.3	▲ 1.0
Ford	6,251	340	5.4	5.3	4.3	▲ 0.1	▲ 1.1
Iroquois	12,541	658	5.2	4.9	4.2	▲ 0.3	▲ 1.0
Macon	46,655	3,357	7.2	6.9	5.5	▲ 0.3	▲ 1.7
McLean	92,320	4,528	5.0	4.6	3.7	▲ 0.4	▲ 1.3
Moultrie	7,724	333	4.3	4.0	3.2	▲ 0.3	▲ 1.1
Piatt	8,495	403	4.7	4.5	3.4	▲ 0.2	▲ 1.3
Vermilion	33,210	2,343	7.1	6.6	5.1	▲ 0.5	▲ 2.0
Region	357,622	20,221	5.4	5.1	4.1	▲ 0.3	▲ 1.3
State	6,487,015	341,077	5.3	4.5	4.8	▲ 0.8	▲ 0.5
U.S.	168,049,000	6,623,000	3.9	3.8	3.8	▲ 0.1	▲ 0.1

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

Willard Airport passenger totals

Monthly totals	August '23	August '22	Change
Enplanements	5,821	4,964	▲ 17.3%

YTD totals	August '23	August '22	Change
Enplanements	45,041	39,080	▲ 15.3%

Annual totals	2022	2021	Change
Enplanements	63,128	53,375	▲ 18.3%

Weekly grain prices

Prices for grain crops for the week of Oct. 2, 2023. Figures are for this week and the percentage change compared with a year ago.
(b) = per bushel; (t) = per ton; (100 wt.) = per hundredweight

Grain	Oct. 2, 2023	2022
Central Illinois Corn (b)	4.43	▼ -32.3%
Central Illinois Soybean (b)	12.35	▼ -6.8%
Central Illinois 48% Soybean Meal Rail (t)	393.40	▼ -15.8%
Hard Red Winter Wheat (b)	6.9675	▼ -34.7%
Truck to Kansas City		
Dark Northern Spring Wheat (b)	8.6875	▼ -22.6%
14% MN, Rail		
Soft White Wheat Portland (b)	6.6083	▼ -30.5%
Sorghum, Kansas City (100 wt.) Rail	5.0475	▼ -28.1%

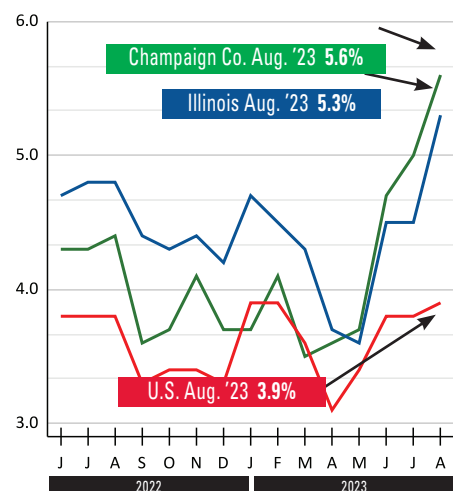
Source: USDA Livestock & Grain Market News

Prices at the pump

Average price per gallon of regular unleaded gas as of Oct. 4, 2023.

Area	October '23	October '22
Bloomington-Normal	\$3.58	\$4.04
Champaign-Urbana	\$3.66	\$3.99
Chicago	\$4.25	\$4.85
Danville	\$3.63	\$3.98
Decatur	\$3.51	\$3.97
Illinois	\$3.78	\$4.21
U.S.	\$3.79	\$3.81

Source: AAA

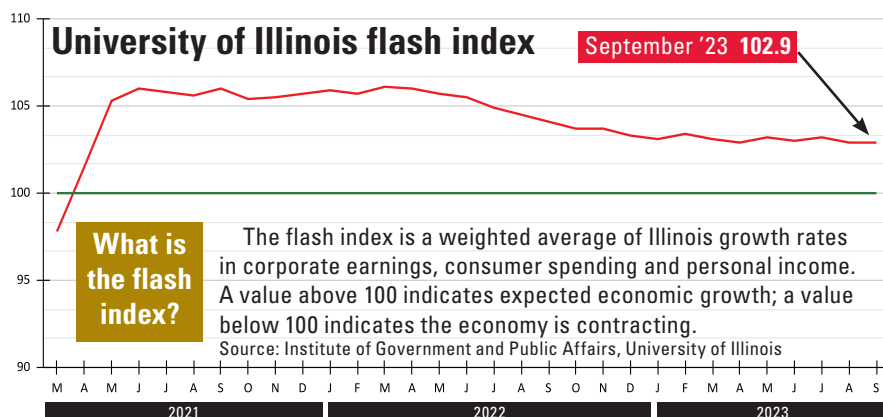


Home sales

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

County							Median sales price		
	2Q 2023	2Q 2022	Pct. Change	2023	2022	Pct. Change	2Q 2023	2Q 2022	Pct. Change
Champaign	689	776	▼ -11.2%	1,090	1,243	▼ -12.3%	\$222,000	\$200,000	▲ 11.0%
Coles	157	173	▼ -9.2%	266	296	▼ -10.1%	\$110,000	\$114,900	▼ -4.3%
Douglas	52	60	▼ -13.3%	94	100	▼ -6.0%	\$141,000	\$151,250	▼ -6.8%
Edgar	32	52	▼ -38.5%	69	89	▼ -22.5%	\$85,100	\$77,750	▲ 9.5%
Ford	45	50	▼ -10.0%	73	86	▼ -15.1%	\$125,000	\$110,000	▲ 13.6%
Iroquois	62	81	▼ -23.5%	107	138	▼ -22.5%	\$129,900	\$130,000	▼ -0.1%
Macon	340	432	▼ -21.3%	584	696	▼ -16.1%	\$135,000	\$122,900	▲ 9.8%
McLean	572	665	▼ -14.0%	924	1,103	▼ -16.2%	\$242,000	\$215,000	▲ 12.6%
Moultrie	35	39	▼ -10.3%	55	77	▼ -28.6%	\$101,900	\$103,700	▼ -1.7%
Piatt	50	67	▼ -25.4%	88	116	▼ -24.1%	\$184,950	\$189,900	▼ -2.6%
Vermilion	169	191	▼ -11.5%	290	349	▼ -16.9%	\$105,000	\$100,000	▲ 5.0%
Illinois	38,236	49,920	▼ -23.4%	64,016	84,295	▼ -24.1%	\$280,000	\$279,900	0.0%

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 Sept. 28, 2023, 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. Sept. '23	U.S. Sept. '22
30-year fixed	7.31%	6.70%
15-year fixed	6.72%	5.96%

Source: Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corp.

Congratulations!

40 LEADERS UNDER 40



DEANNA CAPEL
Executive Vice President
Director of Busey Experience



VALERIA ROHDE
Assistant Vice President
Associate Portfolio Manager,
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Central Illinois Business Magazine
Forty Under 40
Man of the Year
2023

MEET THE JUDGES

FORTY
UNDER
40
2023

CENTRAL ILLINOIS BUSINESS MAGAZINE
THANKS ITS PANEL FOR ITS HARD WORK IN
SELECTING THE FORTY UNDER 40 CLASS OF 2023



GIANINA BAKER

ACTING DIRECTOR
NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

Baker provides leadership and directs research specific to the assessment of student learning at colleges and universities, primarily under the Lumina Foundation grants, at NILOA. Her main research interests include student learning outcomes assessment at Minority Serving Institutions, access and equity issues for underrepresented administrators and students, assessment in athletics, and higher-education policy.

She holds a Ph.D. in educational organization and leadership with a higher-education concentration from the University of Illinois, a master's in human development counseling from Saint Louis University, and a bachelor's in psychology from Illinois Wesleyan University.

Previous to this position, she was director of institutional effectiveness and planning at Richland Community College in Decatur.

Baker was first appointed to the Champaign school board in February 2016 and then elected in April 2017, and was elected president this May.

EMMA DORANTES

DISABILITY RIGHTS LITIGATOR, SPECIAL EDUCATION INITIATIVE
ILLINOIS GUARDIANSHIP & ADVOCACY COMMISSION

Representing students with disabilities with the Illinois Guardianship and Advocacy Commission's Special Education Initiative, Dorantes gives a voice to families throughout the state.

She previously represented individuals in civil mental health trials in Champaign, McLean, and LaSalle Counties with the commission's Legal Advocacy Service.

Before joining the commission in 2018, Dorantes worked in private practice, both in Chicago and most recently as a partner at a Champaign firm.

Dorantes serves on the Champaign County Bar Association (president, 2018-23) and the Illinois State Bar Association's Education Law and Disability Law committees and volunteers as a Champaign County Certified Master Gardener.

Previously, she has served on the boards of National Alliance on Mental Illness of Champaign County, the Champaign-Urbana Theatre Company, and Promise Healthcare.



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SUE GREY
PRESIDENT & CEO
UNITED WAY OF CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

Grey has been a member of the United Way of Champaign County team since June 2006. She has over 37 years of experience working with the community bringing people and resources together to make lasting change and positive impact in our community.

Previously, she worked at the Champaign Park District organizing community events, managing volunteers and working with the board of commissioners. She also spent three years as CEO of the Green Meadows Girl Scout Council.

She is a member of Champaign Rotary, an Alpha Phi alumnae and class member of Leadership Illinois 2019. Grey was elected to the Champaign school board in April 2007 and re-elected in 2011, serving as president for two years. She was also a recipient of the Champaign County Chamber of Commerce's Athena Award in 2005 and was selected as A Woman of Distinction by the East Central Illinois Girl Scout Council in 2012.

She has been married to Tom for 36 years and has three children and three grandchildren.

STEPHANIE STUART
CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER
PARKLAND COLLEGE

Stuart also serves as vice president for strategic partnerships and workforce innovation at Parkland. She is a two-time graduate of the UI College of Media, earning a bachelor's in news-editorial journalism and master's in strategic brand communication. She is now pursuing a doctorate in Ferris State University's Doctorate of Community College Leadership program.

Stuart started her career in tech public relations before transitioning into a more community-focused role in 2012, becoming director of communications and community relations for the Champaign school district. In 2017, she joined Parkland as director of marketing and public relations and was promoted to vice president for communications and external affairs a year later.

Stuart is a member of the Forty Under 40 Class of 2014 and serves on several community boards and councils, including board chair of the Champaign County Economic Development Corp. in 2021-22.

She and husband Dustin live in Mahomet and have two young children, Harper and Lennox.



STEVE SUDERMAN
OWNER
GOOD VIBES SOUND

Suderman transferred to the University of Illinois from Valparaiso University in 1968, and in 1971, he was a founding member of Good Vibes, a local retail business that sells and services audio/video gear.

Over its 50-plus years in Champaign, the company has employed over 500 people, launched dozens of careers and boasts a distinguished alumni of successful grown-ups who were mostly well under 40 when they started.

Suderman became president of Good Vibes just before 9/11, piloted the business through recessions, two relocations, the COVID-19 lockdown and a looting.

A self-described expert at crisis management, Suderman has been happily married for 23 years and plays dad to two cats.



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WOMAN OF THE YEAR

JA'NAEA MODEST | 38

Owner, **DJ Silkee Entertainment**



Story Joey Wright ☞ Photos Robin Scholz

If you've been to a big event in Champaign-Urbana, chances are pretty good that you've seen — and heard — Ja'Naea Modest at work.

Modest — who performs as DJ Silkee — is a staple at business functions, campus events, homecoming dances and just about

anywhere that live music makes sense.

"I work for myself along with doing my classes," said the Urbana High School grad who lived in Danville until sixth grade. "I did not see myself getting to this point, I can say that. I'm just sitting here and loving it. I can't wait to get to the next level."



2023 Forty Under 40 Woman of the Year Ja'Naea Modest, aka DJ Silkee, teaches music mixing to Kenya Covington, 13, and Aleah Emmers, 17, at the Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center in downtown Urbana.

Modest's path to performing — which has enabled her to appear on "The Steve Harvey Show" and perform in front of a variety of crowds in East Central Illinois — began when she was dealt a challenging blow.

She was riding a motorcycle in September 2011 when she suffered a bad accident on Interstate 74.

"Honestly, I probably should not still be alive," Modest said.

The resulting settlement led to a chance to pursue a longtime dream.

"I bought my equipment, and from there, (I did) a lot of stuff pro bono, and then my name started getting out," she said.

In the decade since, the 2023 Forty Under 40 Woman of the Year has turned a near-death experience into a passion project that has made an impact on audiences and students around the area.

It came together quickly after she was able to invest in the right equipment.

"From the DJs that really didn't give me a (chance), it took me into a mind-set of 'OK, now I've got to prove myself,'" Modest said.

"That made me get my work ethic; that made me get out there and just say I can DJ it, you know, I don't have a problem DJing it, and from that, it built up, it kept building up, and my clientele kept getting bigger and bigger, and now we're here today."

There weren't a lot of people willing to show Modest the ropes when she first began to perform.

A few did, like NAME and DJ Mondo. The basics that Modest needed to know included blending music and investing in the right equipment for gigs.

Modest reflects their kindness while teaching children and teens the craft of mixing music at myriad camps throughout the area.

"Usually, a lot of a lot of girls or people that look like me, don't get a chance to experience different courses like this," Modest said. "They don't get a chance to touch the equipment, they don't get a



Ja'Naea Modest, left, takes a lunch break with girlfriend Dionne Lipscomb and their dog, Chi Chi, at Helms Park at the south end of the Second Street Detention Basin in Campustown.

From the nominator

"Ja'Naea is a true community servant. She uses her passion and skill for music to empower and encourage young people. She has spent years working with youth who may not be engaged by traditional means. Not only does she provide entertainment, she also provides hope." — **Mary Catherine Roberson**, 2022 Forty Under 40 Woman of the Year

chance to be able to be around it or see what kind of the lifestyle is, in a sense."

The camps are designed to teach kids the same basics that all DJs should know, from setting a cue to mixing songs together to good stage presence.

Modest has access to portable equipment that allows students to get valuable hands-on experience that they might not always get.

"It just warms my heart every time I do a camp," Modest said. "I get a different set of girls every time and I just don't know where it's gonna head. This last camp, one of my campers, she came up and gave me a hug, and it almost made me like tear up because I'm just like dang, I really affected this girl."

Accessibility is a pillar of Modest's classes.

"I've always done the course for free," Modest said. "I didn't want kids to pay for it. If you want to try it, the craft is there for you. And like I said, it just blew up from there. It's still going; I wasn't expecting myself to be three years strong."

There's a bit of everything in Modest's repertoire, allowing her to play different

genres of music at a wide variety of functions.

As long as the crowd is into it.

"I'm also one of those types of people, like, 'I'll take your request,'" Modest said. "If I don't feel like it's going to move the crowd, I might not play it, but I'll take a request."

Those crowds frequently congregate around Modest's booth when she's on the University of Illinois campus performing at myriad events geared toward students.

She was able to get nearly the entire new freshman class to sing along to Rick Astley at a recent event at Memorial Stadium.

"One of my biggest events that I truly love doing is Sights and Sounds of the U of I," Modest said. "I'm pretty much one of the point people that freshmen get to see when they come on campus."

As for the one piece of advice Modest would offer aspiring performers?

"Just be a people person," Modest said.

"That's the biggest thing. Be a people person and just be willing to listen. A lot of people, they want to know that you can look at their standpoint." 



Congratulations Darrin Hightower, Jr!

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MAN OF THE YEAR

BREADEN BELCHER | 32

Grants Division Manager, **City of Urbana**

Story Joey Wright  **Photos** Robin Scholz

History is part of what drives Breaden Belcher to create a better future for residents of Urbana.

Belcher — a self-described history buff who earned history degrees from Taylor University in Indiana and Florida State — has served as the city of Urbana’s grants

manager since December 2020.

“I’ve always been a big history buff,” Belcher said. “It was really fun and exciting to be able to kind of study that for so many years. That was where I got my first introduction into the grants world, that was primarily working with humanity grants, research grants and things like that.”



Breaden Belcher, grants division manager for the city of Urbana and 2023 Forty Under 40 Man of the Year, talks about the Crystal View Townhomes near Crystal Lake Park in Urbana. Belcher administers grants that help low-income people secure housing in the complex.

It's a role that allows the 2023 Forty Under 40 Man of the Year to make a positive impact on the future of people in Champaign-Urbana every day.

"I've really loved the work because you can just see so clearly the impact that the work has on the community," Belcher said. "This money really just kind of flows through the city, we don't necessarily keep it. The whole point is that we're getting the money out into the community to do good."

Originally from the suburbs of Detroit by way of Florida and Illinois, Belcher moved to the area in 2017 and quickly became involved in a capacity that fit his degree.

He was associate director of the Champaign County History Museum for just over one year before becoming executive assistant to the Champaign County circuit clerk in 2018.

He said that experience — which ended when he began his current job in 2020 — informed much of what he does today, noting it was his "introduction into the intersection between housing issues and the criminal-justice system."

"Someone gets a ticket and it's a minor ticket, but they can't afford to pay it and then it just kind of snowballs," Belcher said. "Before you know it, they're facing serious criminal charges, and that was just very eye-opening, just the impact that policy has on people's lives."

Belcher's impact is substantial in a role that isn't always front-facing or directly in the spotlight.

He manages about \$10 million annually and distributes the funds to those who take advantage of the city's grant programs. That could mean rental-assistance programs, social-service organizations or nonprofit organizations that target areas of need.

"Sometimes all the grant reports and numbers can seem a little cold and impersonal," Belcher said. "But I always try to remind myself that this is really about serving the people of Urbana and also the community as a whole."

Picking a favorite project is difficult in a role where any money doled out can play a big role in helping an organization get people on the right track. Belcher points to the work his team did at the height of the pandemic — when he was still relatively new to the job — as particularly rewarding.

"Just seeing how the community came together to see a problem and fix the problem," Belcher said. "I saw so many examples of people just really coming together and working together and being creative, being collaborative and just finding solutions."

Distributing funding to local youth programs also provides plenty of gratification. Belcher has helped distribute about \$300,000 in the last year to local nonprofits that provide program services through Urbana's youth-services grant program.

"Working with these nonprofits in the community has been so inspiring," Belcher said. "Just seeing the incredible work that they're doing, getting to read the stories of the kids that they're working with and their success and how this program has posi-



From the nominator

"Breaden has a very kind demeanor and friendly manner, but he is also very intelligent and exudes a powerful energy. He simply wants to work and see people be 'better.' We need more people like him, especially now." — **Bridget Broihahn**, *City of Urbana*

tively impacted them."

Belcher credits good people around him with making his life easier.

"There's that network, that community of people who are equally as passionate about making a positive impact in their community," Belcher said. "Seeing their drive, their enthusiasm, that I think keeps me going as well."

His impact comes in a city that he has embraced — and then some — since moving here six years ago.

He said Champaign-Urbana's myriad bars and dining options — Rose Bowl Tavern and Golden Harbor are among his favorites — stand out, along with different opportunities to connect with the outdoors.

"I love being outside," Belcher said. "So you know, mountain biking at Kickapoo (State Recreation Area), or my partner and I, last summer, we had a goal of going to every Champaign County forest preserve, so that was really fun. I love running at Homer Lake, especially this time of year, when the weather is really nice."

American history — specifically the Civil War era — was Belcher's field of expertise when he studied the subject. Returning to it may be of interest to him down the line.

Not that he's planning on changing things up anytime soon.

"I would love to just be, like, a museum curator and/or, I don't know, a battlefield tour guide or something," Belcher said. "Because I just love things like that." 

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Forty Under 40 Congratulations Javaite!

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CHERIE AVENT | 38

Assistant Professor, Educational Psychology, **University of Illinois**



Winners' portraits by **Robin Scholz**

Community involvement: Collaborating with a local African American churches and the Champaign-Urbana Public Health District to understand community experiences with COVID-19; partnering students with local community organizations to offer evaluation services through a course that I teach.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Joining the faculty in the UI Department of Educational Psychology. Many scholars/thought leaders from the field of evaluation have worked and retired from this department. It's an honor to start my career here and be surrounded by their influences to create my own trajectory.

I attribute my success to ... my faith in God; the love and support from my husband, parents, brothers, and other family and friends; and my graduate adviser, Dr. Ayesha Boyce.

What's your one unbreakable rule? Never compromise your moral or ethical responsibilities as an educator of our future generation of leaders and scholars.

The most important lesson I've learned in my professional career is ... Associate yourself with individuals who have as much to lose as you do should something go wrong; otherwise, you will be setting yourself up for failure.

My partner/best friend/mom would describe me as ... Direct quote from my husband: "Inspirational, my rock, intellectually astute, driven, dedicated, people-focused, huge heart, caring and professional."

From the nominator: "Dr. Avent's contributions to bringing together the community to address the inequality faced by Champaign's minority population are a worthy reason to be celebrated. She is devoted to positively impacting populations of the community who are often overlooked." — **William Bernhard**, *UI executive vice provost for academic affairs*

MAGGIE BAKER | 30

Coordinator, Leaders in Employing All People Program, **Developmental Services Center**

Community involvement: Member, Champaign AMBUCS, Champaign County Chamber of Commerce and Champaign Center Partnership; board member One Winter Night.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Exceeding the target number (25) of LEAP-trained businesses in the community. Last fiscal year, we trained more than 60 businesses.

I attribute my success to ... my family! My wife is my rock. I wear a lot of hats, and she supports me no matter which hat I am wearing. I couldn't navigate my life without her by my side. She is my everything. My parents and sister are also a big part of my support system. They offer words encouragement and pick me up when I need it most.

Best advice given or received? Respect and care for others! We are given one chance in this life; we need to do it right.

Best decision you've ever made? Staying in Illinois. Boy, I am sure glad I did. In 2018, I had a couple of radio opportunities in New Jersey and Texas. I made the decision to stay. I met my wife shortly after, and the rest is history.

The most important lesson I've learned in my professional career is ... Learning is something that continues. Just when you think that you've learned it all, fasten your seat belt; there is another lesson right around the corner. Gosh, life would be boring if we didn't continue to learn ... wouldn't it?

From the nominator: "You only have to meet Maggie once to agree she is worthy of recognition. She is the epitome of positivity and approaches her work with the success of others as her goal. She possesses a passion for helping people become their best selves, a can-do attitude and a genuine interest in seeing people reach their goals and dreams." — **Patty Walters**, *executive vice president of clinical services*



DAMIEN BANKS | 31

Physician Office Manager, Primary Care & Pediatrics, OSF HealthCare

Community involvement: I am currently the treasurer of the Parkland Foundation board and enjoy being able to support scholarships and funding for students within the community. Additionally, I am on the Audit Committee of Promise Healthcare, an organization dedicated to serving the underserved community in Champaign-Urbana.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Successfully opening the Rantoul OSF Urgent Care.

I attribute my success to ... my parents laying a great foundation, framework and support. Additionally, my friends, family and mentors that have helped guide and support me.

Best advice given or received? Choose a field of study or work that you're passionate about!

The most important lesson I've learned in my professional career is ... Find work that fuels your passion and drive! There is nothing worse than going to a position or employer and not enjoying the day-to-day work. I recommend people go by the 80-20 rule. If you enjoy your job 80 percent of the time, continue doing the work and find ways to expand your experience. There will be 20 percent of the job you may not enjoy, but that comes with any job; just try to take those negatives and learn from them to grow.

To relax, I ... spend time with family and friends. I am also a huge advocate for taking naps!

From the nominator: "Damien has a passion for serving others, and he works diligently to ensure that he is a beacon of hope for those around him. His volunteerism, professional work and general disposition to ensure that everyone has a voice is admirable and honorable." —

Stephen Edwards, former colleague



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SHAWNA BENTON | 39

Chief Financial Officer, **Armory Capital LLC**



Community involvement: I am involved through a few different organizations where I volunteer as opportunities arise and I also take leadership roles on the boards of some groups. To name a few, Champaign West Rotary, DMGBC Foundation, United Way, CU Church, Eastern Illinois Estate Planning Council and the Champaign-Urbana Theatre Company.

Proudest professional accomplishment: My largest and most challenging client in public accounting asked me to be their CFO.

I attribute my success to ... continuous learning, not just professionally, but personally as well.

Best advice given or received? Only you can change how much you work and the boundaries you set to find the work/life integration that you want.

Best decision you've ever made? Taking on a new role professionally and growing myself by changing career paths after 15 years.

The most important lesson I've learned in my professional career is ... You are responsible for both your successes and failures; learn from both.

From the nominator: "Shawna distinguishes herself as an exemplary community volunteer by consistently demonstrating exceptional dedication, passion and impact toward causes she cares deeply about. Her commitment to our community sets a wonderful example for others to follow. She is a busy professional, mother and wife, yet finds time to volunteer with about nine organizations. She is dependable and consistent in her volunteer community and will stop at nothing to better the lives of others." — **Paula Santiago**, *peer and fellow board member*

CHAUNDRA BISHOP | 37

Regional Health Officer, Champaign Region, **Illinois Department of Public Health**

Community involvement: With my sorority, Sigma Gamma Rho, I am involved in a number of activities, including the Big Give at Stone Creek, CU Days, Jettie Rhodes Day and others. Additionally, I serve on a couple of boards of nonprofits.

I attribute my success to ... Three things: Goal setting, adaptability and a positive mind-set. Even if you set a goal to achieve something, it may not always work out the way you've planned, so you have to be able to adjust strategies as needed. A positive attitude can help you overcome challenges, build resilience, and attract opportunities.

Best advice given or received? The best advice I can offer is be willing to step out of your comfort zone. Being willing to do this and face uncertainty can lead to significant rewards.

What's your one unbreakable rule? Never compromise yourself or your morals.

Best decision you've ever made? Running for office (Bishop has served on the Urbana City Council since 2021).

The most important lesson I've learned in my professional career is ... Physical and mental health are the foundation for success. Taking care of your well-being ensures you have the energy and focus to pursue your goals.

My partner/best friend/mom would describe me as ... Resilient, resourceful and, above all else, kind.

To relax, I ... watch TV/movies — comedies are my favorite; play with my dog, Riley James; or exchange memes with my siblings.

From the nominator: "She's a fighter and always puts others ahead of herself. To say that she deserves this award is an understatement. Her will to live goes beyond herself, so she can show what is possible for those who may come behind her." — **DeShawn Williams**, *Champaign County Treasurer's Office and member of the Forty Under 40 Class of 2022*



ASHLEY BUERKETT | 37

Owner, **Bentley's Pub, Taylor Street Lofts**

Proudest professional accomplishment: Making it safely through COVID-19 as a bar was definitely something that sticks out. It was a big challenge to provide that level of safety and still hope people enjoy themselves in that kind of scenario.

I attribute my success to ... My parents, who were both entrepreneurs and made it look easy. My younger sister, who taught me a lot about work ethic but also self-care and balance. And of course, my amazing fiancé, Garrick, who is so loving and supportive and gives the best advice.

Best advice given or received? Try to walk into a situation or conversation with the attitude that you could learn something from it. Nine times out of 10, with a positive mind-set, you will!

Best decision you've ever made? I used to work for a very corporate design company in Chicago, and while I loved a lot about it and learned a lot from it, I think quitting was the most freeing thing I ever did. I realize I am definitely not a 9-to-5 person and love a varying schedule with different challenges every day.

The most important lesson I've learned in my professional career is ... Never judge a book by its cover.

To relax, I ... listen to music and walk at Meadowbrook Park, watch some kind of true-crime show, play video games, practice Spanish or Swedish on Duolingo, watch TikTok, or work on genealogy projects. It all depends on my mood!

From the nominator: "Ashley symbolizes everything that is good about our community: She is hard-working, kind, creative, clever, sage, savvy and hipster! She is Champaign-Urbana personified!" — **Robin Kaler, friend**



CONGRATULATIONS Cory Roberts



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STEPHANIE BURNETT | 39

Director, Moving to Work Program, **Housing Authority of Champaign County**



Community involvement: My husband, Herbert Burnett, and I run a nonprofit organization called Not on My Watch that works with area youth on financial literacy, leadership development, academic support, business, the arts, sports and recreation, and creating a safe space for youth to have fun and learn. I am also active in my church, New Free Will Baptist Church, where I am the youth director and financial secretary. I also serve on several boards, including the Rantoul Township High School board, Birth to 5 Illinois Region 9, the Champaign County Board's Broadband Task Force and the Community Action Board.

Proudest professional accomplishment: It's hard to name just one, but I will go with developing the Small Business Opportunity and Workforce Development Program at the housing authority. Since its implementation, it has provided financial assistance to almost 10 small business and over 25 participants with goals to earn their high school diplomas, certification in the trades and/or complete college-level courses.

I attribute my success to ... my parents. From Day 1, they set a solid foundation for my siblings and me. We were taught "God first, family second and education third." Having those priorities in that order has made the biggest difference in my life.

Best advice given or received? Never stop working toward your goals or what your definition of success is. Sometimes it may feel like throwing in the towel is the best option, but instead of giving up, re-evaluate the process and keep fighting.

Best decision you've ever made? Giving my life to Christ. He has blessed me immensely over the years and I can never thank Him enough.

From the nominator: "I may be a tad biased, but if I could bottle up the genuine concern (very rare in 2023) that Stephanie has for all mankind and sell it, I would be rich. When she sets her mind on something, she will do all that she can to accomplish it." — **Herbert Burnett**, *spouse*



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MARKETING MANAGER



**CHAMPAIGN
PARK DISTRICT**

JAVAITE BURTON | 33

Director of Community Impact, **United Way of Champaign County**

Community involvement: CU Kiwanis Club board member; Girls Go For It board member; vice president of diversity, equity and inclusion for the Junior League of Champaign Urbana; graduate of the United Way Emerging Community Leaders program; member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Inc.; community volunteer.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Working at United Way, where I help create lasting change in our community.

I attribute my success to ... The special people in my circle who challenge and encourage me to live up to my full potential.

Best advice given or received? Don't compare yourself to others. Run your own race.

My partner/best friend/mom would describe me as ... compassionate, devoted and understanding.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... Never be afraid to fail. Failure provides opportunities to learn and create change.

To relax, I ... meditate and listen to music.

From the nominator: "She's efficient and focused in a fast-paced environment. She has a deep passion for fairness and equity. She cares for others and is able to put herself in their shoes to understand their perspective. She not only works in service to her community; she lives it, too. She is a leader on the move, and our community is lucky to have her!" — **Beverley Baker**, *United Way of Champaign County*



DEANNA CAPEL | 34

Executive Vice President, Brand Experience Director, **Busey Bank**

Community involvement: Serving as the chair for the First United Methodist Child Care Center committee; supporting Monticello Washington Elementary School's PTO; serving on the Victory Over Violence committee; giving back through various Busey volunteer opportunities and campaigns.

Proudest professional accomplishment: It's truly a culmination of progress and lifelong relationships. The ability to see your work impact the fiber of the Busey organization, and beyond that, impact the lives within our wonderful communities. I've met some of the best leaders, mentors and friends over my tenure, and I'm grateful to continue to build upon our impact.

Best advice given or received? Time waits for no one — so make the moments you have count. And of course, listen to "Everybody's Free" by Baz Luhrmann.

Best decision you've ever made? I can't imagine my life without my husband and true partner, Kaelob. At this point, we've been together longer than we were apart, and I'm certain my life is immensely better because of his influence, love and support. When either of us has a goal, challenge or idea, we're behind one another, building our approach and talking through our plan of attack. I'm grateful to know I always have my home team — my husband, three beautiful and wild boys, endlessly supportive parents and friends — and I know I'm fortunate to have had this support throughout my life. It makes all the difference.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... Find meaning in your work and make meaningful relationships — there's nothing greater than having a purpose and sharing the day-to-day with incredible people.

From the nominator: "Deanna is a naturally positive individual and committed to putting her best foot forward in each interaction she has with others in both her personal and professional life —making her a well-deserved recipient of this honor." — **Amy Randolph**, *supervisor*



MICHAEL CROSBY | 39

Lead Pastor, **First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana**



Community involvement: I'm the current chair of the Interfaith Alliance of Champaign County. Most recently, with several pastor friends, I am co-leading an ecumenical, multi-racial book study of "The Politics of Jesus," by Obery Hendricks. The book challenges those of us who follow Jesus to pattern our lives after his radical call to bring good news to the poor and set free the oppressed. I have also helped lead the environmental justice effort through the nonprofit Faith in Place. I also had a short and deeply satisfying career as a soccer coach for third- and fourth-graders in the Champaign Park District.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Most of my proudest moments are not mine but belong to a whole community of people. The people in my church built a house for a longtime member who needed a place to live. I advocate for queer and trans people in religious spaces where their humanity is often diminished.

I attribute my success to ... I try to listen to the Spirit and follow her lead. This means paying attention to people, prioritizing quality over quantity, resisting false urgencies and quick fixes, growing things that will outlast me, and trusting in others and the divine initiative.

Best advice given or received? Be kind to yourself. The is a first step to transformation.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... Embrace mistakes and get good at sincere apologies. This means receiving criticism non-defensively, working to understand how I misunderstood or harmed someone, and making commitments that help prevent it from happening again..

From the nominator: "Michael is a dynamic faith community leader who advances the flourishing of our community in far-reaching ways. He has dedicated himself to building and tending to relationships that span faith traditions and institutions." — **Martha Moore**, *church member and friend*

A photograph of a woman in a CIBM Bank uniform (grey t-shirt, blue pants, red belt, and blue cap) shaking hands with a man in a dark suit and a bright yellow safety vest. They are standing in front of a cardboard box. The background is a blurred industrial or warehouse setting.

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JACQUELYN DOUGLAS | 38

Assistant Principal, Garden Hills Academy, Champaign

Community involvement: Most recently, the Breast Cancer Awareness Walk, ushering at the Martin Luther King Jr. Countywide Celebration and coaching 10U fast-pitch softball with Central Illinois Diamonds since summer 2019.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Taking the next step in my professional career. The hard work, sacrifice and growth it takes to get here is nothing but God's plan. I am still growing into my purpose and what God has in store for me.

I attribute my success to ... the strong line of passionate, courageous and hard-working family members that have paved the way before me. My parents, Dr. Preston and Ivy Williams Jr., have encouraged me and have lifted me up during my educational and professional growth journey.

Best decision you've ever made? Becoming a mother to two phenomenal girls, Gemma Kye (11) and Amaya Jade (10).

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... It is OK to take time for you; everything is not going to get accomplished in one day. One of my mentors, Dr. Fuller, and my sister, Dionne Webster, will routinely ask, "What have you done for Jackie today?" Although there are times I cannot answer, to have them continually asking keeps me honest and working towards this goal of a healthy work/life balance and having fun while doing it.

To relax, I ... enjoy working out, shopping, coaching, watching sports and traveling/spending time with my family.

From the nominator: "Jacquelyn has made an indelible impact on countless numbers of children and teachers as a social worker, an administrator and a coach. Her reach has been far and wide." — **Asia Fuller**, *supervisor*



GUNNAR EDWARDS | 31

Owner, Rally Point Fitness



Community involvement: Our gym has helped dozens of people around the Douglas County and Champaign areas lose thousands of pounds and find themselves through fitness. We also started Wednesday night "veteran hangouts" that give veterans a place to hang around each other and build the camaraderie they've missed since getting out of the military. These eventually evolved into what is now 217 Vets, a nonprofit organization that looks to re-instill veteran camaraderie in the pursuit of suicide awareness and prevention.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Having countless veterans tell me that our organization saved their life. All the stress and hard times of running organizations is all worth it if we can help out one veteran.

I attribute my success to ... my daughter. Peyton is the greatest thing that's ever happened to me. She saved me from being unhappy the rest of my life. I want to show her that regardless of how tough your life is at times, if you truly put in the work, you can do amazing things in this world.

Best advice given or received? Dive in head first. No one knows what they are doing until they do it.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... not everyone wants you to succeed. A lot of people want you to do well, but they don't want you to do better than them. Find people that are truly cheering for you and are happy for your success and celebrate your wins.

From the nominator: "Gunnar pours everything into his business and the organization he founded. He is fully committed to helping others achieve a healthy lifestyle, and to be present for veterans who are struggling with going back to their 'normal' lives. What started as a vision has grown into a newfound culture of support and encouragement for our community to grow and flourish, where everyone is welcome." — **Jamie Nixon**, *client/gym member*

MARNITA HARRIS | 35

Assistant Dean of Students, **University of Illinois**



Community involvement: I currently serve on the advisory board for Women United, as a life coach for DREAAM and on the scholarship selection committee for the Martin Luther King Jr. Advocacy for Justice committee. A few years ago, I also started my own service project called the Blessing Bag Project and during the winter months, I supply hygiene kits to the unhoused.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Working with a student who was dealing with severe mental-health/academic challenges and seeing them make it to graduation. The student even came to meet with me the week of their graduation to thank me for supporting them; that moment was truly full circle, because I knew the challenges this student had overcome.

I attribute my success to ... God's grace and my own personal drive and hard work.

Best advice given or received? Control what you can control and just focus on the next step!

Best decision you've ever made? Embarking on my own spiritual journey — building a personal relationship with God and exploring who I am as a person and who I want to be.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... Don't be afraid to ask questions. No one has all the answers, and you're not expected to, either. Ask questions; that's the only way you will learn and grow.

From the nominator: "Marnita is engaged in the community, a strong advocate and constantly becoming involved in new opportunities. She is a true inspiration and highlight to everyone she meets." — **Katie Fidler**, *friend and member of the Forty Under 40 Class of 2022*

MADELINE HERRMAN | 25

Director of Public Policy, **Champaign County Chamber of Commerce**

Community involvement: Through my work at the chamber, I have the privilege of working on transformational projects and advocacy that improves and shapes our community. I also enjoy volunteering with iRead-iCount and the University of Illinois' Mock Trial Team, where I serve as a coach.

Proudest professional accomplishment: A few years ago, I was told that I "make politics and government fun." This field can be incredibly polarizing and seems daunting or confusing, so to be told that I make this field enjoyable is an honor. There's so much good that civic engagement brings to communities, and empowering others to see the good that advocacy can bring is amazing.

I attribute my success to ... my loved ones. My family and my partner are my champions. They have consistently believed in me in moments where I doubted myself and push me to live to my full potential. I am extremely grateful to them.

Best advice given or received? As only my dad could say: "Don't do stupid things." It's served me incredibly well.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... Remember that everyone is human. People make mistakes, disagree and have bad days, and it's all OK. Take time to connect with others as people and not just as contact in your network.

From the nominator: "Madeline goes above and beyond her position. She puts a lot of work and passion into her job and loves to learn new things that can help her position. She is an amazing co-worker and one of the hardest workers I know." — **Kelsie Woelfle**, *co-worker*



DARRIN HIGHTOWER JR. | 39

Automotive Sales Manager, Serra Champaign Auto Group

Community involvement: I have a nonprofit named DK2 (Darrin's Kids 2). We have thrown three annual 100 haircut events where we provide free haircuts, food, bounce houses, face painting and much more. We also have a Derric Hightower Jr. Scholarship, where we have sent a young man to Schlarman two years in a row tuition-free!

Proudest professional accomplishment: Starting my own successful nonprofit.

I attribute my success to ... my family. My family is my why.

Best advice given or received? Believe in yourself and don't take no for an answer.

Best decision you've ever made? Making the move to the Champaign automotive market rather than staying in Danville's market.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... don't pay attention to what others are receiving or doing. What is for me, will be for me! Also, it's not what you know, but who you know!

To relax, I ... like to work out every morning at 4:30 a.m. to put me in a relaxing state to conquer my day.

From the nominator: "Darrin is compassionate, motivated and determined. His work ethic is bar none. He has a natural ability as a self-starter and leader who inspires, leads and mentors his team on a daily basis, priming everyone around him for success. He is a true community leader who exemplifies the tenets of the Forty Under 40." — **Katherine Hightower**, *spouse*



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Forty Under 40 in 2023!**

ELLEN HOOK | 37

CEO, Bruegge and Co./Ashley HomeStore



Community involvement: We donate mattresses and furniture annually to a variety of organizations and directly to people in need. We've donated through local groups like the Cunningham Children's Home, Darkhorse Benefits for veterans and more.

Proudest professional accomplishment: I have to say being the fifth generation is a special thing for me. The company's 150-year party last year was incredible, but more than that, I would say the challenge of navigating multiple retail locations and delivery crews during COVID-19, so keeping our business moving and growing during that time was an accomplishment!

I attribute my success to ... my upbringing. My parents never made small business look glamorous. In fact, hard work, discipline and a "get up and do it again" attitude helped me be successful in college sports and now in business.

Best advice given or received? Focus on your outcome. In every conversation, interaction, goal, business venture, meeting ... always have your outcome in mind; otherwise, your days and hours ultimately belong to someone else.

Best decision you've ever made? It is hard to pick just one, as we are a sum of the choices we make! I would say following my heart has always been important for me when making decisions.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... to be myself. When I was younger, I thought I needed to "be an example" for my team by exemplifying some sort of "perfect professional" and it was ultimately not me. I think it cost me some good relationships in my early career. It's important to align beliefs and values with behaviors and environment.

From the nominator: "Ellen wants to work for her team every day to make them better and the company better so we can carry it on to the sixth generation and beyond, serving all the communities our stories are in. I don't know a more focused, determined woman." —

Sheila Bruegge, mother

ANDREA JACKSON | 39

Principal, Thomas Paine Elementary School, Urbana

Community involvement: I'm a proud member of the Theta Lambda Zeta Graduate Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc. I serve on the scholarship committee where we have awarded college scholarships to local deserving high school senior girls who have demonstrated their resilience. We do various service projects within the Champaign-Urbana community. I have also served on the Stone Creek Church Worship Team since 2018.

Proudest professional accomplishment: I'm most proud of my accolades and accomplishments achieved after becoming a divorced single mother. While working as a family engagement and curriculum coordinator, I went back to school to pursue my master's in education administration. During this time, I received an Unsung Hero Award. My leadership experience coupled with my master's prepared me to become an assistant principal, and now principal.

I attribute my success to ... I would have to say the ability to persevere, thanks to my faith, encouragement from family and friends and my wonderful children.

Best advice given or received? Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.

Best decision you've ever made? Joining the Urbana school district. I've worked with amazing colleagues that have helped to shape me as an educator and made me a better leader.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... Always look at situations or problems from more than one perspective. When you fail to see others' points of view, you limit your own learning.

From the nominator: "Andrea has committed to the students in our community for almost 20 years. She is a young, strong woman of color working a career field dominated by White women. She has persevered through challenging situations with students returning to school following COVID-19." — Angi Franklin, supervisor and 2016 Forty Under 40 Woman of the Year.



HOLLY KELLY | 39

Regional Educational Technology Coordinator, Learning Technology Center, Regional Office of Education

Community involvement: For the past six years, I've proudly served as a Girl Scout Leader for my daughters. I also serve as board president for the Mahomet-Seymour Girls' Basketball Association. I firmly believe that active involvement in our children's lives is not just a responsibility but a privilege.

Proudest professional accomplishment: The synergy I've discovered within both of my job titles: regional educational technology coordinator and director of social emotional learning. This convergence has allowed me to cultivate a profound understanding of the intersection between technology and human well-being. It's been immensely rewarding to witness individuals and communities embrace the importance of balance, empathy, and responsible technology usage in an increasingly digital world.

I attribute my success to ... the intricate tapestry of relationships that have woven their way through my life, both those that challenged me and those that uplifted me. Each connection, whether positive or negative, has been a vital thread in shaping the rich fabric of my experiences.

Best advice given or received? Embrace the practice of openly sharing your positive thoughts and emotions.

Best decision you've ever made? Leaving the comfortable cocoon of a 15-year-long career. In doing so, I willingly stepped into a world that was unfamiliar, challenging and uncertain. This courageous leap not only opened my eyes to new perspectives but also illuminated the path to a life filled with light, happiness, and a harmonious balance.

From the nominator: "Holly is the most passionate educator I have ever met. She is willing to do whatever it takes to make sure that students, teachers and administrators have the tools and information they need to succeed." — **Matt Kelly**, brother-in-law



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FOR UNDER 40 2023

JENNA KOSS | 36

Director of Sales, **Campus Ink**



Community involvement: Active board member on the Illinois Quarterback Club and volunteer for the Illini Rebounders Club. Mentor for Screen Print Magazine's Mentorship Project.

Proudest professional accomplishment: At the beginning of 2023, I set a goal to hit \$1 million in personal sales by Sept. 1, and I crushed it on Aug. 25!

I attribute my success to ... the support of my little (personal and work) family. They rally behind all of my crazy ideas, adventures, goals and ambitions with grace. These people are my full circle!

Best advice given or received? Whatever you do, give it 100 percent.

Best decision you've ever made? Marrying my husband, Jason! We've been together for almost 18 years (half of our lives)!

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... Trust in the power of failure. People will inevitably experience challenges and make mistakes. Not everything you do will be successful. With no mistakes, there would be no opportunity to learn.

To relax, I ... enjoy going to our pond property with my husband and almost-4-year-old son, Axel. We love to fish, take the boat out, have a bonfire or just relax by the dock.

From the nominator: "Jenna truly is our eyes and ears on every part of our business. She's incredibly in tune with our day-to-day workflow. She sees challenges and she faces them head on. She is the person you can always depend on." — **Jedd Swisher**, *co-owner*

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JOHN MARQUARDT | 38

Director, State Farm Center

Community involvement: I serve as vice president for programs and as a member of the executive board of the Boy Scouts of America Prairielands Council.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Being from the community having the opportunity to help lead an iconic university and community landmark is something I am quite proud of. We've had the opportunity to host some huge events that have created lifetime memories for a lot of people. It's quite an honor.

I attribute my success to ... I've had the opportunity to work with many servant leaders over the years who truly understand the concept in practice. Following their example in spirit has really helped to guide me, both personally and professionally.

Best advice given or received? Leave it better than you found it.

Best decision you've ever made? Deciding to leave my previous passion of teaching and the field of education to pursue a career in live sports and entertainment management.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... People will not necessarily remember the things you do or say, or even necessarily the experiences you help to provide them, but they will always remember how you and your work made them feel.

From the nominator: "John threads the needle of satisfying the community's desire for premium entertainment without sacrificing State Farm Center's budget just to make a splash. He has steadily improved the fan experience during the last few years. He is never thanked for doing this, and would never expect to be thanked." — **A.J. Martin**, *friend*



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MOLLY McLAY | 39

Owner, **Mighty Maven Mentoring**; Telehealth Therapist, **Elliott Counseling Group**



Community involvement: In addition to my work as a therapist with folks around trauma, anxiety, gender transitions and sexuality concerns, I worked for many years at the UI Women's Resources Center providing advocacy for survivors of gender-based violence. I also volunteered for many years with Rape Advocacy, Counseling and Education Services on its hotline and as a medical advocate. I am currently the vice president/secretary of the Champaign County Mental Health Board.

Proudest professional accomplishment: I have two. The first is having taught over 600 UI students to be peer educators for gender-based violence prevention and to have witnessed these students become fantastic advocates and supporters. The second is having solo-authored one of the first academic papers on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on survivors of domestic violence during the early lockdown period, which made a large impact on this area despite me being only a first-year Ph.D. student at the time.

Best advice given or received? "This above all, to thine own self be true," from Shakespeare's "Hamlet," and "Always try to be nice, but never fail to be kind," from "Doctor Who."

Best decision you've ever made? It's a tie. Professionally, it goes back to one fateful day in 2007, sitting on my lunch break, when I decided to become a therapist and then apply for my master's in social work. Personally, it goes back to one fateful day in August 2018, when I saw an intriguing physics professor pop up on a not-to-be-named dating app and swiped right, and now we're married. Never underestimate the power of online dating!

From the nominator: "Molly offers her expertise and wisdom toward the health and well-being of our community through private-practice therapy, mentoring others, pursuit of a doctoral degree and service to people who rely on publicly funded systems. She shares important observations and points us toward fair and innovative solutions." — **Lynn Canfield**, executive director, Champaign County Mental Health Board

BRIDGETTE MOEN | 34

Planning Director, **Champaign County Forest Preserve District**

Community involvement: I volunteer with the Grand Prairie Friends and assist with maintenance of a few small civic gardens in the area.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Overhearing positive comments when visiting projects in which I was involved in the planning or design. Even if it's something as simple as a stranger appreciating a park bench I placed or my kids being excited to play with friends on a playground I designed, it reminds me of the importance of public greenspace and why I entered this field.

I attribute my success to ... the support of my family and colleagues. As I write this, my dad is caring for my kids while I'm at a conference. It's not easy being a working parent, but my partner and kids being understanding while I'm attending an evening meeting or my co-workers covering while I'm home with a sick kid makes it much easier to balance working and taking care of my family.

Best advice given or received? Be a lifelong learner. Your formal education is only a primer for the knowledge needed to be an effective professional.

Best decision you've ever made? Moving back to Champaign-Urbana. I'm from the area and moved to Chicago for a career opportunity after graduate school. It was a great job and I enjoyed living in the city, but I feel most at home in East Central Illinois and I love working on project in my community.

To relax, I ... garden in the warmer months and sew in the winter.

From the nominator: "Bridgette works to help provide nature-based recreation and cultural opportunities for the citizens of, and visitors to, Champaign County. The quality of life in our area is directly improved due to her talents and commitment to coordinating projects that benefit the public." — **Michael Daab**, supervisor



HANNAH MYERS | 38

Utility Billing, Community Outreach and Engagement, City of Arcola

Community involvement: I am the former treasurer (2018-19) and president (2020-23) of the Douglas County Museum, where I would assist the director with fundraising and community outreach activities. I was appointed, then elected this year, to the Arcola school board as acting secretary. I am the chair of the Arcola Tourism Committee and a St. Jude runner who has raised over \$8,000 to date. I also created and maintain the city of Arcola's Facebook page.

Proudest professional accomplishment: I entered a graduate assistantship and graduated summa cum laude with my master's degree during the height of the pandemic and with two kids that transitioned to remote learning.

I attribute my success to ... It might sound a bit cliché, but growing up in a small town. I learned the power of having connections and thinking outside the box.

Best advice given or received? Become a "lifelong learner" and never think you are "too old" or "too experienced" to try something new. Lifelong learning is all about approaching each day with an open mind and thirst for knowledge regardless of age, experience or circumstance.

Best decision you've ever made? To go back to college. And not for some prestigious title, promotion or better pay. It was a personal feat I set out to accomplish, and in doing so, I found valued in pursuing a "goal" rather than a specific degree.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... honesty and transparency. Remaining honest and transparent, whether that means asking for help or owning up to faults/mistakes, can be a valuable tool when it comes to managing the complexities of a career.

From the nominator: "Hannah is a selfless person who just loves to help people and is exceedingly generous with her time. She thinks outside the box, and her creativity challenges those who work with her." — **Judy Landeck**, *friend*



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JORDAN NEAL | 38

Adult Services Manager, Champaign Public Library



Community involvement: Serving as an ambassador for the Chambana Welcome Crew has been a great way to connect with new residents and familiar faces. I am also a lifelong member of St. Matthew Lutheran Church the congregation that founded Sola Gratia Farm, a community-based farm dedicated to producing locally grown, high-quality natural produce.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Coordinating the library's first Community Job Fair in February 2020. It yielded many opportunities for everyone involved. Many participants have shared their subsequent successes as a result, and it brings me joy.

I attribute my success to ... my family. They are my biggest fans and my foundation.

Best advice given or received? Be kind. Give grace — to yourself and others.

Best decision you've ever made? It's a tie between becoming a nurse and joining the Illinois Librarian Association. Being a nurse has helped me serve as an advocate and guide for my family with their health care. Joining ILA yielded many professional networking opportunities for me.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... While working a public library, we can never make assumptions about our audience. Keep an open mind.

From the nominator: "I admire Jordan and the professionalism she brings to each and every day. There are not words powerful enough to describe what she means to this library and our community. I am better for knowing her, and she makes em want to be better every day."

— Tricia Duzan, supervisor

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BECCA OBUCHOWSKI | 39

Executive Director, **Community Choices Inc.**

Community involvement: Housing Authority of Champaign County Board of Commissioners since 2018; Channing Murray Foundation Board President (on board since 2017); helped support the Bucket Brigade food-delivery program during the height of COVID-19; championed efforts to add an accessible first-floor bathroom (construction starting soon); chaired the Champaign County Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Agency Council since 2018; on the steering committee for the Disability Expo since 2016.

Proudest professional accomplishment: I am very proud of the work that Community Choices does every day, the part that I've played to shape it and the ways that I've been able to carry forward the hopes and philosophy of the families who founded it.

I attribute my success to ... My family and friends have always valued community, so I have had thousands of amazing examples of how we can work to champion the well-being and dignity of all people.

Best advice given or received? I often tell my staff that when working to support people and families, they need to be detectives. We all have difficulty explaining what we need in tough times, so our job as staff in human services is to figure that out even if the person can't tell you.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... When problems or conflict come up, you need to run toward them, not away. It can be my (and many people's) gut response to back or shy away, but times of challenge or conflict are when you should give more of your attention and energy — face it head-on and work toward a solution.

From the nominator: "Becca has dedicated her career to fostering and growing a business that serves the people of Champaign County. She has recognized areas of need in C-U and taken active steps to build supports in the community." — **Jill Brink-Rutter**, *board member*



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CINDY OGWAL | 34

College and Career Readiness Specialist, **University of Illinois Extension**



Community involvement: I am the co-founder of the Champaign-Urbana Black and African Arts Festival. I organize the festival and connect with community partners to implement this festival that has been going on for five years now. I am also a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc., where I was most recently chair for international awareness and involvement, and where I implemented a blood drive and international awareness program for World AIDS Day.

Proudest professional accomplishment: When one of my students who was a teen mom received a full scholarship to the college of her dreams. This student is now in a master's program and I am very proud to be a part of this journey.

I attribute my success to ... Being ambitious and persistent.

Best advice given or received? Just start, believe and watch it grow.

Best decision you've ever made? Marrying my husband.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... The only way to do great work is to love what you do.

From the nominator: "Cindy's exceptional leadership, impact on youth, extensive experience, commitment to community engagement and contributions to cultural enrichment make her a deserving candidate. Her dedication, passion and ability to effect positive change make her an outstanding individual who has made a significant difference in the community." — **Phillip Ogwal, spouse**

TIM ORAVEC | 33

Community Development Manager, **Experience Champaign-Urbana**



Community involvement: I'm lucky to have a job that allows me to work for our community every day, whether it's collaborating with partner organizations, presenting to residents, learning and telling stories about local businesses or helping promote Champaign-Urbana's many incredible features.

Proudest professional accomplishment: While working in Chicago, I was part of a team that developed and passed a county ordinance that targeted opioid abuse and environmental contamination by developing a program for safely disposing of unwanted and expired medications. Today, the Cook County Sheriff's Office reports having collected and safely destroyed more than 97 million pills because of the program.

I attribute my success to ... luck, hard work and a long line of extraordinary mentors who believed in me, challenged me and supported me.

Best advice given or received? The Franciscan friar Richard Rohr says he prays for "one good humiliation a day." No matter how successful we become, a "good humiliation" will always remind us to stay humble, and that's when real introspection and growth occurs.

Best decision you've ever made? Being an English major in college. I can draw a direct line between my decision to study English and most of the adventures, accomplishments and meaningful relationships I've enjoyed since then.

To relax, I ... read, cook, listen to music, watch TV or go for a walk.

From the nominator: "Tim exhibits a level of maturity and professionalism rarely seen at his age and stage in career. He is an exemplary employee who is dedicated to this community, and I can only imagine what his future holds. He has inspired me, supported me and impressed me at a level that deserves recognition." — **Kelly White, colleague**

AMY PILCHER | 38

Audit Director, **Martin Hood**

Community involvement: I've served as treasurer of the United Methodist Church in Monticello since 2019. This allows me to serve on the church council, the finance committee and the stewardship committee. I'm also a volunteer in the children's ministry there. Most of my current community involvement includes activities in which my children are participating. I've led a 4-H club in Piatt County the past four years and volunteer to coach youth basketball and softball. My husband and I have also been involved with the Eastern Illinois Foodbank, American Heart Association and United Way.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Passing the CPA exam before finishing my master's degree at the UI helped set me up for success. More recently, I've helped double our employee benefit plan audit practice at Martin Hood. As we're expanding the firm, I'm proud of all the opportunities we are giving younger team members to grow and succeed.

I attribute my success to ... determination and my faith. I try to always give it my all and stay organized. My parents were always very encouraging, which definitely helped too!

Best advice given or received? Don't put off till tomorrow what you can do today.

Best decision you've ever made? Marrying my husband, Chad; we make a great team!

To relax, I ... We're big Illini fans and spend most of our Saturdays in the fall tailgating. I'm not sure it's very relaxing, but I do enjoy the family time!

From the nominator: "Amy is a linchpin in our firm. Her leadership skills and technical expertise make her a standout in our industry. She deserves this recognition because of her commitment to excellent, dedication to being a champion of others and for going above and beyond to improve her own and the firm's quality of work." — **Jeff Livesay**, *supervisor*



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TORIANA RHONE | 38

Workforce Development Program Manager, Champaign County Regional Planning Commission



Community involvement: On a professional level, I have taught financial literacy classes to both male and female inmates. I was a part of the Emerging Community Leader Program in 2021. During my time there, I visited and presented valuable information regarding services for the community to nonprofit agencies and first responders. On a personal level, I am heavily involved in youth sports. I tend to find myself organizing fundraisers, working concession stands, transporting youth to and from activities, and donating to those whom otherwise are unable to participate.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Receiving a proclamation from the governor for organizing and hosting National Apprentice Week in Champaign in 2018.

I attribute my success to ... my upbringing. I come from a close-knit family. I grew up watching the adults around me work hard and show empathy toward others. I attribute that largely to my work ethic and how I have been able to accomplish the things I have so far in my career.

Best advice given or received? Never settle, and give back. Never stop learning all that you can, and use that knowledge to become an asset to your daily work. And most importantly, pay it forward.

Best decision you've ever made? Speaking up during my senior year of college. I needed an internship and most were taken. I recall being down on myself for procrastinating. I embarrassingly approached my department chair with my dilemma. She without hesitation sent me the contact for the director of what's now called Community Services at the Regional Planning Commission. I landed the internship, was hired on at the end of it, and have been working my way up ever since.

From the nominator: "Tori is truly one of the most committed and thoughtful people I have ever met. She helps me make sure our program is successful, which makes an impact on hundreds of people in our community every year." — **Justin Arnold**, supervisor



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CORY ROBERTS | 36

Senior Mortgage Banker, 217 Mortgage Powered by Flat Branch Home Loans

Community involvement: From 2017 until May of this year, I was a full-time firefighter at the Urbana Fire Department. I also ran an annual golf outing for the Urbana Firefighters Local 1147 charity fund that consistently raised \$8,000-plus in funds. I was also lucky enough to win Eastern Illinois Foodbank Prom King in 2022, based on funds raised. In a 1.5-month span, I was able to host several events that earned me the top spot at just under \$12,000.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Being honored with the Mission Impact Award along with Prom Queen Lisa Rector. Each year, this award recognizes community members for their impact on alleviating hunger.

I attribute my success to ... It all started with the unwavering support of my family. At different phases in my life, I've always had mentors who have helped guide me. It's all about whom you choose to surround yourself with and seek advice from.

Best advice given or received? Live for Jesus.

Best decision you've ever made? Deciding to volunteer in my community.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... Nothing changes if nothing changes. It's easy to stay comfortable and tread water. But in order to grow and to get a different result, you have to create change.

From the nominator: "Cory is a true value to the community. He is always going the extra miles for everyone. He is a great leader, wonderful dad and a remarkable friend. He has an innate sense of empathy in helping customers and residents alike." — **Katie Fidler**, *friend and member of the Forty Under 40 Class of 2022*



VALERIA ROHDE | 39

Associate Portfolio Manager of Fixed Income, Busey Bank



Community involvement: I am a member of Second Wind Running Club, and I have served on its board and that of Champaign County Court Appointed Special Advocates. This year, I started a group called Mis Amigas de Champaign-Urbana in an effort to bring Latina women in the area together to support each other and be involved in our community. It has only been about seven months since it started, and we already have 94 women in our Facebook group.

I attribute my success to ... an incredible work ethic from my mom and the confidence that anything is possible from my dad. These two living examples gave me the tools to overcome soul-crushing challenges in life and have gotten me to where I am today.

Best advice given or received? It's never too late to follow our dreams. We create our own story. Challenge how things should be, including social expectations and success.

Best decision you've ever made? Going back to college at 30 years old was life changing, but this was possible by having an encouraging and supportive husband. So marrying my husband was the best decision I've ever made.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... we are all just people. The best leaders I've ever met treat everyone with respect and are not self-important. I am fortunate to know many such leaders at Busey.

From the nominator: "Valeria is wholly dedicated to the pursuit of success — both personally and professionally. In getting to know her, I have been impressed by both her consistent growth mind-set and her propensity for service. She's just as genuine as she is selfless." — **Van Dukeman**, *chairman and CEO*

JACOB ROSKOVENSKY | 38

District Librarian, **Danville School District**; Owner/Operator, **The Mill at Sugar Grove Reception Hall**



Community involvement: Last year, I served on the Edgar County Broadband Committee. I currently serve on the bi-county tractor cruise committee, which brings 50 to 75 classic tractors to East Central Illinois for a 2.5-day cruise. As owner of The Mill at Sugar Grove, I have established a partnership with Tri-Kappa of Vermilion County, a philanthropic sorority dedicated to charity, culture and education. This year, I am president-elect of the Association of Illinois School Library Educators. This will be my second time serving as president.

Proudest professional accomplishment: When my two professions have collided. I have been able to host two weddings of students whom I taught when they were in elementary school. As an educator, we teach the students, and often, we don't get to have a front-row seat at some of their major later life events. The two weddings that I had that front-row seat for were great weekends..

I attribute my success to ... growing up on a farm on the state line. I learned the value of hard work and perseverance tending to the cattle, working the ground, making hay and hauling grain.

Best advice given or received? Figure out what is important to you. That is what you need to spend your time doing.

Best decision you've ever made? At 30 years old, I bought 40 acres. I wasn't too sure what I was going to do with it, but it sits next door to the farm that my grandparents bought in 1968. I have been farming it and experimenting with alternate crops for the best use of the land.

To relax, I ... cruise on my 55-year-old JI Case tractor. I love to hear the diesel engine and feel the breeze on my face.

From the nominator: "Jacob has become a leader in his school and across the state in his chosen profession. He has established his business with the goal of providing a quality venue for weddings. He approaches everything he does with enthusiasm, knowledge and honesty. I am proud to be his colleague and friend." — **Caroline Campbell**, *colleague*

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PAULA SANTIAGO | 38

Director of Engagement, **United Way of Champaign County**

Community involvement: I am a member of the Champaign West Rotary club and honored to serve as president-elect, board member and chair of the vocational and scholarship programs. I also serve on the board of the East Central Illinois chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals. I am a volunteer with the iRead-iCount program through the Champaign County Chamber of Commerce. I served at Meadowbrook Community Church and was part of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program in Vermilion County.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Having the resilience and intentionality to do the balancing act of making an impact (something very important to me), being the best human, wife, mother and friend I can possibly be and navigating competing priorities while working full time and completing my bachelor's degree in my 30s.

I attribute my success to ... Everyone who believed in me during the most challenging of times. My closest friends, relatives, sometimes total strangers.

Best advice given or received? Never let fear get in the way of living out your purpose.

Best decision you've ever made? On a quest to find myself and discover my purpose, I decided to take a leap of faith and leave everything and everyone behind in Manilla, Philippines (where I was born and raised) and move to the U.S. at age 25. My life here, everyone I met and everything I learned in the past 13 years has been a true blessing that I will never be able to fully express in words. I pinch myself almost every single day!

To relax, I ... read inspiring books and sing karaoke!

From the nominator: "Paula is one of the most selfless individuals I have been blessed to know. She is truly dedicated to improving the lives of people in this community who need it the most, especially women and children." — **Marnita Harris**, *friend and fellow member of Forty Under 40 Class of 2023*



DANTE SCOTT | 27

Library Associate, **Douglass Branch, Champaign Public Library**; owner, **Slim Entertainment**



Community involvement: I am a coordinator of the annual Juneteenth celebration held in Douglass Park, coordinator of Friday Night Jam Sessions at Douglass Branch, member of the Champaign County Community Coalition, University of Illinois Vice Chancellor for Research CORE Grant Steering Selection committee, Illinois Broadband committee, WILL's Black FM radio Community Advisory panel, Don Moyer Boys & Girls Club, Hip Hop Xpress & Ghetto Genius Universe, Illinois Library Association, mentor, music educator, and most of all, a strong advocate for underserved black youth and anti-gun violence.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Realizing the impact that I can have and the ability that God gave me to be able to connect with people in the community of all ages and backgrounds every day, from helping people fill out job applications at the library to creating memories on the dance floor, gives me the greatest sense of personal accomplishment.

I attribute my success to ... my late grandmother, Pamela Scott, who dedicated her life to raise me and instill in me all of the things that I am and aspire to be. She was rooted in faith, not just because it was her middle name. She left an impact on everything and everyone she touched and I am indebted to continuing her legacy, while leaving my own.

Best advice given or received? Never doubt yourself. Even though I am still growing in this area, I know that I am the only person that can hold me back.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... never be afraid to take a chance on yourself. When opportunities come your way, take them and dare to exceed even your own expectations.

From the nominator: "Dante will do anything for the community. He provides activities to youth to curb gun violence and mentors kids while also showing them what a leader looks like. He is the example of what it takes." — **Ja'Naea Modest**, *colleague and 2023 Woman of the Year*

A.J. THOMA III | 37

Senior Vice President, **Coldwell Banker Commercial Devonshire Realty**



Community involvement: Went through the Emerging Community Leaders program around 2010; Champaign West Rotary member since 2009 (currently serve as president and board member); Champaign Parks Foundation, 2016-23 (former chair); past member, Champaign County Economic Development Corp. Business Growth Committee.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Earning my Society of Industrial and Office Realtors designation. This is a group of 2,400 of the best and brightest commercial real-estate professionals in the world. The requirements just to qualify are not obtainable by 95 percent of industry professionals. It is a multiple-year requirement, with vast education requirements, interviews and peer reviews. I am one of the only downstate commercial real estate brokers to earn this designation (second to my father, who is now retired).

I attribute my success to ... relentless hard work, long hours, a drive to be the best that I can be, and the values that were instilled in me by my family.

Best advice given or received? The person who speaks last loses. ... There is nothing wrong with sitting back and taking it all in and only speaking when you are asked or have important details to add.

Best decision you've ever made? Deciding to never work in a corporate setting again. In high school, I was awarded a coveted internship in the systems department at State Farm. Although the experience was great, it was imperative to my decision to change my field of study from computer science working in web applications/development to economics and commercial real estate. Corporate life and culture was not for me. It is like putting a square peg in a round hole.

From the nominator: "A.J. is a hard-working broker who is dedicated to his profession. He has a commitment to high achievement, obtaining continuing education and earning prestigious designations at an early stage of his career." — **Tim Harrington**, *colleague*

RACHEL VOSS | 32

Marketing Manager, **Champaign Park District**; Co-founder, **Forge Ahead: A Party to Access**

Community involvement: Through the Champaign Park District, I connect our community to recreational programming, services and special events. I also serve as board chair of the Champaign Center Partnership and represent people with disabilities as the Chair for C-CARTS Rural Transit Advisory Group.

Proudest professional accomplishment: After two-and-a-half years of advocating the importance of disability representation in tabletop role-playing games, video games and TV/cinema, I was selected to present at the Game Developers Conference and separately educate the staff of Wizards of the Coast (Company that oversees "Dungeons & Dragons," "Magic: The Gathering," and more). My work was acknowledged and praised on an international level multiple times this year.

I attribute my success to ... Natural instinct, acting on opportunity and pure spite due to people telling me I can't.

Best advice given or received? Plan F is often better than Plan A. No matter how much time you put into the initiation stage of a project, changes will always happen.

Best decision you've ever made? The best decisions I make always involve choosing me. My whole life, I made decisions based on other people's plans for me. Once I started choosing me and what I want, that's when opportunities began to appear.

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... just because an opportunity is knocking at your door doesn't mean it's the correct one for you and where you're at in your career.

From the nominator: "Rachel advocates for unheard voices and always has equity in the forefront of her work. She is persistent, and through this persistence has made great things happen for our community." — **Chelsea Norton**, *supervisor*



CHRISTOPHER WALTON | 34

Chief Administrative Officer, Village of Savoy

Community involvement: Through my position with the village, the board of trustees has given me the opportunity to serve on many intergovernmental and nonprofit boards, including the Regional Planning Commission and the United Way of Champaign County, who do the hard and amazing work of meeting the various needs of our residents. However, I argue my true involvement in the community is facilitating our residents' and community stakeholders' civic engagement.

I attribute my success to ... my faith and my family. Life is a blessing and should not be taken for granted. I have a loving and supportive family, and I thank Jesus for them every day. He sustains me, and my family constantly motivates me to be a better version of myself.

Best advice given or received? Your self-worth is not dependent on another person's opinion of you. Have confidence in who you are. Find what you are passionate about, unyieldingly pursue it, refine your craft and strive to be better at it tomorrow than you are today.

Best decision you've ever made? Asking my wife for her hand in marriage. She is the amazing mother of our children, a kind and loving person, and my best friend. She supports me, encourages me, tells me hard truths and makes me laugh more than I knew was possible..

The most important lesson I've learned in my career is ... We live in a constantly evolving world full of people with as many opinions as there are stars in the sky. People and their drama are messy. Yet local government is at its absolute best when residents earnestly and constructively get involved. The success of the social contract between residents and their local government is predicated on active civic engagement, transparency and accountability.

From the nominator: "Christopher epitomizes a young leader whose work ethic is unmatched as he strives to serve our community." — **Joan Dykstra**, former village president who hired Walton, and **John Brown**, current village president



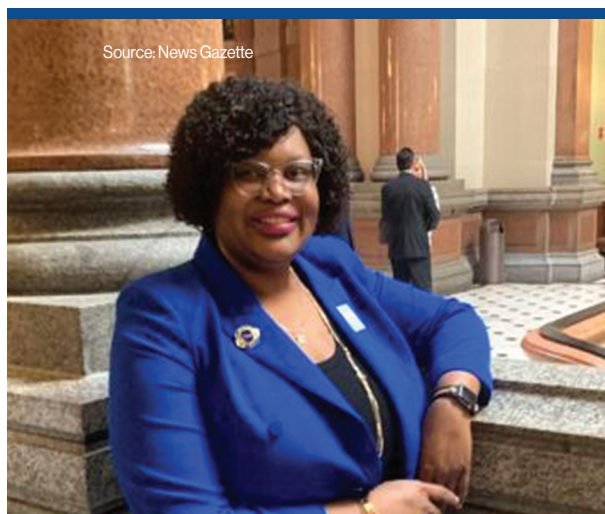
Congratulations Chaundra Bishop! Central Illinois Business 40 Under 40

As the Regional Health Officer from the Champaign Region, Chaundra is an exceptional public health advocate working for the people of this region and all Illinoisans.

IDPH is proud to have Chaundra on our team!



dph.illinois.gov



MARCY ZORA | 37

Judicial Law Clerk, U.S. District Court for the Central District of Illinois



Community involvement: I am president of the PTA of my children's school, Barkstall Elementary in Champaign. I also volunteer in my children's classrooms weekly. I also serve on the United Way's Women United Committee as a representative on its Signature Cause subcommittee.

Proudest professional accomplishment: Graduating first in my law-school class. Women have made great strides toward equality in the legal profession. But, it is still a challenge to break the high barriers. Eight of the top 10 students in my year were men; I was happy that women took the top two spots that year.

I attribute my success to ... my parents and my husband, Mike. My dad worked at an ice cream factory (which made our freezer very popular on our street). My mom was the first in her family to attend college and worked most of her life as a teacher. From a very young age, they encouraged their four children to save half of our earnings to pay for college. I met my husband when I was a senior at the University of Illinois and was considering law school. Even though he knew it might take me away, he bought me a book of the best law schools in the country and encouraged me to apply.

Best decision you've ever made? Turning down a job with a major law firm in Chicago. I was a summer associate for the firm and offered a job upon graduation. The starting salary was more than I make now (11 years later), but I did not want to be trapped in a high-stress/high-demand career. I am very grateful to former Illinois Supreme Court Justice Rita B. Garman for granting me a clerkship out of school that allowed me to decline the big firm life.

From the nominator: "Marcy embodies and leads with inclusion, justice and a fierce drive to create an equitable climate for those around her in professional, community and personal settings. She is part of the fabric of the diverse C-U community and in my mind, incredibly deserving of this prestigious award." — **Drew Keiser**, friend and member of the Forty Under 40 Class of 2022.

Congratulations

2023 FORTY UNDER 40



AMY PILCHER

Martin Hood is proud to congratulate Amy Pilcher on being named a 2023 Forty Under 40 winner. Amy's leadership, talent, and character are a vital part of our firm and have made a lasting impact in the community. Congratulations, Amy!



Avoiding 'elderspeak' with older customers

By WENDY BARTLO

Understanding and catering to diverse customer demographics is essential for success in business. One often-overlooked group with significant purchasing power is older adults. When interacting with them, however, businesses must be cautious about "elderspeak."

This refers to a manner of speaking characterized by overly simplistic language, exaggerated intonation and a patronizing tone. It often involves the use of terms like "honey" or "sweetie" and can include speaking louder or more slowly or a simplified register that sounds like "baby talk."

Elderspeak is problematic for many reasons. Most importantly, it undermines the dignity of older people and can be patronizing, implying that they are incapable or less competent than younger individuals.

Studies have shown that elderspeak can

lead to negative psychological effects. It can contribute to feelings of frustration, powerlessness and even depression, as they may feel infantilized or disrespected. Even when well-intentioned or unconscious, its impact can be just as detrimental.

Older adults are a significant consumer demographic with considerable spending capacity. Ignoring their needs can lead to lost opportunities.

There are many tips for avoiding elderspeak and engaging with older customers. This begins with not stereotyping them. Do not assume all older customers have the same needs or preferences. Treat each person as an individual, give them your full attention and listen to their concerns and preferences. Speak clearly and at a moderate pace, but avoid oversimplifying language or terms of endearment.

You should also avoid addressing them

as "young lady" or "young man." While this might seem harmless, it suggests younger is preferable. When in doubt, ask about their preferences. For example, should you use their first name or a title?

Lastly, provide employee training on age-sensitive communication, emphasizing the importance of polite interactions with customers of all ages.

Effective communication with older customers is crucial for businesses seeking to tap into this demographic's considerable buying power. Elderspeak is detrimental not only to older adults but also to business interests. By avoiding elderspeak, businesses can foster positive relationships and ultimately look forward to repeat business from older adults. ✂

Wendy Bartlo is the assistant director at the Center on Health, Aging and Disability in the College of Applied Health Sciences at the University of Illinois.



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The next generation of leadership



By LAURA WEIS
CIB contributor

Is it Lao Tzu's philosophy that "A leader is best when people barely know he exists; when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: We did it ourselves," or Gen. George S. Patton's "Lead me, follow me or get the hell out of my way" that resonates with emerging workforce leaders? It could be a combination of the two very different approaches. But one thing is sure — there are as many leadership styles, philosophies and viewpoints as there are people.

As simple as it sounds, the idea of leadership is actually very complex. It should be simple in that one leads, others follow. But what does a leader look like in the modern workplace? Has the idea of leadership in the office changed as new generations have moved through the ranks?

There are people in every generation born with innate qualities that make them destined to become leaders. We all know them. They are charismatic, authentic, confident and decisive and have a strong sense of purpose. They have the instinctual ability to inspire and influence others. But there are also "made" leaders whose skills develop through education, training and experience. They have learned communication, conflict resolution, accountability, adaptability and decision-making.

Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964. By 2023, the oldest are in their late 70s, and many are retired. Generation X encompasses those born between the mid-1960s and early '80s. The most senior members of are in their late 50s and turning 60 in 2023. Some have already started to retire, while others are approaching retirement. As Gen X begins to retire, management and leadership positions will open for new generations. How will Millennials and Gen Z lead? Some trends give us clues as to how workplaces might evolve.

Decades ago, workplace leadership was often a top-down, hierarchical model. There were clear lines of authority. Bosses made decisions at the top and funneled them down the chain of command. Modern leadership tends to be more inclusive and

collaborative. Communication and ideas are encouraged and valued, and today's leaders involve everyone in the decision-making process.

In the past, skills that launched careers in leadership roles were personal behaviors that exhibited authority, technical skills and a direct approach to work. There was little emphasis on soft skills. Today, companies emphasize skills such as emotional intelligence, active listening, conflict resolution, collaboration and relationship building.

Technology was limited in previous decades and did not factor into how people led their teams. The work was more manual and focused on managing physical resources. Today, leaders must be tech-savvy due to rapidly advancing technology, and must leverage changing tools for communication, collaboration, data analysis and project management. These tools create a new way of managing resources and leading a team.

In today's workplace, there is a much stronger emphasis on diversity in leadership. New leaders are more aware of the lack of representation of marginalized groups. New generations have a higher recognition of the value of diverse perspectives, and must create environments where all can be heard.

Leaders of previous generations led with the tools, information and expectations available to them. Leadership often relied on established principles and tried-and-true practices, with less emphasis on ongoing learning and adaptation. However, modern leaders will need to be agile and continuously learning. Industry trends, emerging technologies and evolving theories are happening so quickly that leaders must lead and learn as they go to remain effective in a rapidly changing business landscape.

Workplace leaders in 2023 and beyond will likely need to be more collaborative, inclusive, tech-savvy and adaptable in their approach. They will have to be comfortable being influential decision-makers, skilled communicators, empathetic listeners, and advocates for diversity and inclusion. Prioritizing the well-being and growth of their teams will become critical. Based on the Forty Under 40 Class of 2023, it is clear that Champaign County businesses are looking at a bright future, as the honorees pave a path with this evolving leadership style.

Congratulations to this year's recipients on behalf of the Champaign County Chamber of Commerce. On a side note (because this is my article, and I can), congratulations to Madeline Herrman, the chamber's public policy director, for being recognized as one of this year's Forty Under 40 and a bright spot in the Champaign County business community. ✂

Laura Weis, president and CEO of the Champaign County Chamber of Commerce, writes for Central Illinois Business magazine. Email her at LauraW@champaigncounty.org.

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