

SPRINGFIELD
Business
JOURNAL

July 2026

FORTY
UNDER **40** 2026

**Family and minority-
owned businesses**

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**Steve
Zhao**
central Illinois
developer

Allow me to extend my heartfelt congratulations to all of the Springfield Business Journal's Forty Under 40 recipients for 2026.

Thank you for the leadership and contributions you have provided for our community.

I look forward to hearing about many more of your future successes.



Mark D. Cortesi, Agent

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WOMEN'S EVENT CALENDAR

2026 ATHENA Award Ceremony
Thursday, July 23, 2026

Erin's Pavilion at Southwind Park in Springfield
5:30 p.m. Cocktail Hour | 6:30 p.m. Dinner | 7:00 p.m. ATHENA Leadership Award Presentation

www.iwil217.org/events/athena-award

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Life is a learning journey

If you are feeling discouraged about the state of the world, perusing the profiles of this year's Forty Under 40 recipients may help. These young people are not just overachievers in their professional lives, but determined to leave their community better than they found it.

While the recipients have a wide variety of professional backgrounds and interests, some common themes emerge in their approach to life. Multiple recipients said the worst career advice they ever received was "Stay in your lane," while a couple of others cited "Don't rock the boat." Rather than doing just enough to get by – without drawing attention – these young professionals have chosen to ask questions and volunteer for challenges.

Samantha Patrick of INB wrote, "Growth rarely happens by staying in your lane; it happens when you're willing to take on something new." And Megan Reynolds of the United Way of Central Illinois noted the importance of being willing to rock the boat when something isn't right. "The world will only get better when people are brave enough to do the right thing," she said.

The other common theme that emerges is the idea that "life is a learning journey," as Lingling Liu of the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity noted. Rather than following a clear-cut path, many recipients wrote about unexpected opportunities, obstacles that threatened to derail their goals and finding strength and growth in perseverance.

Craig Fiorito of Hanson Professional Services summed it up by saying, "I would tell my younger self to worry less about making mistakes and focus on the experience. The moments that feel like failure drive the most growth."

Making mistakes and experiencing setbacks are never enjoyable at the time, but a willingness to try new things – and sometimes fail – is something we can all benefit from, regardless of our age.



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a
Q & A
with
Steve Zhao

By David Blanchette

Developer and restaurateur Steve Zhao has lived in Springfield for more than two decades and during that time has been involved in projects across the city and beyond. He's developed multiple retail strip centers, often anchored by a restaurant in which he is involved. In addition to projects in Springfield, he's also built shopping centers in Decatur and Champaign.

Zhao has been involved in Springfield restaurant ventures including the Izumi Rotary and Bar sushi restaurant on Wabash and the Hibachi Madness locations on West Wabash Avenue and North Dirksen Parkway. He also owns the Asian Market on Wabash and the building next door at 1322 Wabash that now houses Hummus Republic and Annie's Place, as well as the MacArthur Boulevard building where Feast Buffet is located. Currently, Zhao is building a 53-unit apartment complex in Chatham, next to Glenwood High School.

Zhao lives in Springfield with his wife, Vicky Wu, and two children — a son, 14, and daughter, 13.

PHOTO BY ZACH ADAMS

Where were you born and raised, and what was your first job?

I was born and raised in a small village near Fuzhou, China. It's in southern China in the Fujian Province. At the age of 12, I immigrated to Springfield with my mom and brothers, and my first job was being a translator for my dad. He paid me a little bit, and he took me everywhere he went, talking with business owners, reading his letters and making phone calls for him. So translating for him actually helped me quite a bit later on.

What drew you to Springfield?

My dad opened a restaurant here in 1997, the First Buffet. Then my mom, my brother and I moved here in 1998. I stayed in the city because I fell in love with it. I like it here. It's not so noisy, everybody's so quiet, and the people are great.

Is Springfield becoming more open to patronizing establishments that offer experiences from other cultures?

From what I have seen they are more willing to try new things. Most of the restaurants that we have opened, the first couple of months were great. They were always busy, and I'm assuming that's because people want to try new things. In this town, as long as you provide good food and the price is right, they're more than happy to come.

What challenges have you faced with getting your businesses and developments approved?

There's not really a whole lot of challenge because I'm very conservative when it comes to business. I usually double-check with my attorney, check with the city, check the regulations, making sure everything is good. So if the city said no to a project, I'd usually just walk away and not take any more action or spend any more time on it. Aside from those instances, I really don't have many challenges with my projects.



Steve Zhao's current project is a 53-unit apartment building he is constructing next to Glenwood High School in Chatham. PHOTO BY ZACH ADAMS

How do business owners like yourself demonstrate an entrepreneurial spirit?

You have to be aware of your surroundings and have strong connections with others. I have a couple of brokers that I work with, and I always talk to them to see what's going on with the city of Springfield. Also, stay focused. If somebody else fails, it could be your No. 1 opportunity, right? With that being said, I always keep my mind open for other projects.



Steve Zhao and his wife, Vicky Wu, select a king crab for their dinner. PHOTO COURTESY STEVE ZHAO

What are the key factors in starting a successful and long-lived small business?

You've got to be willing to sacrifice your personal time and be on call 24/7. I have two phones, and they are both always on. You have to be patient with others. You can't get angry because they don't always see what you see. Be patient with your employees and treat them like family. They are assets, not tools, so treat them well. If you treat your employees well, they will always return the favor.

What can be done to even the playing field for all business owners and developers, regardless of ethnicity?

The key step for everybody is to work hard, obey the regulations, exercise caution and don't cut corners. I know a lot of people try to cut corners, and it always ends up making projects go even longer than they anticipated.

I don't feel disadvantaged being an Asian entrepreneur in Springfield. I have great people to work with, and I haven't experienced much bias in decisions involving me. I'm pretty happy with where I am.

What advice would you give to young people who are just entering the work force?

You have to work hard and listen to others, especially the people who are willing to give you advice. During my life I have had quite a few people give me advice, and that has been a key factor in my success. Also treat your family well. A happy family will give you positive energy and the motivation to be more productive while you are at work. Always strive to learn about more things, and if you don't know something, ask; don't hesitate.

What may people be surprised to know about you?

I'm not really an outgoing person. I consider myself kind of shy. Most people see this great businessman, but I don't socialize with a lot of people. But that's one thing I am working on. **SBJ**

FORTY UNDER 40 2026

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THE POWER OF A U OF I MBA



The *Springfield Business Journal* proudly features **40 leaders** who are **under the age of 40** in the Springfield and neighboring business communities. These individuals are selected based on their contributions to our local business community and the community in which they reside. They represent, in part, the future of business in our community and in central Illinois.

The selectees' career paths, educational background and community affiliations are varied. They represent **the best and brightest** from a wide range of occupations. You can expect to hear more from and about these leaders in the years ahead. The program is able to continue due to the commitment of local businesses that realize the importance of acknowledging these up and coming business leaders and supporting community business programs.

Visit springfieldbusinessjournal.com to view selectees from previous years.



JEREMY ADAMS 36

Occupation: CPA, partner at KEB
Email: jeremya@kebcpa.com
Education: Bachelor of Arts, accounting, Illinois Wesleyan University
Family: Wife, Misty; sons, Mason, 4, and Cohen, 1
Affiliations/community activities: Member, American Institute of Certified Public Accountants; member, Illinois CPA Society; member, Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce; treasurer, Springfield Noon Lions Club; past board member and treasurer, Springfield Art Association; graduate of Leadership Springfield
What is your guiding principle in life?

My guiding principle in life is to create surplus value for the people around me, to leave every situation, relationship, team and community better than I found it. That means contributing more than I take, solving problems, supporting others' growth and creating outcomes that benefit others more than myself.

What led you to your career?

My introduction to accounting professor was a retired CPA who brought a real-world perspective to the subject and the profession that resonated with me. After that class, I had no doubt what I wanted to do as a career.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years?

I want my life to reflect steady growth both personally and professionally. I hope to be established as a trusted and respected accounting resource in Springfield. Personally, I'm looking forward to seeing my boys grow up, spending as much time with them as possible and being involved in their sports and school activities.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

I wish I had known the fulfilling life my career would provide for me and my family. It has opened so many doors and opportunities that my younger self could never have imagined.

What has been your greatest professional achievement?

My greatest professional achievement was being promoted to partner at KEB. It was my goal since day one at KEB. I'm grateful for everyone who helped me get to this point.

What app on your phone are you embarrassed to say you use?

I'm embarrassed to say that I'm addicted to mindlessly scrolling through Facebook reels.



SARAH ADAMS 37

Occupation: Curator, Springfield Art Association
Email: collections@springfieldart.org
Education: Master's degree in museum studies from University of Kansas; Bachelor of Arts in religious studies from Western Illinois University
Family: Just three incredibly spoiled cats
Affiliations/community activities: Secretary, social media chair and editor of Historico, Sangamon County Historical Society; percussionist, Trinity Wind Ensemble; pianist in lobby of Simmons Cancer Institute; speaker for various organizations such as Daughters of the American Revolution, retirement communities, historical groups, schools, daycares and universities; actor in Springfield theater companies; play volleyball at Spartan Sports Park; play bocce ball at Obed and Isaac's and regular attendee of Lucky Horseshoes games.

What is your guiding principle in life? I'm guided by kindness and honesty. I want to live well, and I want others to live well.

What led you to your career? It was almost a spur-of-the-moment decision. I was graduating and didn't know where to go next. A friend of mine said, "Why don't you go into museums? You love museums." It hadn't occurred to me that I could.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield? I hope that we can come together as a city to support the great things we have to offer.

What obstacles have you overcome in your career path? Some of the biggest obstacles in my career come from the museum field being so small. I initially moved to New Mexico to find a job. It took almost five years before something opened up for me in central Illinois.

What has been your greatest professional achievement? What I am most proud of in my career is the robust camp program I've built at Edwards Place. We went from having a couple of camps to nearly 40, some of which I teach, which I never thought I'd do.

Who was your childhood or teenage celebrity crush? I can't believe I'm going to admit this publicly, but since I was a child, it's been Gary Oldman. The 4-year-old me had a crush on him as the long-haired, sunglasses-wearing Dracula. This is odd for a couple of reasons: 1) Why was I watching this movie as a kid? and 2) I'm not even attracted to men, yet the crush persists to this day.

Honoring our Forty Under 40 recipients

Congratulations, **Robert Ellison** and **Amanda Zentefis**, for being recognized in Springfield Business Journal's *Forty Under 40*. This list honors the best and brightest individuals from our local business community. Amanda and Robert are the kind of leaders that not only strengthen our organization, but our hometown as well. We couldn't be prouder of their achievement!



ROBERT ELLISON
Vice President
Business Development &
Strategy Execution



AMANDA ZENTEFIS
Vice President
Finance Operations



We are excited to announce that
Jeremy Adams, CPA has been
**recognized in Springfield's
Forty Under 40!**

Congrats, Jeremy!



kebcpa.com   



JASON BEATTY

39

Occupation: Certified financial planner; federally licensed tax practitioner
Email: jbeatty@gmail.com
Education: Master of Business Administration, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
Family: Wife, Danielle; sons, Dawson, 5, and Preston, 2
Affiliations/community activities: West Side Christian Church and Island Bay Yacht Club
What is your guiding principle in life? I strive to leave things better than I found them, to lead with integrity, continue learning and help others succeed. I believe meaningful impact comes from serving others, staying accountable and consistently doing the right

thing.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield?

I hope Springfield remains a community where people can build successful careers, raise families and stay connected to one another. By investing in education, workforce development and economic growth, we can create opportunities that encourage the next generation to live, work and thrive here.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years?

I will continue growing professionally while maintaining a strong balance among career, family and community involvement. I want to be known as a trusted leader, mentor and resource for others, while making a meaningful impact through my work and service to the Springfield community.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

I wish I had known that success is rarely a straight line. Growth comes from being willing to learn, adapt and embrace challenges. The relationships you build, the reputation you earn and the consistency you show over time will matter far more than any single achievement.

What has been your greatest professional achievement?

My greatest professional achievement has been continuously advancing my expertise while helping others solve complex financial and tax challenges. Earning professional credentials and building trusted relationships with clients and colleagues has been especially rewarding. I take pride in making a meaningful impact through service, integrity and lifelong learning.

What's the song you sing in the shower?

"Gratitude" by Brandon Lake



JACOB BULLARD

37

Occupation: Assistant branch manager, Anderson Electric
Email: jacobbb@anderson-electric.com
Education: Bachelor of Science, construction management, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville; associate's degree in applied science, electrical distribution, Lincoln Land Community College
Family: Wife, Jessica
Affiliations/community activities: American Business Club of Springfield, Ansar Shrine
What is your guiding principle in life? Build things that last and invest in the people who surround you.

What led you to your career?

In college, I became interested in a career in construction and, in particular, electrical construction. An opportunity arose at Anderson Electric that allowed me to build upon my skills and bring me to where I am today.

What would you like to give back to your community?

I would like to continue to educate the next generation of tradespeople through LLCC's Construction Trades Workforce Institute.

What obstacles have you overcome in your career path?

Managing projects at a young age was a challenge. There have been plenty of lessons learned the hard way through the years, but being surrounded by a good team has definitely helped.

What has been your greatest professional achievement?

My greatest professional achievement has been helping deliver projects that benefit the community. From school renovations and additions to renewable energy projects and public facilities, seeing those projects come together is rewarding.

What's the worst career advice you've ever received?

"Stay in your lane." The best opportunities have come from a willingness to learn outside of a job description.



JOE BYINGTON

33

Occupation: Co-owner, SB Insurance & Co.
Email: jbyington@sbinsco.com
Education: Bachelor of Science, history and psychology, Illinois College
Family: Daughter, Kenzie
Affiliations/community activities: President, Virden Chamber of Commerce; American Business Club of Springfield; volunteer wrestling coach, North Mac High School; Big I of Illinois

What is your guiding principle in life?

I try to follow the Golden Rule, treat others as you wish to be treated. Now, that's

not always the case but true for the most part.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield?

I hope Springfield can become a case study of what happens when multiple views come together and solve problems. Too often, we dig our heels into the ground and don't understand compromise.

What obstacles have you overcome in your career path?

Buying an existing book of business during an incredibly difficult financial time. My business partner and I had many hoops to jump through, but we got through them and became 100 percent owners in 2023.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

I wish I knew what the grind is — just that, a grind. Too often when someone describes to you what it takes, we all underplay the work it truly takes.

What would you like to give back to your community?

While I do give back to my communities in various capacities, I would like to be able to help mentor kids. I would like to see myself as a positive role model as that can drastically change the trajectory of kids' lives.



ELI COOK

30

Occupation: Financial adviser, growth and development director
Email: eli.cook@nm.com
Education: Bachelor of Accounting, University of Illinois Springfield
Family: Wife, Lindsay; mom, Leeann; dad, Jay; sister, Caley
Affiliations/community activities: Rotary; UIS Professional Network; life member, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation; member, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers

What is your guiding principle in life?

I often ask myself, "Will this matter to me and my family in five years?" It helps me stay focused on what truly creates lasting impact both personally and professionally.

What led you to your career?

I began at Northwestern Mutual as an intern at 18 and over the past decade have grown into a leadership role focused on developing advisers and helping families and businesses achieve long-term financial security.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield?

I hope talented and driven individuals continue to invest their careers and energy into Springfield, strengthening the community for future generations.

What has been your greatest professional achievement?

In 2025, I was recognized as the No. 2 growth and development director in the country, reflecting my commitment to developing others and building a high-performing team.

Has any one event of the past year affected you and how?

Co-founding Impact Financial Group with three partners has been transformational. By combining our practices, we've expanded how we serve clients, particularly across generations, and deepened our role in their financial lives.

What's the song you sing in the shower?

"Take Me Home, Country Roads" and anything by Ella Langley

Congratulations, Michelle Graven!

In just 3 years with the Echo Electric Marketing team, Michelle has become an invaluable part of the team's success. She quickly established herself as a trusted resource across marketing while continuing to make a meaningful impact through her support of industry & community organizations.

We are incredibly proud of Michelle & this well-deserved recognition. Congratulations, Michelle!



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Congratulations

Rebecca Dill

Lending Compliance Officer

UCB congratulates
Rebecca and all the
2026 Forty Under
40 recipients.

We are proud of
you, Rebecca!



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Congratulations, Craig Fiorito!

Hanson Professional Services Inc. is proud to congratulate Craig on his recognition as one of Springfield Business Journal's 2026

Forty Under 40



HANSON-INC.COM



Craig Fiorito
Vice President and
Corporate Controller

CONGRATULATIONS JACOB BULLARD

Your passion, leadership, and commitment to excellence have distinguished you as one of the industry's brightest rising professionals.

Being named a Forty Under 40 Honoree for 2026 is a testament to the impact you've made on your projects, your team, and the electrical construction industry.

We are proud to recognize your achievements and celebrate this exciting milestone.

Congratulations on this well-earned honor!



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JESSICA K. COVEY 34

Occupation: Regional hospice care coordinator
Email: jessica.covey@transitionscares.com
Education: Bachelor's degree in healthcare administration; master's degree in communication; Leadership Springfield Graduate 2023

Affiliations/community activities: Ambassador, Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce; board member, Senior Services; board member, Illinois Women in Leadership; chair, Athena Award

What is your guiding principle in life? Lead with compassion, serve with purpose, and treat every person with dignity. People always remember how you made them feel.

What led you to your career? I loved someone who had cancer, and the excellent care he received during chemo treatments inspired me to work with cancer patients. I gained experience and eventually transitioned to hospice care.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years? I have a goal of earning a management position, so I can lead, coach and teach others how to continuously grow.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path? I wish I had known that you can only control what you can control and that it's okay to not have all the answers.

What has been your greatest professional achievement? My team and I organized a toy drive for St. John's Children's Hospital and delivered over 200 gifts to the children on Christmas Eve.

What's the worst career advice you've ever received? A former leader told me I would never succeed in earning a position in hospice care because I am not a nurse. She later offered me an office that I kindly declined.



ERIN CRUMLY 39

Occupation: Wealth adviser/president at Evergreen Wealth
Email: erin.crumly@EGWadvisors.com
Education: Bachelor of Science, finance and insurance, Illinois State University
Family: Parents, Kevin and Diane Crumly; two siblings
Affiliations/community activities: CFP Board; St Pat's School; Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln

What led you to your career? My father started our company in the mid-90s, so I grew up around the financial services industry. I am the second generation continuing that legacy. Being a wealth adviser allows me to use those strengths in a meaningful way while helping clients work toward their goals.

What has been your greatest professional achievement? Earning my Certified Financial Planner designation and being promoted to president of our company. It is an honor to lead a business that my family and colleagues have worked hard to build, while also guiding its future growth.

What would you like to give back to your community? I hope to continue helping individuals and families be good stewards of their hard work and wealth accumulation. I will continue my volunteer service, board involvement and community engagement.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path? I would tell my younger self to stay committed, keep learning and understand that credibility is built over time.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield? I hope we continue to support local businesses, encourage growth and create an environment where people want to raise their families and build meaningful careers.

Who was your childhood/teenage celebrity crush? Brian Littrell of the Backstreet Boys.



REBECCA DILL 36

Occupation: Lending compliance officer, United Community Bank
Email: rparker@ucbbank.com
Education: Bachelor of Science, business administration, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
Family: Husband, Matthew; sons, Parker and Jordan

Affiliations/community activities: Member of Illinois Women in Leadership Springfield; St. Joseph's Catholic Church; Ball-Chatham Parent Teacher Organization; volunteer at Glenwood Elementary School

What is your guiding principle in life? I have two: "Treat others the way you want to be treated," and "The glass is always half full."
What led you to your career?

I moved to Chatham in 2013 after college and was hired at UCB in the data operations department. From there, I was recruited to the compliance department and steadily advanced through retail, Bank Secrecy Act and lending compliance positions, which led me to my current position as lending compliance officer.

What obstacles have you overcome in your career path? The biggest obstacle has been finding a good work/life balance. Working full-time while being a mom to two young boys can be challenging. Throughout my career, I've found ways to be more intentional with my time so I can be fully present in each area without feeling like I'm stretched too thin.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

No one has it all figured out. Jump in, work hard, don't be afraid to ask questions, and be confident in your knowledge.

What has been your greatest professional achievement? Being promoted to lending compliance officer of the bank in 2021.

What's the song you sing in the shower? Anything by Dave Matthews Band

40 UNDER 40

Congratulations
MEGAN REYNOLDS
 Director of Marketing & Communications

Congratulations on your Forty Under 40 recognition!

.....



Gregory Marantz

Executive Vice President of
Finance and Risk Management

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Congratulations to Eli
and all the other young
professionals who are
dedicated to making the
Springfield community a
better place for all.



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Congratulations to Emmanuel "Manny" Mikaelson, EA, MBA,

named to Springfield's Forty Under 40. As founder and president of TPH Strategies, Manny helps local businesses navigate tax, bookkeeping, and financial strategy with clarity and confidence. Beyond his practice, he's deeply committed to giving back and staying active in the community that he's proud to call home.





YVES DOUMEN 37

tural business

Family: Married with a daughter, 3.5, and a son, 22 months

What would you like to give back to your community?

I give back by reducing disparities in access to healthy food while advocating for more equity within Illinois food production systems.

What led to your career?

I grew up in a farming family in Cameroon, Africa, and have a passion for and experience in sustainable-urban-agriculture production.

What are your greatest professional accomplishments?

My work has been featured on NPR, *The State Journal-Register*, Fox Illinois and News Channel 20. I received the 2023 Illinois Jaycees' The Outstanding Young Persons of Illinois Award, 2024 Sertoma Club of Springfield Man of the Year.

What do you do in your free time?

I volunteer and play soccer in my free time.

What are you passionate about?

I am passionate about community building, economic development, community development and agroforestry.

Occupation: Illinois Army National Guard as a logistics officer, second lieutenant, an ecosystem builder, an agribusiness consultant, a community-oriented leader and the founder of many local and international business ventures, notably Afro House Springfield, DM Global Group LLC and The Motherland Community Project, a nonprofit that works to address food insecurity in underserved communities in Springfield and central Illinois through a sustainable-urban-agricultural system.

Email: motherland.gcp@gmail.com

Education: Bachelor's degree in geography science and an associate degree in agricul-



ROBERT J. ELLISON 39

Be completely authentic.

What led you to your career?

I went to U of I with the official major of undeclared. A combination of classwork, professors, mentors and life experiences led me down a career path in healthcare.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield?

To be a place where people are proud to raise families, grow businesses and make a positive impact to create a stronger, more united Springfield.

What would you like to give back to your community?

More of my time and perspective.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

Sometimes the best answer is not always the right answer.

What's the worst career advice you've ever received?

Make sure you are heard at meetings.

Occupation: Vice president, business development and strategy execution, Memorial Health

Email: Ellison.robert@mhsil.com

Education: Bachelor's degree in health administration, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign; Master of Health Administration, Saint Louis University

Family: Wife, Rachel; son, Ethan, 15; five German shorthaired pointers, Lily, Chief, Rye, Ty and Tailor

Affiliations/community activities: Board of directors, Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce

What is your guiding principle in life?



CONNOR ETHERIDGE 30

What is your greatest hope for Springfield?

I hope for a revitalization of downtown Springfield that will attract individuals and businesses.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years?

In 10 years, I hope my life contains friends and family that love and support me while continuing to work with driven and inspiring peers.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

Don't be afraid to ask questions. As Confucius said, "The man who asks a question is a fool for a minute, the man who does not ask is a fool for life."

What has been your greatest professional achievement?

I am most proud of earning the trust and business of many great people and businesses throughout central Illinois.

What's the song you sing in the shower?

"Dear Maria" by All Time Low

Occupation: Assistant vice president, commercial banking, Hickory Point Bank
Email: connor.etheridge@hickorypoint-bank.com

Education: Bachelor's degree, Belmont University

Family: Wife, Hayley, currently pregnant with our first (boy)

Affiliations/community activities:

Board chair, Land of Lincoln Goodwill; School board member, Sacred-Heart Griffin; advisory committee member, Central Illinois Customer Service Association; board member, Animal Protective League



CRAIG FIORITO 39

which sparked my interest in the financial and tax side of running a business.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield? As someone who grew up in central Illinois and has built my life here through school, work and raising a family, my greatest hope for Springfield is that it continues to be a place where future generations can build meaningful lives and careers close to the people and communities they care about most.

What would you like to give back to your community? I give back to my community by helping younger generations discover the value of the outdoors. I believe spending time outside is valuable and can teach important life skills. Whether it's volunteering with Scouts or simply inviting friends on outdoor trips, I enjoy watching young people build confidence and lasting memories outside.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

I would tell my younger self to worry less about making mistakes and focus on the experience. The moments that feel like failures drive the most growth.

What has been your greatest professional achievement? Passing the CPA exam.

What song do you sing in the shower? "Hi-de-ho" by Blood, Sweat & Tears

Occupation: Corporate controller, Hanson Professional Services Inc.

Email: cfiorito@hanson-inc.com

Education: Bachelor of Science, accounting, Illinois College; Master of Arts, accountancy, University of Illinois Springfield

Family: Wife, Laura; daughter, Sutton; son, Bridger

Affiliations/community activities: Vice president of finance, Abraham Lincoln Council, Scouting America; finance committee member, American Council of Engineering Companies of Illinois; Certified Construction Industry Financial Professional; alumni, Leadership Springfield; volunteer coach, Rochester Youth Athletic Association

What led you to your career? Growing up, I watched my parents run a small business

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ISAAC FREEMAN 31

Occupation: Chick-fil-A owner/operator
Email: isaac.freeman@cfafranchise.com
Education: Bachelor of Arts, public relations, Middle Tennessee State University
Family: Wife, Abby; son, Oliver, 4; daughter, Lily, 2
Affiliations/community activities: Springfield Sunrise Rotary Club, president; member of Cherry Hills Church

What is your guiding principle in life?

To glorify Jesus Christ by serving others, promoting growth and providing care.

What led you to your career?

I began working at Chick-fil-A at 16 years old in Tennessee. I worked from 2012 to 2019 in one restaurant, then worked for Chick-fil-A Inc. until 2022 when I was given the franchise opportunity in Springfield.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years?

I'd like to see our restaurant continue to provide great experiences for our guests and provide great careers for people in our community. I hope that we can continue to raise our children in Springfield and plant firm roots here.

What would you like to give back to your community?

My hope is that I serve the Springfield community through great food and service each time they visit us. I hope every person who comes to our restaurant feels a sense of belonging and individual care. My goal is to care for my team members to help them reach their own goals, so that they lead and enrich our community as well as their own lives.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

Focus on getting 1 percent better each day. If that's the goal, you'll reach places you never think you could.

What has been your greatest professional achievement?

Owning and operating Chick-fil-A White Oaks is the greatest achievement and honor I've had in my professional career.

What's the worst career advice you've ever received?

"Selling chicken might not be for you."



ZHAVIER J. HARRIS 30

Occupation: Marketing and communications manager I, Springfield Urban League, Inc.
Email: zhavijharris@gmail.com
Education: Bachelor's degree in journalism and communications, Hampton University
Family: Parents, Darryl and Angela Harris; brother, Zaire J. Harris
Affiliations/community activities: National Urban League-appointed Whitney M. Young leader; cross-cultural media correspondent for ICN TV Network (China), the Long March in 2016 and 2026; certified FAA Part 107 drone pilot and program instructor; Project Ready Mentor, Rise Up Man! program leader; member and former basileus of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc., Omega Nu Chapter

What is your guiding principle in life? Romans 12:21: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

evil with good."

What led you to your career? My career inspiration started with a passion for creation and positively impacting my community. I enjoy bringing ideas and concepts to life and having those concepts create change for organizations.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years? Married and surrounded by people I love, trust and care for. I aspire to lead and inspire the next generation by planting the seed of hope and opportunity in their essence.

What would you like to give back to your community? I will dedicate my life towards ensuring that the next generation sees men like myself and wants to mirror and surpass my success. I want to build a community that serves to build each other up and create a stronger future.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

Everything that you are, is exactly what you've always needed to be. Fully embracing every aspect of your being will take you further than cosplaying someone or something you are not.

What has been your greatest professional achievement? My proudest accomplishment has been returning to the Springfield Urban League, the organization that helped guide me to Hampton University, and establishing its marketing and communications department. Also, being selected to serve as the international correspondent for the Hampton University Scripps Howard School of Journalism and Communications and as a cross-cultural media correspondent for the Springfield community.



MICHELLE GRAVEN 34

Occupation: Marketing and communications manager at Echo Electric, a Sonepar Co.
Email: Michelle.graven@echoelectric.com

Education: Bachelor of Arts in marketing and communications with a concentration in public relations and a minor in fashion business from Columbia College Chicago

Family: Engaged, Arthur; cats, Remy and Roo

Affiliations/community activities:

Women Advocating Today for Tomorrow; employee resource group, Sonepar USA; Big Brothers Big Sisters; Leadership Springfield graduate; Thomas Rees Memorial Carillon Society, former board member

What is your guiding principle in life?

I believe in leaving a positive impact and something meaningful wherever I can.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield?

I hope more people choose to live here and enjoy the businesses, cultural organizations, parks and

events that Springfield offers.

What obstacles have you overcome in your career path?

I thought leadership was not for an introvert, but I've learned that listening, connecting and showing up consistently matters. My perceived weakness is one of my greatest strengths.

What do you wish your younger self had known?

I wish I had known not to wait to feel ready before seeking an opportunity or sharing an idea. To trust yourself. The qualities you feel are out of place will set you apart when it matters.

Has any one event of the past year affected you and how?

I was on a team that integrated and rebranded five electrical-distribution companies into a single organization. This taught me how to lead through uncertainty and that effective communication is paramount.

What's the worst career advice you've ever received?

"Don't rock the boat." I worried about saying the wrong thing or at the wrong time. I've learned that respectful disagreement and different perspectives often lead to better decisions. Having a seat at the table also means having a responsibility to use your voice.



JACK HART 23

Occupation: Founder and director of ILSportsWire

Email: jhart@hartmg.com

Education: Bachelor's degree, Illinois State University

Family: Parents, Julie and Matthew; sisters, Jane and Kate.

Affiliations/community activities: I work full time in the small-town communities around central Illinois covering high school sports throughout the year.

What is your guiding principle in life?

Compassion. ILSportsWire is a platform to share stories of talented athletes from often overlooked communities. Every small town

has unique people with inspiring stories.

What obstacles have you overcome in your career path?

The biggest obstacle was convincing others to believe in my vision — building credibility with sponsors, athletes, parents and schools to see the benefits sports coverage can have to a community.

What would you like to give back to your community?

I give my gratitude to those who believe in me and to those who thank me for highlighting their communities.

Has any one event of the past year affected you and how?

Covering the Mount Pulaski girls basketball team's run to the state tournament and watching the community rally around them. Coach Ryan McVickers expresses often the ability ILSportsWire has to bring a community together.

What led you to your career?

My mentor and sports marketing professor, Mark Gibson, is passionate for the industry. He inspired me, the former college soccer player. I discovered a love for sports media and storytelling.

What app on your phone are you embarrassed to say you use?

I use the Weather Channel app way too many times a day. I even check the weather in other parts of the country.



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LINGLING LIU 37

Occupation: Community engagement manager, Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity

Email: mti.lingling@gmail.com

Education: Master's degree, translation and interpretation, University of International Business and Economics; Master of Arts, communication, and Graduate Certificate, entrepreneurship, University of Illinois Springfield

Family: Spouse, Tommy; dog, Leia; cat, Mace; other family members in China and Switzerland

Affiliations/community activities: Springfield Immigrant and Advocacy Network; board member of Champaign County YMCA, certified medical interpreter

What is your guiding principle in life?

I believe our well being is communal.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield?

An equity-minded and anti-racist city council.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

I wish my younger self knew that she was outstanding and that life is a learning journey — don't be so harsh on yourself.

What has been your greatest professional achievement?

Pivoting to a meaningful and fulfilling career during the pandemic, a career of serving under-resourced communities and addressing inequities.

Has any one event of the past year affected you and how?

A three-week trip in my home country, China. I admire China's beauty, culture and food so much. Connecting to my roots was good for my soul.

What's the best purchase (under \$100) you've made in the last six months?

A set of used tools and beautiful glass for stained glass projects.



GREGORY MARANTZ 36

Occupation: Executive vice president, finance and risk management, BOS.

Email: gmarantz@bankwithbos.com

Education: Bachelor's degree in general management, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign; MBA, Saint Louis University

Family: Wife, Hannah; daughters, Palmer and Sloane; dog, Koufax

Affiliations/community activities:

Currently sit on the Springfield Public Schools Foundation board, Springfield Memorial Hospital board and Springfield Sports Hall of Fame board. Previously served two terms on the Lincoln Land Community College Foundation board and served as vice-chair and chair.

What is your guiding principle in life? Fail forward.

What led you to your career? I am a third-generation banker and thought I wanted to be a banker because I like numbers. But once I understood the impact I could have as a community banker in the many communities we serve, it was confirmation that this career is for me. To help someone with their next stage in life — a new home, starting a family or a starting a small business — is by far the most rewarding part of my job.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years? I hope my family is happy and healthy and that I can continue to make a positive impact in the community through my work at BOS.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path? Don't sweat the small stuff and the little things that cloud the bigger picture.

What has been your greatest professional achievement? Helping the bank implement an employee stock ownership plan.

What's the song you sing in the shower? Currently, anything from the "Sing 2" soundtrack, thanks to my daughters.



HECTOR LOPEZ 38

Occupation: Restaurateur; owner of The Taco Joint

Email: hectorlpz88@me.com

Education: Jacksonville High School

Family: Wife, Maasyel Nunez; daughter, Valentina Lopez

What is your guiding principle in life?

To build something lasting for my family and those who stand next to me.

What led you to your career?

I took a year off after high school before college and worked for my father at El Rancherito in Jacksonville. I enjoyed it so much that I take care of our restaurant in Springfield.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield?

field?

I hope Springfield realizes its potential as a premier regional hub for culture, food and community. We have world-class hospitality, innovation and community spirit.

What would you like to give back to your community?

I want to give back the same mentorship and opportunity that my father gave to me and my brothers. Through our restaurants, I want to provide more than just jobs.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

I wish I'd known that the toughest seasons would be my greatest competitive advantages, so take a deep breath, rely on family, and realize that every challenge is just preparing you to manage at a higher level.

What's the best purchase (under \$100) you've made in the last six months?

A solar bug zapper for my yard.

Who was your childhood/teenage celebrity crush?

Eva Mendes



MICHAEL MEYER 38

Occupation: Farmer and owner, Mueller Family Farm

Email: muellerfamilyfarmllc@gmail.com

Family: Farm founder, grandma Linda Mueller; mother and stepdad, Mindy and Jody Carter; girlfriend, Amber Risen; fur family, Tank, Lily and Gus

Affiliations/community activities:

Old Capital Farmers Market; Urbana Market on the Square; Jacksonville Farmers Market; The Farms of Illinois; Slow Food Award; Illinois Stewardship Alliance

What led you to your career?

Childhood memories of gardening with my grandparents and later helping my grandpa, Lari Mueller, complete one final season during his battle with cancer. The farm offers freedom and the ability to be my own boss.

What obstacles have you overcome in your career path?

path?

Mother Nature's obstacles of wind, hail, flooding, drought, disease and pests. These variables change, and a farmer has to change techniques to combat these obstacles. Scaling up to a profitable business has also been difficult. Specialty crop producers have historically not had as much government funding as commodity crop growers have.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years?

I wish to be doing what I am doing now, and I would like to build a house on the property and live a true homestead lifestyle. I plan to invest in emerging technologies to keep Mueller Family Farm at the cutting edge of specialty crop production in our region.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

You cannot rush success. I wanted to grow the farm, and that put stress on myself and my family. I wish I could have told myself to take it easy, create a plan and execute a successful business.

What has been your greatest professional achievement?

My greatest achievement is turning a hobby farm in the middle of nowhere into an operation that feeds thousands of people all while maintaining my personal values and integrity. And, I never imagined I would celebrate being a Forty under 40 award recipient with the people that love and support my vision.

What's the best purchase (under \$100) you've made in the last six months?

Standing in boots 10-plus hours a day means I need to take good care of my feet.



ARTHUR STEINER
Associate Director of Finance
YMCA of Springfield

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Of
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Our YMCA



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40 UNDER 40

BY SPRINGFIELD BUSINESS JOURNAL

“Congratulations. I am so proud of you, Stephanie.
I have seen you grow from a little girl to an
extraordinary lawyer and leader of the community.

The legacy of our family firm is in good hands.”

-DAD (Tim Shay)





EMMANUEL MIKAELSON

27

mit mistakes cleanly, take responsibility where it's mine and protect the people who trust me with their finances.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years?

Honestly, I would love to be a dad in the next five years. I want fatherhood to consume my life for a bit and really devote some time to my family. From a career perspective, I want to be in a place where I can continuously learn and grow. I want to lead a team and continue to make an impact.

What would you like to give back to your community?

Keep mentoring through the UIS VITA program and teaching. Helping students and lower-income families gain real financial footing is how I'd most like to pay forward the guidance I received.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

That just because you don't see the light ahead doesn't mean that it's not there. The path I'm on is not straight by any means, and there are humps and hurdles, but it's heading in the right direction.

What has been your greatest professional achievement?

Nothing can really top buying a brick-and-mortar business at 24 years old. It was a massive leap of faith and has been rewarding every day.

What's the song you sing in the shower?

"Never Too Much" by Luther Vandross

Occupation: Business owner, TPH Strategies

Email: mdavis@tphstrategies.com

Education: Master of Business Administration, University of Illinois Springfield; Bachelor of Science, accounting, Millikin University

Affiliations/community activities: Board member and treasurer, Land of Lincoln Goodwill; secretary, Springfield Old Capitol Art Fair; board member, United Way; co-chair, Impact Life; ambassador, Springfield Chamber of Commerce

What is your guiding principle in life?

Do honest work and own the outcome. I ad-



TREVOR NOONAN

38

view that teaches us to look beyond ourselves and recognize our connection to all people. It is our responsibility to treat one another with dignity and respect.

What led you to your career?

What led me to my career was realizing that some of the most important lessons in life — how money works, how wealth is built and how to make long-term decisions — are often not taught in a meaningful way. I now help people make informed decisions, build confidence with their finances and create better futures for themselves and their families.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield?

I hope we continue to build a future that embraces the full story of its past. Before Illinois became a state in 1818, indigenous peoples lived on this land leaving their mark that shaped the next generations to come.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

The rule of 72: Money invested at 10 percent doubles about every seven years, and money invested at 7 percent doubles every 10 years. (*Disclaimer: This is not investment advice.)

Has any one event of the past year affected you and how?

The passing of my grandmother, a Brothertown Indian, reminded me that we are part of something much larger than ourselves. While loss brings grief, it also brings perspective: A meaningful life is measured not by what we accumulate, but by what we leave behind for future generations.

What's the best purchase (under \$100) you've made in the last six months?

The best purchase I made was supplies for my garden. Growing food helped me slow down, reconnect with nature and appreciate the value of patience. The best investments, whether in life, relationships or finances, require time and attention before they bear fruit.

Occupation: Wealth management, Morgan Stanley

Email: Trevor.noonan@morganstanley.com

Education: Lincoln Land Community College, Loras College

Family: Proud son, brother and owner of a Pembroke Welsh Corgi named Tink

Affiliations/community activities:

SIU Denim and Diamonds committee member; tribal member of the Brothertown Indians in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.

What is your guiding principle in life?

Birthplace: Earth, Race: Human, Politics: Freedom, Religion: Love

My guiding principle is rooted in an indigenous world view that teaches us to look beyond ourselves and recognize our connection to all people. It is our responsibility to treat one another with dignity and respect.



SAMANTHA PATRICK

39

I began my career at age 17 and was often the youngest person in the room. Earning credibility required preparation, persistence and a willingness to learn. Those experiences taught me resilience and reinforced that growth comes from curiosity and embracing challenges.

What has been your greatest professional achievement?

Building and developing teams that embrace collaboration, continuous improvement and a shared commitment to serving others. The achievement I am most proud of is seeing people I've mentored grow into leaders and succeed in their own careers.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years?

I hope to continue growing as a leader while staying connected to what matters most: family, community and meaningful work. I want a life filled with service, adventure and lasting memories with the people I love.

What would you like to give back to your community?

Through board service, coaching youth sports and community involvement, I hope to create opportunities for others and encourage them just as others encouraged me.

What's the worst career advice you've ever received?

"Stay in your lane." Some of the greatest opportunities in my career came from stepping outside my comfort zone, asking questions and volunteering for challenges. Growth rarely happens by staying in your lane; it happens when you're willing to take on something new.

Occupation: Vice president, mortgage operations, INB N.A.

Email: spatrack@inb.com

Education: High school graduate

Family: Husband, daughter and family dog, Clyde

Affiliations/community activities: Board of directors, Girl Scouts of Central Illinois; Illinois Bankers Association; Youth sports coach and volunteer; St. Jude run participant

What is your guiding principle in life?

No one achieves success alone. Throughout my career, I've learned from people who invested their time, knowledge and trust in me. I believe it's important to extend a hand to those coming behind you. Leadership is not about how far you climb, but how many people you help along the way.

What obstacles have you overcome in your career path?

TROXELL

CONGRATULATIONS

JAKE ROURKE

Insurance Agent

Congratulations to Jake Rourke! This is an impressive milestone that reflects a decade of dedication and the trust of 400+ clients along the way. Jake's commitment to delivering real value, paired with his grounded approach to life, whether he's with his kids, on the golf course, or spending time with family, makes this recognition well-earned. We're proud to have him representing Troxell!





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CONGRATULATIONS, MRS. V!



If you want to understand Adrienne VanFossan's impact, don't look at her title. Look at the people she brings together.

As an elementary principal, "Mrs. V" has never viewed a school as just a building of classrooms. To her, it's a community. She has a rare, remarkable gift for bringing people together, whether she's hosting Popsicles with the Principal, organizing Literacy Nights, or tracking down local centenarians (yes, she actually found two 100-year-olds!) to celebrate the 100th day of school. She doesn't just host events at her school; she uses her leadership to serve her community.

What makes Adrienne truly special is that "Mrs. V" isn't a persona she puts on at the door. It's just who she is. She cares about people. She is the person who remembers your name, notices when you are quietly struggling, or are wearing a new pair of earrings. In a world that can easily drift apart, Adrienne is always the anchor pulling people back together.

Her professional impact can be measured in vibrant school cultures, successful programs, and deep community relationships. But for those of us who know her best, those accomplishments only tell half the story. The very same kindness, fierce commitment, and compassion that make her an exceptional educational leader are what make her an incredible wife, mother, sister, and aunt. She pours every ounce of her heart into the people she loves and the communities she serves.

Being named to the Springfield Business Journal's 40 Under 40 list is a tremendous, well-deserved honor. It recognizes her vision and leadership. But more than that, it honors what we have been lucky enough to witness her entire life: a legacy built on making others feel connected, supported, and loved.

Congratulations, Mrs. V! We are so incredibly proud of you.



LAKEISHA PURCHASE 37

Occupation: Ward 5 alderwoman, lobbyist, owner of 5th Street GEM and real estate investor
Email: lakeishapurchase217@gmail.com
Education: Bachelor of Arts in political science with a minor in speech communication
Family: Proud cat mom to Tiger.
Affiliations/community involvement: Lifetime member of NAACP; board member, Medics First and SIUC Saluki Women's Council; member, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc.; Links Incorporated, Top Ladies of Distinction Inc.; founder, ElevateHER Village

What is your guiding principle in life?

Four D's — Desire, Dedication, Determination and Discipline — guide my life and leadership. They inspire me to dream big, stay committed, overcome challenges and remain focused. These principles have shaped my service, entrepreneurship and advocacy, helping me create lasting impact in my community.

What led you to your career? My career is rooted in service, community development and economic empowerment. In my multiple roles, I work to create opportunities, strengthen neighborhoods, advocate for meaningful change and build a lasting impact for future generations.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield? My hope for Springfield is a future where every resident has access to opportunity, feels valued and can thrive. If we collaborate and invest in neighborhoods, businesses and housing, we can build a stronger, more inclusive city where future generations succeed and prosper.

What has been your greatest professional achievement?

My greatest achievement is creating opportunities and making a lasting impact through public service, business, real estate and advocacy. More than any title, I value the trust I've earned, the lives I've touched and the positive change I've helped bring to Springfield.

What's the worst career advice you've ever received?

"Stay in your lane." I've learned that growth comes from stepping beyond expectations, embracing multiple roles and staying true to purpose. My career reflects service, entrepreneurship and leadership without limits or defined boundaries.



MEGAN REYNOLDS 36

Occupation: Director of marketing and communications, United Way of Central Illinois
Email: mreynolds@uwcil.org
Education: Benedictine University
Family: Husband Christopher; children Teagan, Trevor, Peyton, Noah and Dominic
Affiliations/community activities: Past president, Rotary Club of Downtown Springfield; past advisory board member, Salvation Army; past board member, One Stop Community Collaboration; Illinois Women in Leadership; Mid-Illinois Communications Association; Paul Harris Fellow

What is your guiding principle in life? Fight hard, love harder. Speak up for yourself and anyone who hasn't found their voice yet. Don't shrink. Never miss a chance to show someone how much they mean to you. I'm raising my kids by the same code: Be fierce, be kind, and don't take anyone's nonsense.

What led you to your career? Honestly, I fell into it. I didn't have a master plan. I followed opportunities, said yes to some things I probably wasn't qualified for but knew I would figure it out, and somewhere in there I realized that taking something from idea to execution, and telling stories that move people to act, is exactly what I'm meant to do.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years? In 10 years our youngest will be graduating high school, so I fully intend on letting that year become the year I allow myself the ease in to becoming the physical and emotional embodiment of Mrs. Claus — warm, round, completely unbothered and running a roadside baked goods stand that can guarantee my house always smells like freshly baked bread and macarons.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

That passion and yearbook editor credits could become an actual career that brings real joy.

What obstacles have you overcome in your career path? I've had seasons that required me to choose myself and my children over everything else and, later, rebuild from there. On the other side was clarity that I can demand more, that I'm capable of anything and having the right people in my corner makes all the difference.

What's the worst career advice that you have ever received?

"Don't rock the boat." Wrong. Rock it. The people we serve deserve advocates who actually advocate — who stand up, speak out and hold themselves and others accountable. If something isn't right, say so. If someone doesn't have a voice, be one. The world will only get better when people are brave enough to do the right thing.



SEAN M. ROBB 35

Occupation: Pediatric nurse, SIU Medicine Pediatrics
Email: Sear0choreo@gmail.com
Education: LPN from Capital Area School of Practical Nursing, Springfield, 2019; Associate degree in nursing (in progress), Lincoln Land Community College
Affiliation/community activities: Springfield Theatre Centre board member as of 2026; director, Springfield Public Schools 186 Collage Show Choir since 2025; freelance and voluntary choreographer; Springfield theater community member and supporter
What is your guiding principle in life? People first. Always. Community matters

deeply, people deserve dignity, and leadership has a duty to protect and uplift others. I believe celebration is not frivolous. Joy as resistance holds power in that love and community are put first.

What led you to your career?

The world of nursing called to me after experiencing my own need for health-care professionals. Dedicated individuals undergoing the education needed to promote health, spread joy and provide support for others — I knew it was the place for me, and I have yet to be proven wrong. Paired with my passion for the arts and performance, it creates a perfect balance of meaningful action and meaningful joy.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield?

I hope that Springfield continues to open its arms to all communities who live, work and learn here. I hope Springfield keeps expanding support and opportunities for minority groups, the unhoused, the LGBTQIA+ community, local arts, small businesses and the organizations that support growth within our community.

What would you like to give back to your community?

I aim to contribute to my community through joy first and foremost. I support celebrating positively and purposefully. I am also committed to being a vibrant model of acceptance, love, individuality and community.



KATIE ROMANG 37

Occupation: Clinical therapist, co-owner of Luminary Counseling
Email: Kromang@luminarycounselingsolutions.com

Education: Bachelor's degree in social work and Master of Social Work, Illinois State University

Family: I've been married to my wonderful husband, Greg, for 13 years. We have three beautiful kids: Johnny, 12, Melanie, 10, and Julia, 9; lab, Ruby. I also want to mention my lovely parents who have always supported my education and career dreams.

Affiliations/community activities:

Member, Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce; member, Postpartum Support International; member, National Association of Social Workers; sponsor of Rochester Community Sports; alumnus, Illinois State University

What led you to your career? As a child, I benefited from therapy for anxiety and learned the value of mental health support. After eight years in school social work, I met my best friend and business partner, Lauren Henton. We took the leap and pursued our dream private practice and co-founded Luminary in 2020.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years? I hope to maintain a meaningful presence in the lives of family as they grow. Simultaneously, I am dedicated to expanding Luminary's reach, ensuring our community has greater access to high-quality mental health services.

Has any one event of the past year affected you, and how? My son's unexpected hospitalization and surgeries tested our family and reminded me of the power of resilience, community and accepting support from others.

What do you wish your younger self had known? Building a business requires persistence, success comes from staying committed through challenges, and growth happens over time.

What is your guiding principle in life? Even difficult seasons are meaningful and offer opportunities for growth, perspective and purpose.

What app on your phone are you embarrassed to say you use?

I'm a TikTok scroller and rely on Maps way too often for having lived here for 15 years.

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JAKE ROURKE 39

Occupation: Partner/insurance producer
Email: Jrouрке@troxellins.com
Education: Illinois State University
Family: Wife, Katy; son, Miles, 3; daughter, Macie, 11 months
Affiliations/community activities: American Business Club; Local First Springfield; Chatham Chamber Ambassador; board member, Kidzeum of Health and Science; board vice president, Family Service Center; Land of Lincoln Professional Networking Group

What is your guiding principle in life?

Be more concerned with your character than your reputation; your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what

others think you are.

What led you to your career?

My grandfather, Con Rourke, who was in insurance for over 50 years in central Illinois.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield?

My greatest hope for Springfield is that it continues to be a place where small business owners and entrepreneurs can thrive, innovate and grow. I hope our community continues to support local businesses and their families that contribute so much this city.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years?

Still working at and helping to grow Troxell. Continuing to protect people and businesses in this community. As well as being very busy with my two kids and all their activities.

What has been your greatest professional achievement?

Being asked to be a partner at Troxell. Having ownership in one of the oldest businesses in Springfield that has such a great history. Being a part of keeping this business locally owned for many years to come is a great honor.

What's the song you sing in the shower?

Usually anything my daughter was just listing to on Ms. Rachel.



LUKE SCROGGINS-ZELLERS 39

Occupation: Director of finance, Family Service Center
Email: luke.scroggins@gmail.com
Education: Bachelor of Science in accounting, Illinois College; Master of Business Administration with a concentration in organizational leadership, Benedictine University at Springfield
Family: Husband, Cody; son, Waylon; parents, Dennis and Carla Scroggins
Affiliations/community activities: American Institute of Certified Public Accountants; Association of Certified Fraud Examiners; Illinois CPA Society; Society for Human Resource Management; The Art Association of Jacksonville, secretary 2025-present, board member 2024-present; Real Men Read; yoga instructor, Jax Yoga

What led you to your career?

My interest in accounting started in high school when I took my first accounting course and realized it was something I wanted to pursue further. That led me to study accounting in college. After graduating, I gained experience across several sectors including banking, public accounting and nonprofit organizations. Over time, I found myself especially drawn to the mission-driven work of nonprofits where I could apply my accounting expertise while supporting organizations that make a positive impact in their communities.

What would you like to give back to your community? I would like to give back my time to my community. Whether it's volunteering, supporting local organizations or attending community events, I believe being present and involved is one of the most meaningful ways to make a positive impact.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

I wish my younger self had known that everyone's career path is different, so there's no value in comparing yourself to others. Careers aren't always linear, and that's OK. Some of the best opportunities come from unexpected turns, so it's important to stay open to new experiences.

What has been your greatest professional achievement? My greatest professional achievement was passing the CPA exam while working full-time. It took a lot of dedication and long hours of studying outside of work. I'm proud to have accomplished it and very thankful for the support of family, friends and co-workers.

What's the best purchase (under \$100) you've made in the last six months?

Pickleball equipment. My family found a new hobby that gets us outside together, and even our teenager will put down his electronics to play.



KERBY SCANLAN 30

Occupation: Family nurse practitioner in pediatric, cardiology and pediatric primary care
Email: kerby.scanlan@gmail.com
Education: Master of Science in nursing
Family: Husband, Tyler; son, Tiger

Affiliations/community activities:

Director, Sangamon County Fair Queen Pageant; Sangamon County Fair Board; Pediatric Quality Improvement initiatives and multidisciplinary quality committees; Children's Miracle Network; Dirty Birdie Golf Outing; Toys for Tots; Illinois Pageant Director Association; Illinois Association of Agricultural Fairs; Style of Hope Gala

What is your guiding principle in life? My guiding principle is to leave people and places better than I found them. Whether I'm caring for patients, raising my son, mentoring young women through pageantry or serving my community, I believe small acts of kindness, leadership and

service can create a lasting impact.

What led you to your career? I have always been drawn to helping others and making a difference in people's lives. Nursing gave me the opportunity to combine science, compassion and advocacy, and becoming a pediatric nurse practitioner allowed me to build meaningful relationships with children and families while helping shape their health and well-being for the future.

What would you like to give back to your community? I want to continue creating opportunities for others to grow and succeed. Through healthcare, I hope to improve outcomes for children and families. Through pageantry and community service, I hope to help young women develop confidence, leadership skills and a commitment to serving others.

What obstacles have you overcome in your career path? Like many young female professionals, I faced the challenge of balancing career advancement, graduate education, leadership responsibilities and new motherhood simultaneously. Earning my graduate degree and advancing my career while raising a young child required perseverance, flexibility and resilience. Those experiences taught me to lead with grace under pressure, adapt to challenges and gave me a deeper appreciation for the realities many families face every day.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

I wish I had known that leadership is less about having all the answers and more about being willing to learn, listen and show up consistently.

What's the song you sing in the shower?

"Choosin' Texas" — see you at the Illinois State Fair, Ella.



STEPHANIE SHAY-WILLIAMS 38

Occupation: Attorney, Shay Law
Email: sshay@shayandassociates.com
Education: Bachelor of Arts, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign; Juris Doctor, Northern Illinois University

Family: Husband, Nick; children, Roman, 9, and Rhett, 6; dogs, Georgie and Minnie

Affiliations/community activities: Board of directors, Decatur Bar Association; director, DBA Continuing Legal Education Program; Sangamon County Bar Association; Central Illinois Women's Bar Association

What is your guiding principle in life?

"I hope I shall possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain (what I consider the most enviable of all titles) the character of an honest man." — George Washington

What led you to your career? I have always had a strong interest in the law. After graduating from law school, I knew exactly where I wanted to practice — my

family's law firm. Shay Law was founded by my father, Tim Shay, more than 30 years ago, and it has been a cornerstone of our community ever since. Today, I have the privilege of working alongside both my father and my husband, Nick Williams. It is truly an honor to be part of one of Springfield's longstanding family-owned businesses.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years? It is my professional goal for Nick and I to carry forward the legacy of Shay Law as my father transitions into retirement. I am committed to preserving and building upon the firm's name, reputation and the goodwill we have worked so hard to establish within this community.

What obstacles have you overcome in your career path? I am a plaintiff's trial attorney focusing on medical malpractice, personal injury and workers' compensation — an area still largely male-dominated. As a result, I prioritize surrounding myself with strong female peers who support and uplift one another.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

Focus on what you can control. Life will always bring the unexpected, and so much of what happens is beyond our control. But within every challenge is a choice — how you respond. When you focus on your attitude, your effort and your resilience, you take back your power and shape your own path forward.

What's the best purchase (under \$100) you've made in the last six months?

We adopted our dog, Minnie, after she was found as a stray and brought to Sangamon County Animal Control. She has been a truly wonderful addition to our family. We have always had rescue dogs — and always will.

Congratulations Samanth Patrick

INB proudly celebrates Samantha Patrick, AVP, Mortgage Operations Officer, on being named a Springfield Business Journal 2026 Forty Under 40 honoree.

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ARTHUR STEINER 35

Occupation: Associate director of finance

Email: asteiner@springfieldymca.org

Education: Over 30 Y-USA leadership and development certifications.

Family: Engaged to Michelle Graven; cats, Remy and Roo

Affiliations/community activities: Springfield YMCA's SNApping Turtles, Saturday Strikers, Strong Kids, Team River Runner and Leadership Springfield

What led you to your career? My family inspires me: my mother's 40-year career at the YMCA, my father volunteered with the Boy Scouts as a swim coach and a

mentor, my brother's 25 years of service to our country.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path? Being right does not matter if you cannot get people to buy in. I mistakenly gave orders instead of uniting a team with a common goal and purpose.

What is your guiding principle in life? My grandparents' wisdom, "Virtue is not about the strength you show through your own trials and tribulations but the strength you give to others to help them through theirs."

What obstacles have you overcome in your career path? Mistakes are obstacles if you refuse to learn from them.

What has been your greatest professional achievement? The Stormy Webster Award for outstanding aquatics director, which is an award my mother received — my biggest mentor.

What's the best purchase (under \$100) you've made in the last six months? S'mores Oreos.



MEGAN STOLLER 39

Occupation: Clinical pharmacist/pharmacy supervisor; owner/operator of Springfield Lice Clinic LLC

Email: megan.goodman12@gmail.com

Education: Doctorate of Pharmacy, St. Louis College of Pharmacy

Family: Husband, Lucas; daughters, Mia and Sloane
Affiliations/community activities: Sherman Elementary PTO; Healthy Kids Running Series sponsor and former coordinator

What led you to your career?

I have a dual answer here: First - pharmacist. My mom was an elementary school principal, and one of her teachers, JoAnn Pierson, was talking with my mom about their daughters. Mrs. Pierson mentioned that her daughter was a pharmacist and that if I liked math and science, I should consider pharmacy. I looked into it and decided to pursue

a degree in pharmacy. My second career was a surprise. I never considered myself an entrepreneur and not one that would open a lice clinic. But after a run in with head lice, the kindness of another mother helped change my mind from being mortified to finding the downside to opening a clinic. A year and a half later, I am running a successful small business — Springfield Lice Clinic LLC.

What obstacles have you overcome in your career path?

Working in healthcare is rewarding and comes with a lot of sacrifice. Hospitals don't close; people have to be there to help people 24 hours each day, seven days each week. I had to allow myself to reorganize my priorities, moving work/life balance higher, feeling valued at work higher, finding an opportunity within the oncology space higher and putting less emphasis on salary and earnings.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

You're worth more than you give yourself credit.

What has been your greatest professional achievement?

Becoming a board-certified oncology pharmacist

What app on your phone are you embarrassed to say you use?

I'm not embarrassed that I use Apple Maps, but I'm embarrassed how often I have to use it. I could get lost in a paper bag.

What's the best purchase (under \$100) you've made in the last six months?

Mickey Mouse ice cream bars for my girls at Disney World.



BAILEY SULLIVAN 38

Occupation: Owner and instructor at Pulse Pilates Studio

Email: pulsepilatesil@gmail.com

Education: Associate's degree in design in product development from the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising; bachelor's degree in English from Westminster College; comprehensively certified in Pilates through Balanced Body

Family: Married to Kole Fitzgerald

What led you to your career?

I was ready for a change from the fashion industry and knew I wanted to make a difference in the lives of others. I had been doing Pilates for several years and loved how it made me feel. My mom encouraged me to get certified. I completed a 500-hour program through Balanced Body to become a certified instructor. I have taught in Park City and Salt Lake City, Utah, West Hollywood and Brentwood, Cal., and moved to Springfield six years ago.

What is your hope for Springfield?

I grew up here and moved away in 2001. Since returning, I have been talking about how we can make Springfield great again. Springfield has so much potential, and we need to think outside of the box when it comes to new commercial development spaces, fresh restaurants and fun activities. I hope existing spaces get a revamp to help revitalize different areas instead of building further west. My hope is that Springfield returns to the bustling capital it once was, and I'm grateful to add to that growth.

What would I like to give back to my community?

I want my Pilates studio to be a space people love coming to, a studio that is calming and peaceful and motivates people to be the best versions of themselves.

What obstacles have you overcome in your career?

During COVID-19, gyms and fitness studios were the last to open. Pivoting to virtual teaching and moving across the country from Los Angeles to Springfield was a challenge. I'm glad I searched for another line of work. Helping people through Pilates is truly what I was meant to do.

What is the biggest accomplishment in your career?

I opened Pulse Pilates Studio at The Gables in December 2025. It has been one of the most challenging and rewarding things I have ever done. I've been the sole instructor for six months and am proud of myself for how hard I've been working and all I've accomplished so far. I have built an awesome community within those walls, and I love helping the amazing people who walk through our doors. I am grateful that someone in my world nominated me for the Forty Under 40 award.



ADRIENNE VANFOSSAN 36

Occupation: Principal, Rochester Elementary School

Email: arhawkins2s@gmail.com

Education: Bachelor of Science, biology education, Southeast Missouri State University; Master of Arts, educational leadership, University of Illinois Springfield

Family: Husband, Justin; son, Hawkins

Affiliations/community activities: Volunteer, Rochester Youth Athletic Association

What led you to your career?

My education at Rochester inspired me to become an educator. Returning home to give back to the same community and help shape the next generation felt like a natural and meaningful path.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield?

I hope Springfield continues to invest in and expand family-friendly events. My family and I enjoy spending time at places like The Railyard and other local businesses that create welcoming environments for children and families.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years?

I hope to maintain the same passion for education that inspired me to pursue this career and approach each day with enthusiasm. Personally, I hope to be supporting my son as he explores activities and interests that bring him joy.

What would you like to give back to your community?

I hope that the experiences students have in Rochester leave them with fond memories of their childhood and a strong connection to their community.

What obstacles have you overcome in your career path?

Two weeks before beginning my role as principal, I experienced the loss of my mother from cancer. Navigating this loss while stepping into a new leadership position was one of the most challenging periods of my life. It reminded me that educators often navigate personal challenges while continuing to serve others, and it helped shape the leader I am today.

What's the best purchase (under \$100) you've made in the last six months?

My Sleep Crown pillow

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TYLER WALKER 36

Occupation: Vice president, Martin Engineering Co.
Email: twalker@martinengineeringco.com
Education: Bachelor's degree in engineering, Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Family: Wife, Elise; three kids, Wyatt, 8, Olivia, 5, Luke, 2 months

Affiliations/community activities: We live in Rochester where I enjoy helping coach some of my son's sports teams and spending time with friends and family. We are members of Rochester Christian Church.

What led you to your career? I worked at MEC in high school doing a variety of tasks. Also, as a summer intern during college working as a construction inspector and civil engineering services is rewarding, especially when you see the projects being built and used by the community.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield? I hope

Springfield and the surrounding area continues to be a great place to live, work and raise a family. I hope Springfield continues to support new and existing businesses. Springfield has good momentum going, and I hope that continues.

What has been your greatest professional achievement? In 2021, dad (Steven Walker, MEC executive vice president) and Phil (Martin, MEC president) approached Adam (Pallai, MEC vice president) and I about purchasing the business, and we started that process in 2023. They retire later this year, and the final transition will take place. I am very thankful for how smooth the process has been to this point and am looking forward to the future of MEC.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years? I hope Adam and I are continuing to manage MEC with success and integrity as dad and Phil have for the past 20 years. I would like for us to continue to grow while still being the local firm that our community trusts.

Has any one event of the past year affected you and how? My wife and I decided to try for one more child and had a happy, healthy boy on April 3. With an 8-year-old and 5-year-old it has been fun to watch them with the new baby, and we are looking forward to making new memories as a family of five.

What's the worst career advice you've ever received? A friend and mentor of mine said that the worst words in business are: "That's the way we've always done it." I believe that holds true, especially in the current market in surveying and engineering. The next 10 years are going to be interesting, and we will need to adapt to keep up with new technologies and practices.



AMANDA ZENTEFIS 39

Occupation: Vice president, finance operations, Memorial Health
Email: zentefis.amanda@mhsil.com
Education: Bachelor's degree and master's degree in accounting, Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Family: Husband, Todd; children, Kaylyn, Evelyn and Rosalyn

Affiliations/community activities: Illinois CPA Society, Healthcare Financial Management Association

What is your guiding principle in life?

Lead with empathy and choose kindness.

What led you to your career?

I chose a career in accounting because it aligned closely with my strengths as an analytical and detail-oriented person. I enjoy analyzing numbers,

understanding the story they tell and translating those financial insights into operational performance. Memorial Health gave me the opportunity to combine that with a meaningful mission. Being part of a healthcare organization allows me to contribute in a different way — supporting a strong system that ultimately helps deliver quality care and positively impacts the community.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield?

I hope Springfield continues to grow its economy by investing in small businesses, helping them succeed, expand and create opportunities for all members of our community.

What would you like your life to look like in five or 10 years?

I hope to continue growing within Memorial Health, contributing to its mission and making a meaningful impact. I hope I have also continued to balance that with my desire to watch my young children grow and enjoy family life together.

What do you wish your younger self had known when you started on this path?

I would remind myself that maintaining a positive perspective during challenging moments is so important to your wellbeing and professional growth. Stay committed to learning at every opportunity.

What app on your phone are you embarrassed to say you use?

I would be embarrassed if anyone looked at my history on Maps and knew how often I still use it to get around town after living here 16 years.



RICK WIESE 39

Occupation: Arson investigator and Realtor
Email: rwiese3@wiesepropertiesinc.com
Education: Associate of Applied Science in Emergency Medical Services; Associate of Applied Science in Fire Science Technology; Bachelor of Science in Emergency Management
Family: Wife, Amy; daughter, Emma, 19; sons Ryker, 9, and Beckett, 6

Affiliations/community activities:

Youth baseball coach, Springfield Shamrocks; Illinois Chapter of International Association of Arson Investigators; Capital Area Association of REALTORS

What is your guiding principle in life?

My guiding principle is to be an asset to the people around me. I enjoy watching others grow and succeed. Coaching youth baseball helps fulfill that purpose by giving me the opportunity to teach young athletes how to work through adversity, build resilience and

gain confidence. Whether it's my family, my career or the community, I want to leave people better than I found them.

What led you to your career? I never really had to search for a career path. From a young age, I was drawn to the fire service. Growing up in a family of first responders, I heard the stories, saw the dedication and witnessed the impact they had on people's lives. I knew I wanted to be a part of it. I became an EMT at 18 and enlisted in the U.S. Air Force as a crash fire rescue technician, which strengthened my passion for emergency services. Twenty some years later, I still have that same drive for the fire service and the opportunities it provides to serve others. Along the way, I discovered another passion: real estate. Julie and her team at Keller Williams Capital introduced me to an entirely different way of thinking and problem solving. Real estate challenges me to grow in areas I never expected and gave me a new appreciation for business, relationships and long-term planning.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield? To see our downtown continue to grow and thrive. Having worked downtown for much of my career, I've witnessed the challenges and have seen the potential it has. I'd love to see more people living, working and spending time downtown with thriving local businesses, restored buildings and a strong sense of community.

What would you like to give back to your community? I give back to my community through fire and arson investigation. By determining the cause of fires and providing answers to those affected, I play a role in improving public safety and helping people move forward after difficult events. I'm also a resource for those impacted by fire, offering guidance, support and direction during what is often one of the most challenging times in their lives.



CHELSEY ZIEBLER 39

Occupation: Owner, Vine & Rind; entrepreneur; principal, Jefferson Middle School
Email: chelseyziebler@gmail.com

Education: Bachelor's degree in hospitality management; master's degree in consumer studies; master's degree in educational leadership

Family: Husband, David; twins, Landon and Leah, 11
Affiliations/community activities: Local business owner, educational leader, mentor, community event organizer, youth advocate and supporter of numerous Springfield-area charitable and community initiatives

What is your guiding principle in life? People matter. Whether in education, business or everyday life, I believe success is measured by the positive impact we have on others and the relationships we build along the way.

What led you to your career? I have always been

drawn to serving people and creating meaningful experiences. That passion led me to pursue careers in both educational leadership and hospitality, two fields that, at their core, are about building relationships, fostering connections and helping others grow.

What is your greatest hope for Springfield? I hope Springfield continues to grow while maintaining its strong sense of community. Our city is at its best when local businesses, schools, nonprofits and families work together to create opportunities and meaningful experiences for everyone.

What has been your greatest professional achievement? Creating organizations and environments where people can succeed. Watching students achieve their goals, team members develop into leaders and guests connect through shared experiences has been more rewarding than any title or recognition. The lasting impact on people is what I value most.

Has any one event of the past year affected you and how? The overwhelming support our community has shown for Vine & Rind has had a profound impact on me. What began as a dream has grown into something far greater than I ever imagined because people believed in the vision and chose to support it. That experience reinforced my belief that if you can dream it, work hard and believe in yourself, incredible things are possible. I hope my journey encourages other women to pursue their passions, take risks and have confidence in their ability to create something meaningful in their own lives and communities.

What's the worst career advice you've ever received?

"Play it safe." Some of the most rewarding opportunities in my life came from taking calculated risks.



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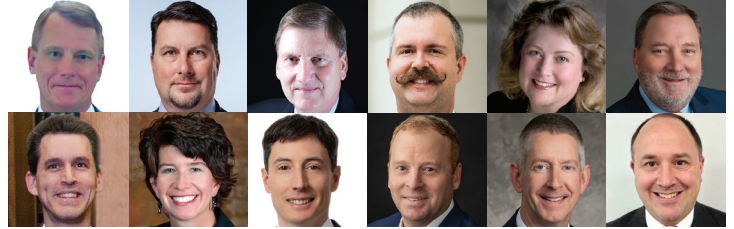
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Benjamin M. Sgro	Sgro Hanrahan Durr Rabin & Reinbold LLP	Springfield	217.789.1200	Personal Injury: General; RE: Commercial; RE: Resident; Workers' Comp
Stephanie I. Shay-Williams	Shay & Associates Law Firm LLC	Springfield	217.523.5900	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Aaron D. Evans	Sorling Northrup	Springfield	217.544.1144	Close/Priv Held; RE: Comm; RE: Resident; RE: Finance; Trust/Will/Estate
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Preserving a legacy

Plumb Family Insurance brings new life to historic house

By Karen Ackerman Witter

Allstate has been a part of Lisa Plumb's life for nearly 40 years.

Her father, Jack Readicker, was an Allstate agent operating at a kiosk inside Sears at White Oaks Mall in the late 1980s. From a young age, Plumb watched her father in action and eventually followed his footsteps to join the insurance business.

Plumb now owns the all-female Plumb Family Insurance Allstate agency, and she recently relocated the growing business to 926 S. Seventh St., the historic building that housed the Iris and Ivy boutique for 25 years. She also is launching a new bookstore — Elderberry and Plumb Bookstore — on the building's first floor.

Allstate was founded as part of Sears, Roebuck and Co. in 1931 and became an independent insurance company in 1995. Following Allstate's separation from Sears, Readicker relocated his agency to the north side of Springfield and grew the business. Plumb's husband joined the business and led the agency from 2003 until his retirement in 2024.

Upon her husband's retirement, Plumb decided to take over the business to honor all of the family's work that came before.

The business has been in growth mode in recent years and needed a new location with more space. In March, Plumb and her team moved into the historic John Cranmer Cook home on Seventh Street in the Aristocracy Hill neighborhood. In collaboration with her brother, Tom Elder, they are opening Elderberry and Plumb Bookstore in the front half of the building's first floor on July 1.

While looking for new space, Plumb fell in love with the historic house and its rich history. Just as she is committed to honoring her family's legacy and history, she is committed to preserving and sharing the history of the influential people who lived in the house and had a profound impact on Springfield and beyond (see sidebar).

The Allstate insurance offices are in the back of the first floor of the building and on the second floor. The agency offices aren't your typical office cubicles. Each room is a separate office space, and Plumb married the décor for each office to the team member's personality. For example, Plumb's office has a New Orleans vibe, which is one of her favorite places.

For Plumb, Allstate is not just a business; it is a family. Several team members have been with the business for decades, and the agency



The Allstate team: Front (left to right) Kaiya Lasley and Lisa Plumb with Lily; On stairs (left to right) Susan Harrison, Wendy Bartlett, Kathy Beddingfield.
PHOTO BY KAREN WITTER

has many long-term customers with whom they have shared major life events. They have several clients who represent three generations of the same family.

Anyone can buy insurance online, but Plumb says their business culture, honed over four decades, is to have an avid team of people who care about you and your family.

"You can't get that everywhere," she said. "This group of women is special."

The Elderberry and Plumb Bookstore on the building's first floor also has a unique feel, with multiple intimate rooms that each have their own theme, vibe and décor. With tall ceilings and windows and colorful decorations, it has a welcoming atmosphere with what Plumb describes as a French-boutique touch.

The bookstore's shelves feature more than 3,000 titles that include various genres — new books and classics, fiction and nonfiction, sci-fi and romance novels, bird and nature books and more. A cozy room designed to appeal to kids features children's books, and another room is targeted at teens. Related merchandise includes puzzles, literary card games and other items such as candles and perfumes that support a relaxing reading environment.

Plumb's goal is for the bookstore to be an inviting place that is peaceful and quiet. It is a "well-loved house and we want that to be reflected when visitors come in," Plumb said. She

hopes the store will attract the clientele who are visiting Incredibly Delicious on the other side of Seventh Street.

Sarah Kiliman is the bookstore manager. She is an avid reader, worked in bookstores for many years and has degrees in literature. Kiliman says Springfield has a rich community of readers and writers.

"What makes us unique is that we can have conversations with customers," Kiliman said, adding that they then can offer selections that customers want.

The bookstore currently is partnering with other businesses to host pop-up events and activities. In addition, the goal in the near future is to make an outbuilding on the Seventh Street property available for meetings of book clubs and other events.

After its official opening on July 1, Elderberry and Plumb Bookstore will be open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Tuesday through Friday and from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturdays. It is also at the Farmers Market on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

The John Cranmer Cook house was built in 1877. John Cranmer Cook, who raised cattle and thoroughbred horses, bought the home for his family in 1887. He and his wife, Mabel, had one daughter, Susan Cook House, who later inherited the home. The charitable Susan Cook House Educational Trust remains to this day and has benefited local schools and arts and cultural organizations for years.

Cranmer Cook's father (John Pope Cook) was mayor of Springfield, sheriff of Sangamon County and a Civil War general. Springfield's Cook Street is named for him. Cranmer Cook's grandfather, Daniel Pope Cook, was the first attorney general of Illinois, a highly influential U.S. representative and the namesake of Cook County. He married the daughter of Gov. Ninian Edwards. Many individuals connected to the John Cranmer Cook home came from distinguished families who had a profound impact on the community.

As the newest resident of the historic house, Lisa Plumb hopes to preserve this aspect of Springfield history and share what she is learning with the community. Her commitment to honoring the legacy of her family business mirrors the legacy of the historic building.

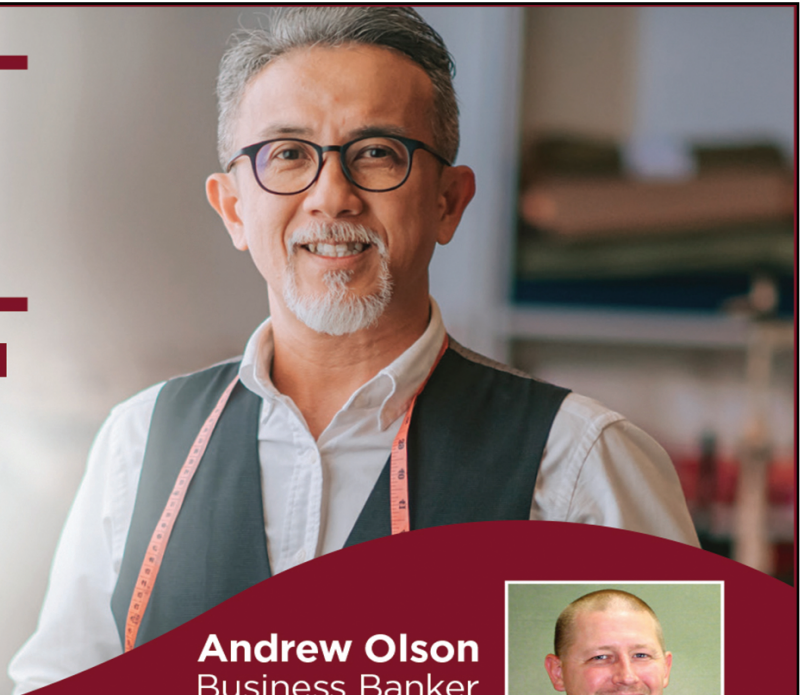
"The house tells a story," Plumb said. "Stories are what we remember."

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New grocery store for east Springfield

By Angela Mueller



Arriel Williams has purchased the former Save A Lot building, 2520 Clear Lake Ave., and is reopening it as 7's Groceries. PHOTO BY ZACH ADAMS

Springfield native Arriel Williams worked in a grocery store as a youth, and now he's gearing up to open his own independently owned store on Springfield's east side.

Williams has purchased the vacant Save A Lot building on Clear Lake Avenue and is planning to open a new grocery store, to be known as 7's Groceries, at the location. The new store is slated to open the first week of August.

"It's something I always wanted to do since I worked in a grocery store when I was younger," Williams said.

Save A Lot announced in mid-December that it would be closing the store at 2520 Clear Lake Ave. on Christmas Eve. Williams purchased the property in March for \$275,000, according to Sangamon County tax records.

"I grew up in the area," Williams said. "The opportunity came across for me to buy the building, so I jumped on it."

Williams is a real estate investor, who has invested in both residential and commercial properties in the Springfield area. He said he had

recently sold a 60-unit property when the Save A Lot building hit the market.

"I saw it was for sale, and it ended up being a great opportunity," he said. The purchase of the 10,000-square-foot building also included all the store fixtures, such as shelving, cabinets and refrigeration units.

Williams said 7's will be a full-service grocery store. He said he's still determining what additional offerings the store will feature, such as prepared meal offerings like rotisserie chicken.

"I'm still pitching ideas of what I'm going to do — or having different ideas pitched to me," he said.

Signage for 7's already has gone up on the Clear Lake building. Williams chose the 7's name for the store in honor of his daughter, who is named Sevyn.

Save A Lot no longer has a store in the Springfield market, with the closest stores now located in Decatur and Pana. The company operates more than 700 stores across 30 states.

According to a May 2026 report from the

National Grocers Association, the economic footprint of independent grocery stores, such as 7's, has been growing over the past decade, indicating increasing support for local, community-based businesses. The independent grocery industry generates \$557.5 billion in total annual economic activity nationwide.

This includes \$353.5 billion in direct retail sales, accounting for 38.4 percent of the \$920 billion U.S. food retailing sector, according to the report.

"Independent grocers are helping power the American economy from the ground up," Greg Ferrara, NGA president and CEO, said in a statement about the report. "These are Main Street businesses creating jobs, supporting families, and reinvesting in the communities they serve every single day."

Locally, Williams said he's been receiving a positive response from the community about his plans for the 7's store.

"I'm getting a lot of good feedback," he said. "It's definitely something that's needed." **SBJ**



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Isringhausen transitioning to second generation of leadership

By Lynn Whalen



From left to right: Luke Isringhausen, new vehicle sales manager; Joe Isringhausen, Porsche sales; Cory Libka, general manager; and owner Geoff Isringhausen. Not pictured: Geoff Isringhausen Jr., special vehicle procurement manager. PHOTO BY ZACH ADAMS

Isringhausen Imports, 229 E. Jefferson St. in downtown Springfield, was founded 45 years ago by car enthusiast Rob Isringhausen. His brother Geoff joined him as the company's fourth employee in January 1984. The business has remained family owned and operated throughout its history. Below is a Q&A with Geoff Isringhausen regarding plans to continue that legacy into the future, along with a discussion about the advantages and challenges of running a successful and growing family business.

Tell us about the generational leadership of Isringhausen Imports.

We are proudly operating in our first generation of leadership, though we are actively transitioning toward our second. My brother, Rob, founded the business in 1981 on South 11th Street as a small, pre-owned car operation. He was just 25 years old and driven entirely by his deep love for automobiles. What started as a passionate hobby quickly expanded into nationwide trading. I joined him in 1984, right before we made the pivotal move to our downtown location on Jefferson Street. Today, I remain fully active in the daily operations

and serve as the dealer principal. Over the past 45 years, we have evolved from those humble beginnings into a premier automotive destination, bringing world-class luxury brands like BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Porsche and Volvo directly into the heart of our city.

Is there a next generation coming up in the business and a succession plan to keep the business family owned?

Yes, preserving our family legacy is incredibly important to us. Succession in a highly specialized, luxury automotive group requires careful, deliberate planning to ensure the business thrives for decades to come. We are very fortunate to have a dedicated group of next-generation family members active in the store today. This team includes my son-in-law Cory Libka, our general manager; Geoff Isringhausen Jr., special vehicle procurement manager; Luke Isringhausen, our new vehicle operations manager; and Joe Isringhausen in Porsche sales. Each brings unique strengths to the table, and together, they are learning the complexities of the business, so we can ensure the dealership remains locally and family owned far into the future.

What are the pros and cons of being a family-owned car dealership?

The greatest benefit is the deep, personal accountability we have to our community and our staff. When your family name is on the building, your reputation is tied to every single transaction. We treat our clients like neighbors, which has allowed us to thrive in our historic downtown location while others have moved around the perimeters of town.

The primary challenge of a family business is that business decisions and family dynamics are deeply connected, making long-term planning incredibly tough. Passing the torch isn't just about who gets what title; it's a huge emotional hurdle, especially when a family faces unexpected losses. Plus, running global brands like BMW, Porsche and Mercedes means we have to satisfy strict corporate rules about who takes over, not just our own family wishes.

Finding the right harmony between family dynamics and corporate requirements takes a lot of time and patience — but protecting what we've built for our community makes every bit of that hard work worth it. **SBJ**



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Beautiful partnership

Molina grant funds Bless 'It Beauty Salon career pathway program

By Janet Seitz

Bless 'It Beauty Salon, a faith-led nonprofit organization, experienced an uplifting, hair-raising boost thanks to a \$25,000 grant from Molina Healthcare Charitable Foundation.

The Molina foundation was created to improve the health and well-being of disadvantaged populations by funding meaningful, measurable and innovative programs.

"Molina takes a comprehensive approach to addressing health-related social needs," Kris Classen, plan president of Molina Healthcare of Illinois, said in a statement. "By partnering with Bless 'It Beauty Salon, we are advancing workforce development and expanding avenues to employment — all while preparing future hair stylists to recognize and respond to clients' mental health needs."

Bless 'It's Styling Toward Success Pathway Program was developed in collaboration with Springfield-based Next Level School of Cosmetology Arts and will support individuals pursuing careers as beauticians by helping them obtain their Natural Hair and Braiding License, a credential recognized under the Illinois cosmetology act.

Molina recognized that the program provides aspiring beauticians with the skills to have a stable career while integrating mental health training to help them better support clients' well-being. Additionally, with the average unemployment rate among Black Illinoisans exceeding the state's average, these types of partnerships can make a difference in the community.

The Molina grant provides support for BIBS administrative operations, instructor staffing and program materials, which enables the organization to offer scholarship assistance to every student in the program. The scholarships — made possible through funding from Molina, Next Level



The Molina Healthcare Charitable Foundation presented a \$25,000 check to Bless 'It Beauty Salon, NFP to support career and community development. PHOTO COURTESY MOLINA

School of Cosmetology Arts institutional support, Carolyn Rise and Stand Community Funds, and the Velma Cares Act — are based on individual financial need and income qualification. Students are required to maintain standards of attendance, grade point average and conduct while enrolled in the program.

According to Bless 'It founder Veris Van, the program offers the only natural hair and braiding and nail technology training available to District 186 high school students. The aim is to create equitable pathways to professional licensure and economic stability. "By removing financial and educational barriers, we help individuals — particularly youth and underserved community members — transform their passion into profession while strengthening the economic health and well-being of central Illinois," Van said.

All applicants — both high school students and adults — complete an online application and must write an essay explaining why they should be awarded a scholarship and how the training will support their career goals.

"This is a passion of the heart," Van said of the program. "I grew up with a love for hair and a passion for loving people. God married these two together and BIBS was born."

The recipient selection process reflects this calling, she said. "We seek individuals who share that same passion for the beauty industry and demonstrate a genuine desire to serve their community through their craft."

Selection is rooted in potential and purpose, Van said. "We partner with Southeast High School's post-secondary coach to identify students who have the passion but may lack the resources. Through our income-based scholarship model — offering both full-ride and partial-ride scholarships — we ensure

that financial barriers never extinguish the fire in a motivated student's heart.

"Every scholarship recipient represents an investment in someone's God-given purpose," Van continued. "By providing access to professional training in natural hair, braiding, nail technology, barbering, professional educator and cosmetology, we help individuals discover and develop their gifts while building sustainable careers that strengthen our community. This is why BIBS exists: to see passion meet purpose and to watch individuals transform their love for beauty into a profession that serves and uplifts others."

This grant is part of more than \$5 million that Molina and the Molina Healthcare Charitable Foundation have contributed in Illinois over the past two years to community organizations that play a vital role in strengthening health across the state.

"Molina has paved the way in building community," Van said, "and we are honored to be a part of their village." **SBJ**

Janet Seitz is a local communications professional, writer and artist. To share your story, contact her at janetseitz1@gmail.com.

The legal risks of AI

AI's increasing prevalence in business raises issues, need for policies

By Thomas C. Pavlik Jr

As AI becomes more prevalent in our lives, it's important to stay educated on how our legal system is addressing novel topics related to its increasing use. Many of the issues discussed in this article are not even on the radars of business owners – but they should be.

One of the more interesting recent cases addressed a company's use of AI in researching and planning the defense to a potential claim. The business extensively used an AI platform to pose questions using facts and assumptions related to formulating a defense – all before retaining counsel. Of course, the information included various embarrassing facts and assumptions. The matter ultimately blossomed into litigation, and, during discovery, the plaintiff requested all information from that AI platform related to the claim. Although the company objected, claiming it was privileged, the court found otherwise. It reasoned that the business was not receiving advice from an attorney as AI is not an attorney.

What does this mean for a business owner? Well, first, expect litigants to start asking for all AI queries related to the case. Second, although no court has yet ruled on this issue, logic dictates that the court may have ruled differently had the AI research been done at the request of the company's lawyer. This is because that may have cloaked the information with the work product privilege, which is an exception to disclosure. Yet another reason to consult your friendly neighborhood attorney.

Another issue relates to shadow AI, which is AI use by employees without oversight or approval. Shadow AI can expose a business to significant risk if confidential information, trade secrets, customer data or proprietary strategies are uploaded to unsecured platforms. With most AI systems, submitted data enters the public realm. Sensitive company information generally should not be entered into an open AI system because it then loses its confidential nature. Moreover, use of client information within an AI platform may result in a breach of confidentiality obligations between you and your clients.

Business owners should consider implementing a policy to govern employee use of AI. It should address what information may be entered into AI platforms, what approval processes are required, what systems are authorized for use and what human review procedures must occur

before AI-generated content is relied upon or distributed.

Another developing area of concern involves the use of AI in employment decisions. Some businesses have started using AI tools to screen resumes, evaluate applicants, monitor productivity and even assist in making hiring or termination decisions. While these systems can create efficiencies, they also create legal risks.

First, at least one court has ruled that such use of AI can result in a violation of consumer protection statutes like the Fair Credit Reporting Act, which contains a broad definition of consumer reports and stringent requirements on disclosures. Along the same lines, inputting personal data in an employer's possession might violate any number of state or federal privacy laws.

Second, if the use of AI disproportionately screens out candidates belonging to a protected class, an employer may still face liability under existing discrimination laws even if the discrimination was unintended. In other words, employers generally cannot avoid responsibility by blaming the algorithm. Courts and regulatory bodies are increasingly taking the position that businesses remain accountable for decisions made with the assistance of AI systems. Simply put – there's no excuse for abandoning human oversight.

AI also presents substantial concerns involving intellectual property rights. Businesses frequently use AI to generate marketing materials, written content, software code, logos, photographs and other creative works. However, ownership rights involving AI-generated content remain unsettled in many respects.

For instance, under current guidance from the U.S. Copyright Office, purely AI-generated works may not qualify for copyright protection because copyright law traditionally requires human authorship. This means that a business could spend significant time and resources developing AI-generated content only to discover it lacks enforceable intellectual property rights to the finished product.

There's also the risk that AI-generated material may unintentionally infringe upon the intellectual property rights of others. Many AI systems are trained on enormous amounts of pre-existing data, including copyrighted materials found online. As a result, businesses using AI-generated content should not assume AI-created work is free

from infringement concerns. Several currently pending high-profile lawsuits are testing these exact issues.

Defamation presents another emerging concern. AI systems occasionally generate inaccurate or entirely fabricated information, commonly known as hallucinations. While these errors are sometimes harmless, they can become problematic when false statements are made about individuals or businesses.

Imagine you ask an employee to use AI to quickly prepare a report about a competitor, vendor or former employee. If the AI system fabricates criminal conduct, regulatory violations or unethical behavior and the information is then circulated, the company could potentially face defamation-related claims. Meaningful human review of AI-generated content should be required before it's distributed externally.

Finally, contractual issues involving AI are becoming more significant. Many businesses now rely upon third-party AI vendors for software, automation, customer service and data analysis. Before implementing such systems, owners should review vendor agreements to determine who owns the data being entered into the platform, how that data may be used, what security obligations exist and what liability limitations are in the agreement. Many businesses are surprised to discover standard vendor contracts heavily favor the AI provider and may provide limited protection in the event of a data breach, system failure or inaccurate output.

Ultimately, businesses should resist the temptation to treat AI as merely another software tool. AI systems can influence employment decisions, generate public-facing statements, process confidential information and shape important business strategies. As a result, decisions involving AI should receive the same oversight and risk analysis that businesses would apply to any other significant operational or legal issue. Or, said another way, don't abandon common sense. **SBJ**



Thomas C. Pavlik is an attorney with Delano Law Offices in Springfield.



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Nonprofit work can teach what your job can't

By Kelly Gust

When professionals think about career development, the instinct is to look inward: new certifications, stretch assignments, promotions or leadership programs. Growth is something we expect to find within the walls of our organizations.

But some of the most valuable professional development opportunities are somewhere else entirely: outside your company, outside your industry and often outside your comfort zone. That's where nonprofit involvement comes in.

Volunteering or serving on a board is often framed as "giving back." And while it absolutely is, that framing undersells its value. For professionals, it's also one of the most practical and underutilized ways to build leadership capability.

Leadership without authority

In most workplaces, leadership is tied to hierarchy. Titles come with decision rights, and influence is often reinforced by organizational structure. But nonprofits operate differently. Whether you're volunteering or serving on a board, you're often working with people who don't report to you, aren't compensated and are balancing competing priorities. You can't rely on authority to move work forward. Rather, you have to rely on influence. That means building trust quickly, communicating clearly and motivating others without formal power. These are some of the hardest, and most important, leadership skills to develop.

A broader lens

It's easy to become too shaped by our own organizations. Over time, we absorb their assumptions, language and ways of solving problems. Nonprofit work disrupts that. You're exposed to different missions, constraints and stakeholders. Decisions may need to be made with fewer resources. Priorities are driven by impact, and

success is measured differently.

This shift forces you to consider perspectives you wouldn't encounter in your day-to-day role. Engaging outside your industry will build stronger judgment, creativity and adaptability. You'll learn to operate in different settings.

Real decision-making experience

Board service, in particular, offers something many professionals don't get in their day jobs: a clear view of how decisions actually get made. Budgets, strategy, risk, governance become live discussions with real consequences. Even serving on a committee or volunteering can provide insight into how leaders balance competing priorities, what good decision-making looks like under uncertainty and how group dynamics influence outcomes. This kind of experience accelerates leadership readiness in ways that classroom training cannot.

A different kind of network

Professional networks tend to form within industries. Over time, many people find themselves connected to others who think, work and operate in similar ways. Nonprofit involvement broadens that network. You'll meet people from different sectors, backgrounds and career paths. More importantly, you'll build relationships based on shared purpose rather than shared roles. These connections are often more durable and diverse than traditional professional networks. They open doors, offer new perspectives and strengthen your ability to operate across different environments.

The discomfort is the point

Nonprofit work can feel less structured than what you're used to. Roles may be unclear. Resources

are limited. You may find yourself working outside your area of expertise. That discomfort is not a drawback; it's the value. Growth rarely happens when everything is defined, familiar and within your control. It happens when you're required to navigate ambiguity, contribute in new ways and stretch beyond what you already know. In a world where so much professional development is carefully curated and controlled, nonprofit involvement offers something different: real-world complexity.

Where to start

In addition to looking for a board seat where you can add value, you can also consider:

- Volunteering for a cause that genuinely interests you
- Joining a committee or supporting a specific initiative
- Finding opportunities that stretch your skills
- Looking for something that will add to your perspective, not just your schedule

A final thought

Careers are built within organizations, but capability is built across different experiences. If you want to grow as a professional, lead better, think more broadly and operate with greater impact, go spend some time somewhere your title doesn't carry as much weight. If you're looking to grow, don't just look up — look outward. SBJ



Kelly Gust is the founder and CEO of HR Full Circle, a Springfield-based consulting firm. She now supports talent development at O'Shea Builders, focusing on coaching, learning and building people programs that help individuals and teams succeed. For the past several years, she has written a monthly professional development column for Springfield Business Journal.



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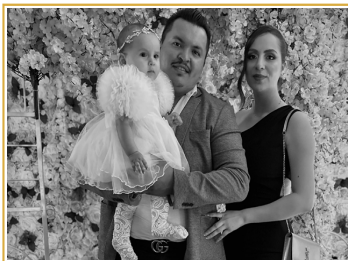
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Pamela Gray Designs, 1255 Red Bed Run, Sherman. 217-415-4408. Pamela Gray.

KlawzbyKarlee Boutique Nails LLC, 612 South Grand Ave. W. 217-518-2473. Karlee Utterback.

Nomad, 3600 S. Sixth St., Suite B. 281-734-6393. Alana Mcleahany.

Bently's Hair Co., 126 N. John St., Rochester. 217-498-1081. Shelby Siddens.

Mid-Illinois Dumpster Rentals, 4375 N. Peoria Road. 217-652-9776. Bradley Scott Wike.

Target Market Pros, 3500 N. Dirksen Parkway, Lot 57. 217-441-3847. Mark K. Clotfelter.

Little Sprouts Montessori Schoolhouse, 717 Rickard Road. 217-220-5811. Amber L. Fitzgerald.

Gold Crest Communications, 3612 Saint Anne's Drive. 217-843-1598. Carter Leo Conway, Gary Conway.

Coady's Computers and Imaging, 21 Longview Drive. 217-414-2560. Mary Jo Coady, Gregory A. Coady.

Giving Back The Purpose, Inc., 519 N. Bruns Lane. 217-787-8981. Kimberly K. Magowan.

BK Excavating, 6127 State Route 123, Pleasant Plains. 217-440-8656. Brennan Klutz, Brittany Klutz.

Midnight Bloom Creations, 1522 S. Spring St. 217-720-2962. Lana Ware.

Chele's Spa, 901 Clocktower Drive, Suite 20. 833-415-2749. Dechele J. Trammell.

Little Clover Ceramics Company, 215 Fox Lane, Mechanicsburg. 217-816-3531. Tori Lornitis.

Post Play Productions, 111 Allegheny Road, Rochester. 217-306-7764. Elijah Holler.

Pro Nails, 1150 N. Fifth St. 217-550-2329. Lam Pham.

Steven's Autobody LLC, 1922 S. 13th St. 217-900-0493. Stevens Alexander Gomez.

Capitol Streamz, 2700 Manchester Drive. 217-553-4938. Brady Odom.

Malone Care Services, 27B Dawson Circle, Riverton. 217-900-0444. Desiree Deann Malone.

Catie Sheehan joins Memorial Health



Catie Sheehan has joined Memorial Health as the vice president of marketing and communications. In this role, she will oversee marketing and internal and external communications for Memorial's five hospitals, outpatient clinics and system operations.

Sheehan most recently served as the deputy director of the Illinois Office of Tourism, but has an extensive background in healthcare, including several roles with Hospital Sister Health System and serving as the executive director of marketing and communications for the Southern Illinois University System Office.

"It was such a fun opportunity," Sheehan said of her time with the Office of Tourism, "but when this job at Memorial came up, I really thought that I was feeling the call to get back into healthcare."

"When I left healthcare in 2023, I was really in the mindset of seeking new opportunities. I had been at HSHS for seven-and-a-half years, and I loved my time there, but the pandemic was hard and I thought that I wanted to explore

some other opportunities professionally. I've had a great opportunity to do that over the last few years."

Sheehan said her new role with Memorial will be very similar to what she did at HSHS, with the exception of not being involved in government relations. She also noted that Memorial Health is "more directly in central Illinois," with five hospitals in this area. She said HSHS had "15 hospitals spread across two states" during her time there, now 13 following the 2024 closure of two hospitals in western Wisconsin.

"I learned that I felt most professional and personally connected to working in healthcare and wanted to see if there was an opportunity for me to do that in the future," Sheehan said. "I met a lot of the new leaders at Memorial and it felt like a really good fit."

"Sometimes it takes leaving to realize what you really want," she said. "It feels really good to be back in healthcare. I feel very aligned with the work." **SBJ**

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PUERTO Vallarta

By Thomas C. Pavlik



Puerto Vallarta, 1101 Wabash Ave., occupies the former Taqueria Moroleon space. PHOTO BY ZACH ADAMS

Puerto Vallarta Mexican Restaurant opened recently in the former Taqueria Moroleon space near the Wabash Avenue curve. It's a family-run operation with great service and, even for a Mexican restaurant, a huge menu that will satisfy everyone.

It doesn't look like Puerto Vallarta did much to the space. It's still festooned with tons of

color and attractive tables and chairs. It being the World Cup, all the TVs were tuned to soccer. The walls are decorated with a number of pleasing murals. The whole space screams south of the border.

The day we visited the weather was temperate and pleasant, but Puerto Vallarta's HVAC system may have a problem keeping up when

things really heat up this summer. But hey — that's why they have a liquor license. Although we visited on a business day for lunch, any other time I generally like to wash down my meal with a margarita or ice cold Tecate. If that's your desire, Puerto Vallarta has you covered. Their bar also has seating for about a half dozen.

My guest and I arrived right at noon. Al-

though guests came and went, Puerto Vallarta had steady business, including a decent take-out clientele.

Puerto Vallarta's menu is one of the more expansive I've seen. The separate lunch menu is available from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday. Dishes are reasonably priced (especially the lunch fajitas at \$12.25, good value for the portion we observed), and everyone will find something to their liking. The Tacos Gobernador (a flavorful messy taco combining shrimp, onions, peppers and cheese topped with a chipotle sauce) as well as the Chori Pollo (thinly sliced grilled chicken and chorizo covered in queso and served with lettuce, tomatoes and onions) stood out. We decided, however, to order off the dinner menu.

I judge a Mexican restaurant by its carnitas but could not find a dedicated offering on the menu (other than the street tacos), which was surprising and a bit disappointing. However, there were additional offerings that caught our eye that mostly came from the "Specials of the House" menu section and included the Chile Colorado (a Mexican stew of beef simmered in a rich, savory, red chile sauce) and the Molcajete Jalisco. The latter was described as a layered bowl stacked with carne asada, pork adobado, chicken, chorizo, melted cheese, green chile, Pico de Gallo, green onions, avocado and chili toreado (blistered peppers). Heck, I'm about exhausted just from typing the ingredient list.

We started with a small queso with compli-

mentary chips and salsa. I prefer yellow queso, which apparently nobody serves in Springfield. However, for white queso, this was among the best I've had in Springfield. Although it wasn't overly spicy, the peppers stood out and gave it a nice pop. The chips appeared to have come out of a bag and were not the greatest. The salsa, while hitting all the right notes and looking homemade, was very runny. It made each dip of a chip an adventure. Thankfully, our server brought extra napkins without us having to ask.

For entrees we opted for the three street

tacos served as a meal that included the addition of rice, refried beans and the "Make Your Own Combo." The combo involves up to three items, which include tacos, enchiladas, tostadas, burritos and chimichangas, all with your choice of protein. The street tacos come with onion, cilantro, radishes, limes and salsa verde. Protein options include asada (sliced skirt steak), camarón (grilled shrimp), pescado (grilled tilapia) and carnitas (Mexican-style pulled pork). Both of our options involved hard decisions.

I went with the birria (meat marinated in various spices, herbs, dried chiles, garlic and vinegar), the carne



One of the entrée choices is three street tacos serves with onion, cilantro, radishes, limes and salsa verde and your choice of protein. PHOTO FROM FACEBOOK

asada and the carnitas. In each instance, the tortillas were on the hard side; at least one was corn, which is my preference. The birria was flavorful and juicy and was my favorite, especially compared to the somewhat dry carnitas and carne asada. Still, a hit of acid from the limes and the salsa verde went some way toward mitigating that dryness. I left a clean plate.

My guest with the combo opted for an enchilada and a burrito, which also came with beans and rice. They were both well-sized for the price (\$12.25) and were reported as on par with Puerto Vallarta's peers. His best praise was for the green and red sauces, which were reported to be packed with bold and delicious flavors.

Service was friendly and excellent across the board — I suspect primarily because all staff looked to be family members and had some skin in the proverbial game.

With the many similarities between Springfield's Mexican restaurants, it's the small things that make the difference. Puerto Vallarta did a nice job on many of the small things, enough so that we plan to go back. **SBJ**



The enchiladas are well-sized and come with beans and rice. PHOTO FROM FACEBOOK

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