

**Niesa Silzer, Carlos Pelham, Katie Brenckle,  
Paul Griffin, Monica Grinage Cooper, Liz King,  
Gathan Borden, Nathan Tollett, Tamela Blalock,  
Stephanie Molina, Lindsey Rosenthal, Chris Finelli,  
Brett Sterenson, Cat Carter, Shawn Seipler,  
George Kong, Ailene Sorice, Yigit Pura...**

...and 22 other young professionals made Connect magazine's first 40 Under 40 list. Meet the planners, hoteliers, chefs, destination managers, marketers, speakers, entrepreneurs and students who are the up-and-comers and future leaders in the meetings industry.

# 40 UNDER 40

**Finding the 40:** Coming up with the top 40 young industry leaders wasn't easy. We asked planners, hoteliers and destination partners for their recommendations. We wanted to hear from people working in the industry every day. A number of suggestions didn't make the final cut, but that's why we plan to make "40 Under 40" an annual story. If you know someone you think should be considered for next year's list, please send the name and a brief summary of the person's achievements to [editor@collinsonmedia.com](mailto:editor@collinsonmedia.com).

I VISIONARY I

## Shawn Seipler

**Executive Director,  
Clean the World**  
Orlando, Florida  
Age: 35

Four out of five nights on the road can get a person thinking about all kinds of things. Shawn Seipler couldn't help but wonder what happens to the used soap left behind in hotel rooms. As an e-commerce vice president of sales and marketing, he was good at recognizing opportunities. Learning that impoverished children worldwide die from diseases preventable by simple hand washing, he and a business partner set out to reclaim and sanitize partially used hotel soaps and amenities and get them to those in need. He started Clean the World in his own kitchen; in two years, he's partnered with 1,000 individual hotels, diverting 550 tons of waste from landfills and sending eight million bars of soap to people in U.S. homeless shelters and to 42 countries worldwide. Under his leadership, the nonprofit earned the World Vision Haiti Relief Award, Sustainable Florida Best Practices Leadership Award, a Chase Community Giving Grant and a Harrah's Foundation Grant. Seipler launched Clean the World Global in May to help meet swiftly rising demand. What's next? Replicating the soap experience for hotel textiles. —Katherine Manfredi

### Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

"I truly hope that our green and socially responsible programs are a standard in the global hospitality industry. And more importantly, in 10 years I hope that Clean the World's work on the international humanitarian front is being recognized as one of the reasons diarrheal disease and deaths caused by a lack of proper hygiene are quickly moved off the top 10 killer list."

I INDUSTRY VET I

## Paul Griffin

**Director of Meetings and Events,  
Destination Marketing Association  
International**

Washington, D.C.

Age: 36

Paul Griffin already had racked up a long list of accomplishments before he joined DMAI seven years ago. When he was with the Greater Boston CVB, he was voted Convention Services Manager of the Year and led the convention team to two Pinnacle Awards for business excellence from the Boston COC. He met Michael Gehrisch and Elaine Rosquist while they were planning the DMAI conference (then IAVI) in Boston, and they recruited him to join the association. He's now the director of meetings and events, overseeing 19 conferences. Griffin, a member of ACOM, PCMA, ASAE, AMPS and HIP, says there are two things he really likes about his job: getting to do something different every day and working with DMAI's members. If Griffin had been paying attention, he might have foreseen a future in event planning when he was chosen to be chair of special events for the student council while attending St. Michael's College in Vermont. He organized fundraising events and concerts, bringing acts like Dave Matthews Band to campus. Who knows? Maybe they'll show at up a future DMAI event. —Libby Hoppe



I A MOTHER'S DAUGHTER I

## Niesa Silzer

**Creative Director, Details Convention and Event Management**

Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Age: 39

It seems only natural that Niesa Silzer views her mom, Jean, as the most influential person in her life. "My desire to continually learn came from her," Silzer says. "She went back to school as an adult, became a meeting planner and I work with her now." A mother/daughter Silzer team was never a given, though, as Niesa initially chose the theater—specifically stage managing—as her post-college career. But 12 years of touring with major musicals took a toll. "I didn't have a home, own any dishes or have a bed of my own." So she went back to school (to University of Nevada, Las Vegas for her master's in hospitality administration) and joined her mom in the meeting planning world seven years ago. Industry veteran and planner Joan Eisenstodt calls Silzer irreverent, warm and brilliant, saying she's "rocking the world of meetings and events." Besides volunteering with MPI Greater Calgary Chapter, Silzer teaches event planning at Mount Royal University and, in her rare spare time, enjoys sighting bears and moose in the Canadian Rockies. —Marc Boisclair

I CORPORATE CLIMBER I

## Carson Edwards Jr.

**Global Account Executive, Marriott Global Sales Team,  
Marriott International Inc.**

Washington, D.C.

Age: 37

If anyone understands life on the road, it's Carson Edwards Jr., CASE. Consider his upbringing: born in Buffalo, N.Y., but raised in Richmond, Va., Camden, N.J., Washington, D.C., the Bronx and Norfolk, Va. Then there are the weeks he travels for his globetrotting Marriott job. "I enjoy it, but it's not glamorous—it's work," he says. Still, Edwards isn't complaining, as he's happy engaging with planners at some 55 of Marriott's top association meetings accounts, helping coordinate global get-togethers that can range from 10 to 20,000 attendees. Edwards' role models—his mom, teachers and track coaches—kept him focused and self-disciplined as a youth and through college and an MBA program. As a result, he's worked his way up Marriott's corporate ladder. In 2005, Edwards wanted to give back and suggested that Marriott fund a scholarship in the name of Alice S. Marriott for Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority's hospitality students. "It feels good to help other young people achieve their goals," says Edwards, whose aim was to honor the hotel family's matriarch for her efforts to educate students about the hospitality industry. —M. Boisclair





I COMPETITOR I

## Chris Finelli

**Associate Director of Sales,  
Manchester Grand Hyatt**

San Diego, California

Age: 33

"Everything has revolved around meetings," says Chris Finelli when asked about his career. The lifelong West Coaster grew up in Los Angeles and earned a hotel administration degree from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. During college, Finelli got his start in hotels, holding positions like sales intern, valet and front desk representative. "I didn't know anything about sales when I first started," he says, "but they were the ones going out to restaurants and entertaining clients, and I thought, 'That looks kind of easy.' That's before I knew about quotas," he jokes. He's now the associate director of sales at California's largest hotel and the committee chair for the San Diego CVB sales committee. He's also a new dad to a 5-month-old boy. Finelli admits he loves playing and watching sports. "I'm very competitive; I don't like to lose." That carries over to his job. "There's a thrill in making the booking and closing the deal." —L. Hoppe

I EARLY RISER I

## Katie Brenckle

**Executive Director, Convention and Visitors  
Bureau of Dunwoody**

Dunwoody, Georgia

Age: 26

"I think a lot of people sort of find themselves in tourism," says Katie Brenckle. After graduating from the University of Georgia with a degree in journalism and public relations, Brenckle landed in Thomasville, Ga. She planned to find work in her field, but instead started her career as the tourism coordinator for the city. When she moved to Atlanta a few years later, the CVB of Dunwoody was forming, looking for a deputy director. "I threw in my resume, and I was lucky that they were willing to give me a chance," she says, admitting she feels young to have such an important role at a CVB. Six months into the job, she was promoted to executive director. Because the CVB is small (with only two full-time staffers and one part-timer), she's asked to do everything from sales and marketing to attending industry trade shows. Brenckle's on the board of directors for the Atlanta Metro Travel Association and DeKalb Police Alliance, and when she does have a little free time, she says it's easy to make her happy. "You can put me on a beach with a good book and I'm pretty content." —L. Hoppe



I MEDIA BOSS I

## Gathan Borden

**Marketing Manager, Louisville Convention and Visitors Bureau  
Louisville, Kentucky**

Age: 31

Anyone who's worked with the Louisville CVB knows Gathan Borden—or at least his multimedia footprint. Officially the bureau's marketing manager but known as the self-dubbed social media guru, Borden's got his physical and digital fingers plugged into a variety of outlets: advertising, print media, direct mail, Facebook, Foursquare and Twitter. He's liberal with shout-outs to local vendors and tweets about how important travel and tourism are to his hometown. "A little over three years ago, my current job didn't even exist," he says. Now, the bureau hosts summits to educate people on social media navigation. That's a full 140 characters from Borden's childhood dream of becoming a civil engineer. "I was really into math and science, then took public speaking and marketing in college," he says, finding his eventual knack for connecting people and products. After five years in sales for local broadcasting outlets he spotted a marketing opening for the CVB and literally sold himself, via three face-to-face interviews, as the best candidate for the job. —M. Boisclair



| COLUMBIA CHAMPION |

## Kelly Barbrey

**Vice President of Sales and Marketing, Midlands Authority for Conventions, Sports and Tourism**  
Columbia, South Carolina

Age: 33

Kelly Barbrey was born and raised in Atlanta, and received her bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Georgia in Athens. After a brief career in magazines, she joined the Athens CVB and worked her way up to director of sales. There, Barbrey met future husband, Britton, who lived in Columbia, S.C., where she moved in 2004. Barbrey took a job as sales manager at the newly built Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, which falls under the umbrella of the Midlands Authority for Conventions, Sports and Tourism. Eventually, Barbrey worked up to her current position, where she leads the marketing team that created the city brand, "Famously Hot," which won the 2010 Governor's Cup award. In 2008, Barbrey was named employee of the year, a recognition from her boss and coworkers that she finds invaluable because it followed a leave to have her first child and a lot of hard work to strike a work-home balance. Barbrey loves her dual roles as mom of daughters Merritt, 3, and Hadley, 8 months, and promoter of Columbia. —Rob Hodges

| PEOPLE PERSON |

## Eli Gorin

**Vice President of Global Client Relations, ABTS Convention Services**

Bay Harbor Islands, Florida

Age: 32

It's no surprise to those who know Eli Gorin, CMP, that his true strength is his ability to work with people. "My family was always very involved volunteering in charity events and fundraisers," says the North Miami Beach native, who likely acquired some early group management skills growing up among 16 cousins—nine of whom lived a block or two away. Gorin, CMP, later chose event management at The George Washington University, where he first whetted his planning appetite by organizing the university's Spring Fling festival for 3,000 students. He went on to earn graduate degrees in business and hospitality, applying his planning skills as a meeting and event specialist and adjunct professor. In 2006, at 27, Gorin founded his own firm, gMeetings, focusing on bringing meetings to Latin America. Last year, Gorin sold his company and joined ABTS. Now when he's not navigating group housing and other meeting aspects for medical conference attendees from around the globe, Gorin stays active in PCMA and MPI, where he's a frequent trainer and speaker. He's also studying for his CMM designation. —M. Boisclair



| GEN Y GUY |

## Jason Ryan Dorsey

**Speaker and Chief Strategy Officer, Center for Generational Kinetics**

Austin, Texas

Age: 33

Jason Ryan Dorsey's been on the road since he was 18, speaking on generational topics. He published a book, "Graduate to Your Perfect Job," fresh out of high school. It became a bestseller, and soon he was speaking to half a million members of Gen Y about becoming adults. "Employers and big companies started calling me and saying, 'I hired your people and now they're driving me crazy,'" he says, so he switched from speaking to Gen Y to speaking about Gen Y. He's since written four more books and established the Center for Generational Kinetics, a research firm studying generational trends. "We work with hotels and associations to think about emerging trends and what they can do with them. For example, when a Gen Yer shows up at a hotel, what is the experience they want?" Dorsey, who received an Austin Under 40 Entrepreneur of the Year award at 25, is still on the road much of the time, giving energetic and humorous keynotes. The best part of his job, he says, is that every day he gets to solve new and different problems. The worst part? Leaving his wife and 4-month-old daughter home in Texas. The self-tagged Gen Y Guy is growing up. —L. Hoppe



I NEW MEDIA LEADER I

A close-up portrait of Liz King, a woman with long dark hair and glasses, smiling warmly. She is wearing a dark top. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.**Liz King****Owner, Social Media****Event Specialist,****Liz King Events**

New York, N.Y.

Age: 28

Liz King had a Twitter account before she had a business. She created @LizKingEvents to start researching trends in the event industry, and before she knew it, people were contacting her and referring her to clients, forcing her quickly to set up the business side of Liz King Events. Today, King and two colleagues focus on integrating social media into live events, such as the 2010 BizBash Social Media Lounge. King's blog, which won the 2010 Eventpros Most Thought Provoking Blog and People's Choice awards, features 11 industry leaders from different aspects of planning, from photography to AV. King's original intent to go into counseling turned into event planning when she realized she doesn't leave work at the office. Events blend much better into her personal life, which usually includes experiencing new cities by trying restaurants and discovering hidden places where she might host an event. —J. Garrett

**What are your go-to resources to keep up with what's happening in the industry?**

"The resources shared on Twitter and social media are second-to-none. They are extremely timely and relevant and I find most new knowledge online first."



I MENTOR I

## Cat Carter

**Director of Group Sales, The Westin Alexandria**  
Alexandria, Virginia

Age: 31

After traveling the world with her family and experiencing some of the finest hotels in exotic locales, D.C. native Cat Carter knew she was headed for a career in hospitality. After pursuing an undergraduate degree and MBA in tourism at The George Washington University, Carter married her love for hotels and her commitment to sustainability with a career at Starwood Hotels. As director of group sales, she works to bring meetings to The Westin Alexandria, but she is also co-chair of the property's Green Council, establishing sustainable initiatives for the property. "My father has worked in sustainable tourism for 30 years, so [sustainability] is near and dear to my heart," she says. Carter's career has progressed quickly, and she wants to help young talent in her company move up as well. "As a leader on the team, I think it's really important to be focused on your own development but at the same time to take on that mentoring role for someone else," she says. "That gives me a different level of satisfaction." Carter's active in her local AMP and MPI chapters, and last March, she was named the Supplier of the Month by SGMP. —Lisa Plummer

### What's your advice for someone just starting out in the industry?

"Share your goals, share your aspirations and network internally as well as externally. You always have to be promoting yourself."

I A NATURAL I

## Carlos Pelham

**Meetings Manager, Solar Energy Industries Association**  
Washington, D.C.

Age: 35

If there's a DNA strand designed specifically for planners, Carlos Pelham has it. In grade school, he planned picnics and field trips to the park and mall. "I created permission slips for my friends' parents to fill out," he says. Ditto for a teacher's surprise party. "I coordinated the menu and a payment schedule for the gift," he says. Still, Pelham went from college directly into public relations before making his way back to planning in 2000. The Arlington, Va., native hasn't slowed down, putting his planning skills to work around D.C. before landing at SEIA in 2008. His current duties include helping to manage and produce (e.g., site selection, vendor research/selection, on-site logistics, housing, post-event wrap-up) up to a dozen conferences annually ranging from 15 to 25,000 attendees. Outside the meeting room, he's busy with MPI (a past president of MPI Potomac), ASAE and as co-founder and board advisor of Hospitality Industry Professionals, a social and business networking group for young professionals that's blossomed from its first Washington event with 14 people in 2008 to bashes of 400 and chapters in Chicago and New York as well as D.C. —M. Boisclair

### What was the best advice someone gave you when you started in the industry?

"Relationships matter in this industry."





▲ | CONVENTION CHEF |

## Martin Pfefferkorn

**Executive Chef, Hyatt Regency Atlanta**

Atlanta, Georgia

Age: 37

The son of a farmer, Martin Pfefferkorn began his unlikely career working as an apprentice in a professional kitchen in his native Austria at the age of 15. In his 20s, a seasonal job at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, Mich., brought him to the U.S. Shortly thereafter, he met his wife and relocated here. Eventually, he went to work for the Hyatt Regency Tamaya Resort and Spa as fine dining chef, and was promoted to executive sous chef. Due to his strong organizational skills and eye for detail, he was transferred several times to other Hyatt Regency properties to work as the opening chef, always a tall order. Currently, he's executive chef at one of the busiest convention hotels in the chain; last year, it hosted more than 2,500 events. The most challenging aspect of his work right now is adjusting to the size of the new hotel. "I went from working at a 400-room property, to one that has over 1,300 rooms," he says. Although he's classically French-trained, Pfefferkorn created an innovative menu for the hotel's new bar, Twenty-Two Stories, that's influenced by the ingredients used to make beer (such as hops, malt and yeast). Not one to remain idle, Pfefferkorn enjoys riding motorcycles and occasionally piloting a helicopter in his spare time. —Erin Caslavka

### Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

"Everything I've ever planned has never worked out the way I thought it would. So I'm going to take the future as it comes."

▲ | IDEA MAKER |

## Chris Collinson

**Chief Strategist, Collinson Media and Events**

Atlanta, Georgia

Age: 33

There are people who come up with good ideas and do nothing with them. Then there are people who act on their ideas. Chris Collinson falls into the latter group, and that's why Connect magazine exists. We'd be remiss if we didn't include our own chief strategist on this list as he's one of the idea makers, with the help of his parents and brother, who has grown Collinson Media and Events from a small publisher's rep firm to a full-service media company. He joined the company in 2003 and launched Rejuvenate Marketplace and magazine in 2007. "We all took the best from all the meetings and conferences we attended and left the worst," he says. "We asked, 'What if it was free to attend? What if we did reverse trade show style appointments? What if we got really cool entertainment?'" He's since added Connect and Collaborate Marketplace events to the annual calendar. Collinson is part of the creative team behind the company, but he admits his best ideas come when he brainstorms with others. "As long as you have an end goal that you are trying to get to, you can bring in a lot of points of view to bring an idea forward." —L. Hoppe

### What's your advice for someone just starting out in the industry?

"Ask a lot of questions. Don't make assumptions. Never stop learning. And be a little—just a little—pushy and persistent."







I STRATEGIC THINKER |

## Ailene Sorice

**Corporate Sales Manager—  
Charter, Meeting and Incentive Sales,  
Norwegian Cruise Line**

Miami, Florida

Age: 36

This Emory University Goizueta Business School MBA grad cut her brand management teeth at biggies like Kodak and Unilever (think Slim-Fast) before parlaying her early boutique incentive house experience into corporate planning, DMC sales and client relations. Ailene Sorice now manages corporate sales for Norwegian Cruise Line. She increased sales an astounding 500 percent last year, garnering the Corporate Sales Manager of the Year award her first year with the company. With results like that, Sorice stands out as a strategic thinker, the result of an entrepreneurial family that encouraged risk-taking. A member of MPI, SITE and FICP, Sorice says she's not afraid to present ideas that might rock the boat but she knows are sound; she's willing to do the work and take action. —K. Manfredi

I CULTURAL CULTIVATOR |

## Jason Dunn

**Director of Multicultural Affairs  
and Community Development,  
Cincinnati USA Convention and Visitors Bureau**  
Cincinnati, Ohio

Age: 33

Jason Dunn might not have known what a convention and visitors bureau was when he was growing up, but he says he can't imagine working anywhere better. "We get to travel around the country, host events, entertain people, sit back and see how the city has changed," he says. The CVB hired Dunn in 2004, impressed after he planned the pre-opening for the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. Today, Dunn's role as director of multicultural affairs involves connecting conventions with local multicultural businesses and educating the multicultural community about what the CVB is doing. He encourages citizens to be ambassadors for the city, sharing the story of Cincinnati's transformation in the last decade. His involvement with the multicultural community has played a large role in attracting national and international conventions to town, including the National Baptists, NAACP, World Choir Games and National Society of Hispanic MBAs. In Dunn's personal time, which he spends with wife Tiffany and 8-year-old daughter Mya, he's still swallowed up by tourism and hospitality, traveling for conferences and events for church, fraternity or Mya. —J. Garrett



I FEARLESS CLIMBER |

## Megan Larsen

**Director of Sales,  
Crowne Plaza Denver  
International Airport**  
Denver, Colorado

Age: 33

Megan Larsen's path to a director of sales position is an unlikely one. Her introduction to the industry started in 1999 when she decided to work banquets at Denver Airport Marriott at Gateway Park to earn extra money during the holidays. She never left, instead working her way up to the hotel's restaurant and front desk and eventually to sales, working with government, association and SMERF groups. She was promoted to director of sales in 2006, and the Crowne Plaza Denver International Airport recruited her two years later. Larsen leads using the same attributes that made her want to be an actress growing up—she's outgoing and fearless. At the Crowne Plaza, she has earned the Rocky Mountain Chapter of MPI Supplier of the Year and Meeting Excellence awards and Colorado Business Council Excellence Award. She also formed the Gateway Park Hotel Association, uniting neighboring hotels for events such as blood drives and volunteering at children's clinics. Larsen, who gets married in November, loves to ski and snowboard, camp and visit Elitch Gardens with her family. —J. Garrett



| THE EXTRA MILER |

A professional headshot of Nathan Tollett, a man with dark hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and patterned tie. He is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera.

## ◀ Nathan Tollett

**Director of Sales, Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau**

Houston, Texas

Age: 31

It would be fun to be with Nathan Tollett on Halloween; he's definitely not afraid of costumes. He dressed up in a DHL courier uniform to meet one of the company's executives at the airport for a site visit and rode a cow around the George R. Brown Convention Center dressed as a deli manager in an effort to get group business. That's Tollett's approach—to go a little above and beyond—to attract conventions to Houston. And it's paid off: He's roped in high-profile groups including the International Dairy Deli Bakery Association and Microsoft. He'll put on a costume to win the hearts of prospective groups, but the reason he's successful probably has more to do with his overall job strategy. "It's pretty simple: Ask questions, be a good listener, be creative and think outside the box," Tollett says. "It's not what we have, it's what the customer needs... [and we try] to position their needs and requirements with our infrastructure and resources. There are a lot of great cities in this country, a lot of great hotels, restaurants and convention centers, but it's the people that really make the difference." When not working hard to lure groups to town, Tollett enjoys connecting with his industry by staying active with PCMA and serving as a board member for the HSMAI. —L. Plummer

### **What's your advice for someone just starting out in the industry?**

"As social media continues to transform our world, it's important to remember our business still operates as a relationship-based industry and to value the face-to-face interactions with your customers and colleagues. That said, embrace the opportunity for change and developing new techniques for continued success."



| GREEN ADVOCATE |

## ◀ Andrew Walker

**Managing Director, Eco-Efficient Events (E3) Ltd.**

London, England

Age: 35

Andrew Walker joined the MPI Toronto Chapter as a hospitality and tourism management student at Ryerson University in 2002 and was hooked. Since then, he's been recognized by MPI as Student of the Year in 2004 and Volunteer of the Year in 2009. He then became committee chair and director on the board. Tourism Toronto asked Walker to take on media communications for the 2007 PCMA convention's Zero Waste initiative, which got him interested in green meetings. He joined GMIC that year and began pursuing a master's degree in environmental studies with a focus on sustainable meeting and event management. He remained focused on green events, interning at a carbon consultancy and chairing the Canadian group contributing to the development of international event sustainability standards ISO 20121. He remains a committee member even after relocating in 2010 to London through dual citizenship. Last year, he was named an international board member for GMIC and launched Eco-Efficient Events to provide sustainability education, training and consulting for business events. Walker plotted his early career to gain experience in a variety of hotel, catering, tourism and meeting management jobs, eager to learn from seasoned event professionals. He's the one we're learning from now: Walker has quickly become a respected event sustainability speaker and industry leader. —K. Manfredi

### Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

"I would love to think that in 10 years time there won't be any need for sustainability consultants...but I don't think this will actually be the case as change takes time. In this light, I hope that in 10 years time my business is thriving. I also hope that I will be teaching in an academic setting, if only part-time."

| THE NETWORKER |

## ▶ Monica Grinage Cooper

**Event Program Manager, International Facility Management Association**

Houston, Texas

Age: 32

Monica Grinage Cooper was planning events before she realized she was planning events. The Tennessee State University graduate took a position with The Clean Air Campaign, and a small part of her job was coordinating in-school education programs for students. Every job that's followed has been in meeting planning, including her current position with the International Facility Management Association, where she's been for almost three years. She's responsible for the look, feel, programming and content for the association's events, including the annual World Workplace conference and expo, which has 5,000 attendees. Cooper, who's studying for her CMP certification, says the meetings industry is a perfect fit for her personality. The ISES member is also a rock-star networker. She hosts happy hours the first Friday of every month for event industry professionals in Houston. Terrence L. Rollins, who serves on the IFMA Sustainability Committee, says, "Her outgoing and friendly personality is widely respected, and just can't be matched." —L. Hoppe

### Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

"I see myself leading a talented and motivated team of event professionals for a progressive organization while also satisfying a personal goal of traveling abroad speaking and training at industry conferences."





| BRANDING ARCHITECT |

## Michael Alderson

**Vice President of Marketing and Public Relations,  
FSA Management Group**

Louisville, Kentucky

**Brand and Messaging Strategist, Valence Consulting**  
New Orleans, Louisiana

Age: 33

As a child, Michael Alderson wanted to be an architect. "I liked drawing out details and seeing something come into reality. I feel like that's exactly what I do right now, but in a very different way," he says. Alderson works with planners (mostly nonprofits), crafting messages and marketing strategies for their events. "My background is in commercial marketing. I love all the creativity of commercial marketing, but with nonprofits, their heart is in the right place," he says. (He recently started working with Valence Consulting part-time on commercial projects.) His two degrees—a master's in business communication and a bachelor's in psychology—help him in his current role, which requires he know how to talk to people and understand what they want. Since joining FSA in 2008, the marketing department has won 17 national and international awards, including two MarCom Platinum Awards. Before joining FSA, Alderson won several Aster Awards for his work in healthcare marketing. Alderson says his 20s were all about sales, his 30s are about marketing and his 40s may shift to higher education. He's always been interested in history, and he's currently working on a book about America's role in the economic and commercial development of the Caribbean. He recently moved to New Orleans, where he's spending all his free time exploring the city's history, architecture and martinis. —L. Hoppe

### What's your advice for someone just starting out in the industry?

"To successfully brand and market a conference, you have to find and maintain a healthy balance between strategy and tactics, so the tiniest brushstrokes always add color and definition to the bigger picture. Also, learn the fine art of controlled compromise: Gain buy-in, stand by your decisions and be prepared to adapt to new influences."

| CREATIVE FORCE |

## Stephanie Molina

**Director of Marketing,  
Beaumont Convention and Visitors Bureau**

Beaumont, Texas

Age: 33

Louisiana native Stephanie Molina moved to Beaumont, Texas, during junior high school, fell in love with the Cajun-Texan vibe of the border community and never left. Armed with a degree in business administration from local Lamar University, Molina started with the CVB as a public information officer in 2001, three days after graduation. During the past 10 years, she's grown with the CVB, helping see Beaumont through a rebranding effort as well as a recovery from two major natural disasters—hurricanes Katrina and Ike. Molina has been the driving creative force behind many of the CVB's prestigious awards, including numerous ADDY awards from the American Advertising Federation, which recognized the organization's website, collateral materials and campaigns. Other awards have included the 2010 Travel Standard of Excellence WebAward from the Web Marketing Association and several from the Texas Association of CVBs Idea Fair. Her creative side comes from being an artist, a pursuit she follows along with raising daughters Myah, 8, and Gabriella, 4, with husband Shawn. —R. Hodges

### What's your advice for someone just starting out in the industry?

"Listen and learn as much as you can, but don't let the fact that you're new hold you back. One of the greatest things in tourism and travel is the fact that with the right attitude and drive, you can advance quickly. There's a tremendous amount of opportunity for go-getters in this industry. Ask questions, read as many industry publications as you can and make industry friends all over the world."





I THE RECRUIT I

## Jessica Methier King

**Director of Sales, Renaissance Montgomery Hotel and Spa at the Convention Center**  
Montgomery, Alabama

Age: 32

Like many people in the industry, Atlanta native Jessica Methier King fell into the meetings world by happy accident. While working in advertising sales for a publishing company in Auburn, Ala., and playing a dual role as meeting planner for company events, King was noticed by the general manager of the Auburn Marriott Opelika Hotel and Conference Center at Grand National who offered her a job in catering sales. Five years and another hotel property later, she knows without a doubt that she made the right career transition. "When I first started, the general manager said I'd either love it or hate it and if I loved it, it would get under my skin," she says. "That's exactly what happened." She's been at the Renaissance Montgomery for four years, and is a member of PCMA, MPI and the Junior League of Lee County, sitting on its education, training and public relations committees. Although she is passionate about her career and volunteer work, King says what she loves most is spending time with her husband. The newlyweds married in January. —L. Plummer

I NOVICE I

## Courtney Stanley

**Special Projects and Events Intern,**  
**Country Music Association**

Nashville, Tennessee

Age: 22

Somebody has to be the youngest on the list, and that's Courtney Stanley. But don't tell her that a Gen Y'er can't have an impact on a big industry such as meetings. She wouldn't believe you anyway. The 22-year-old recent Central Michigan University graduate received this year's RISE Award (Recognizing Industry Success and Excellence) for Young Professional Achievement from MPI for creating networking and hands-on opportunities for CMU event management students. She also developed a program called "Beyond Hands On" that encourages partnerships between event organizations and student professionals. Stanley has already found herself in the enviable position of working with the Country Music Association, a perfect fit for someone who loves music and film. When not working, Stanley can be found traveling, particularly to Spain and the south of France, where she recently attended the Cannes International Film Festival. —E. Caslavka



I CHANCE TAKER I

## Katie Hais

**Manager, Conventions and Events,**  
**American Hotel and Lodging Association**  
Washington, D.C.

Age: 29

What can a college graduate do with an anthropology degree? Become a meeting planner, apparently. At least that's what Katie Hais did. "I always thought events might be something I'd be interested in," says Hais, CMP, who joined the Environmental Protection Agency's events department after leaving Union College in Schenectady, N.Y. Call it a lucky career hunch, but Hais has found success in meetings, now serving as the events manager for AH&LA, coordinating 15 to 20 events a year. "No two events are the same, and we're always trying to change them and bring something new to the table," she says. Hais is involved with MPI and is chair of the Community Outreach Committee for MPI's Potomac chapter. She's also the staff liaison for AH&LA Under 30 Gateway, a networking and mentorship program for young industry professionals. "It's great knowing that I'm helping to provide a valuable resource for my peers," says Hais. Recently, she took on another planning job: wedding planner. She's tying the knot next year. —L. Hoppe



I QUICK LEARNER I

◀ **Tamela  
Blalock****National Sales Manager,  
Team San Jose**

San Jose, California

Age: 30

Tamela Blalock moved through several careers before finding the tourism industry: operations research analyst in the CIA's counterterrorism department, high school Spanish teacher, sales agent for the Washington Redskins, and leader of The George Washington University's meetings and convention housing program are all listed on Blalock's resume. The 30-year-old thought she would one day manage a football team and began a master's program in tourism administration at GWU but soon discovered she had a greater affinity for travel and tourism. She then joined Team San Jose. One year after beginning her career there, Blalock's passion for the industry and the city she sells has not gone unnoticed. "What impressed me about Tamela is her drive to get things done," says Amanda Scott, association manager of the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors Inc. "She has a way of looking at things from all angles and presenting new ideas that would tie any type of organization's meeting topic into the flavor of her city." She's involved in PCMA, MPI's Potomac chapter, SGMP and AMP, and recently won MPI's Potomac chapter Rising Star of the Year award. She's getting a lot of attention in her new role, but Blalock admits, "My parents better understood what I did when I worked at the CIA."

—L. Plummer

**Where do you see yourself in 10 years?**

"If I'm not still in the supplier role, I may see myself lobbying for our industry, working for the U.S. Travel Association. I want to advocate for our industry so [people] understand our impact to the economy, which is very huge and still very much under the radar."



I SOCIAL ENGINEER I

## Portia Kee

**Events Manager,  
Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-  
American Arts and Culture**  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
Age: 34

At the busy \$18 million Gantt Center at the Levine Center for the Arts in Charlotte, N.C., special events are common, with additional facility rentals for fundraisers, business meetings and small receptions. Spearheading it all is Portia Kee, the events manager at the 46,500-sq.-ft. facility and a member of ISES. Kee got her start producing fashion shows in Miami, then segued into owning Kee Connections, a personal concierge service where she hosted and entertained clients visiting the South Beach area. She moved into a position as social events manager for the annual American Black Film Festival (she'll tell you she's a movie junkie), and was then recruited to work at the Gantt where she helps coordinate all events. Wanting to attract more of the under-40 crowd to the center, Kee recently created "Social Supremacy," a weekly happy hour for Charlotte socialites held on the facility's indoor/outdoor rooftop terrace. She has a variety of responsibilities at the center, but Kee says the most challenging aspect of her job is "staying away from all the good food and sweets that surround me during events."

—E. Caslavka

I STRAIGHT SHOOTER I

## Stephanie Arone

**President, General Manager and Director of Sales,  
Activity Planners Inc.**  
Las Vegas, Nevada  
Age: 39

How did a no-nonsense, native New Yorker like Stephanie Arone end up as a major event player in "anything goes" Las Vegas? "Accidentally. I didn't even know that destination management was an industry," she says. After graduating from New York's Pace University in 1994, Arone, DCM, left her future as a Wall Street commuter behind for the glitz and glamour of a keno runner job at Vegas' Fiesta Casino Hotel—"perhaps the lowest rung on the Vegas employee ladder," she admits. That foot in the hospitality industry door, though, quickly led to a human relations position managing Fiesta's training and orientation. In 1997, when veteran Vegas DMC Karen Gordon was looking for another creative mind, Arone won the job over some stiff competition. She took over Activity Planners after Gordon's retirement last year, and she's already built a repeat client rate of 60 to 65 percent in ultra-competitive Vegas with her hands-on, straight-shooting approach. In her rare spare time, Arone gives back to both her profession (through MPI, PCMA, the ADME and the Las Vegas Hospitality Association) and her community as a board member with the Patrick Kelly Youth Foundation, which provides scholarships for underprivileged youths. —M. Boisclair



I FRESH FACE I

## Ashley Akright

**Executive Meetings Manager,  
Gaylord National Resort and  
Convention Center**  
Washington, D.C.  
Age: 24

Ashley Akright knew she belonged in hospitality from a very young age. By the time she arrived at Pennsylvania State University in State College as a freshman, she already had begun her path to meetings and events. Majoring in hotel, restaurant and institutional management, Akright became heavily involved with PCMA in college, helping to found the association's Penn State student chapter and serving as its president, secretary and vice president, sitting on the PCMA Student Task Force and winning as many conference scholarships as possible. Akright landed an internship at the Gaylord Palms Resort and Convention Center in Orlando, and after graduating in 2009, she began working at Gaylord's D.C. property as a conference coordinator. Two years later, Akright is already in a leadership role as executive meetings manager. —L. Plummer





▲ ADVENTURER |

## Chris Gahl

**Director of Communications,  
Indianapolis Convention and Visitors Association**

Indianapolis, Indiana

Age: 33

Chris Gahl had an adventurous childhood traveling back and forth to Hawaii to visit family, fostering skills for surfing and scuba diving. After pursuing a degree in broadcast journalism and communications at Butler University in Indiana, Gahl heeded the call of his Polynesian roots and ventured to Honolulu, where he worked in marketing and public relations for four years. But when he and his wife decided to start a family, they wanted to do it in Indianapolis, his hometown. He's been with the Indianapolis CVA for six years, and Gahl says he enjoys proving to planners that there's a lot more to the city than the iconic Indy 500. He's also worked hard to promote the recently completed \$275 million expansion of the Indiana Convention Center. "I've always been fascinated with what someone takes from a destination and what someone leaves behind," Gahl says. He's actively involved with the Society of American Travel Writers, and recently was named a "Who's Who In Hospitality" by the Indianapolis Business Journal. He doesn't mind working overtime to help promote his city, but he also doesn't mind getting away from time to time to travel and find that perfect wave. —L. Plummer

### **What was the best advice someone gave you when you started in the industry?**

"Always be transparent and don't pretend to be something you're not."

| RELATIONSHIP EXPERT |

## Shelby Schuler

**Group Sales Manager, Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort**

Destin, Florida

Age: 34

Shelby Schuler's goal is to make every meeting she's involved with a production. Whether it's due to early theater ambitions or her dynamic personality, the Mobile, Ala., native, who learned customer service by working in her dad's meat market and grocery store, wants to create memorable experiences for every group. Schuler's thriving in her newly created position as group sales manager at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort, and has goals to turn her emerging markets of New England, Mid-Atlantic, Chicago, Texas and California into established markets in the next three years. Her drive and ability to build relationships with her customers earned her the MVP of the Quarter award in 2007 at Sandestin and Manager of the Quarter award in 2000 while working at the Wynfrey Hotel in Birmingham, Ala. When she's not working behind the scenes of an event, Schuler is on the beach with her boxer, Grace Kelly. —J. Garrett

### **What was the best advice you got when you started in the industry?**

"When I started my first job, my parents told me to always have integrity and respect for others, and as long as I did this I could never fail. These were the best words of wisdom and have been the cornerstone of my career."







I ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARD I

## Lindsay Smith-Arell

**Sustainable Program Director,  
Colorado Convention Center**  
Denver, Colorado  
Age: 32

As a lifelong outdoor enthusiast, Lindsay Smith-Arell has been long aware of the importance of environmental stewardship, but it wasn't until she began working as an event planner in Seattle that she became concerned about the industry's waste. Wanting to move back to her hometown of Denver, Smith-Arell approached her former employer, the Colorado Convention Center, about creating a position for her to move the center in a more sustainable direction. Five years and a long list of progressive environmental initiatives later, the CCC has become one of the most eco-friendly convention centers in the nation. In fact, Smith-Arell was instrumental in helping the building attain LEED-EBOM (Existing Building Operations and Maintenance) certification from the U.S. Green Building Council recently, the first awarded to a convention center. When asked why sustainability is so important to her, she says, "It seems like such an obvious, simple way to fix some of the issues we've created. There are easy ways to make huge positive impacts." —L. Plummer



I ENGAGER I

## Jessica L. Levin

**President and Chief Connector,  
Seven Degrees Communications**  
Edison, New Jersey  
Age: 33

Jessica Levin had a client before she had a company. Two years ago, someone needed her help when planning an event, setting the ball in motion. Seven Degrees Communications was born. Levin had previously worked in marketing, event planning and strategies, and was considered an expert in social media and emerging technologies—all services her company now provides. She calls herself an entrepreneur at heart, and cannot imagine working again for someone other than her clients. Levin's drive helped her become president of the New Jersey Professional Marketers Association, Interactive Education Chair for the Association for Accounting Marketing, member of the social media advisory group for PCMA and co-founder of EventCamp, a nonprofit conference for event professionals focusing on social media and technology. She was named planner of the year by the New Jersey chapter of MPI and is a JASPER Award winner in the special event planning category. Work takes the Florida native all over the country and abroad, but her sole regret about traveling so frequently is missing her beloved cat, Pumpkin Pie. —R. Hodges



I A LIFER I

## Audra Franks

**Senior Director of Meetings, American  
Dental Education Association**  
Washington, D.C.  
Age: 35

Audra Franks would have stayed in the hotel industry, where she started her career after earning an undergraduate hospitality degree, if it wasn't for the long hours. A conversation with a meeting planner convinced her that she'd do well in that field, and she started planning government meetings shortly thereafter. That was six and a half years ago, and in that time, Franks, CMP, has added a stint at SmithBucklin, a Master of Tourism Administration from The George Washington University and planning jobs with two large associations to her resume. She now plans 40 to 50 meetings a year for the ADEA, including an annual session for 2,000 people. In a way, Franks has become what she wanted to be when she was a kid: "I wanted to be a business professional. I had a vision of a padfolio in my hands, wearing heels." She trades the heels for more comfortable shoes when she's in the throes of a multi-day meeting, but she has no plans to leave the industry. "I like that we start initiatives, we create initiatives and we keep folks working," she says. —L. Hoppe

I TOP CHEF |

## ◀ Yigit Pura

**Executive Pastry Chef,  
Taste Catering**

San Francisco, California

Age: 30

It isn't every day someone gets asked to compete for \$100,000 on a nationally televised cooking show. But that's what happened to Yigit Pura (pronounced "Yeet") when he was selected to participate in the premiere season of Bravo's "Top Chef Just Desserts." (He went on to beat 11 other contestants for the top prize.) When asked about winning the competition, he says, "It's been tremendous for my career surely, but it has also given me the platform to have a voice and do advocacy for the [issues] that are really dear to my heart, like the Human Rights Campaign and The Trevor Project." Originally from Turkey, Pura got his start at age 19 making pastries at The Meetinghouse, a 3-star restaurant in San Francisco. Currently you'll find him creating specialty desserts like lemon verbena panna cotta with caramel gelee at Taste Catering, an events-planning company. One of the most prestigious events the company hosts is the Meals on Wheels of San Francisco Gala, which brings together top culinary talent to cook a black-tie dinner for 900. (The event recently raised \$1.4 million, including \$10,000 for a dessert tasting with Pura.) The busy chef is also working out the details of opening a high-end pastry shop in San Francisco later this year.

—E. Caslavka

### Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

"I have an idea of where I would like things to lead, but the past year alone is a great example of relishing life's surprises and being open to new and unthought-of opportunities."

*Taste  
Yigit Pura  
Pastry Chef*



I CHARMER |

## Dzirra Junior

**Director of Sales, The Mirage Hotel and Casino**  
Las Vegas, Nevada  
Age: 38

"When I was a child, I never thought I was a child," says Dzirra Junior, CMP, who admits she spent more time with her mom than her friends, foregoing the playground for creating dishes in her Easy Bake oven. Small wonder, then, that Junior spent her first seven hospitality industry years in food and beverage. From there, she moved successfully into convention services, but the time demands of being a single mom with a young son led her to sales. Her charm and determination caught the eye of MGM Resorts International officials, who first hired her in 2006 to develop the diversity market and recently promoted Junior to oversee all sales at the Mirage. "Dzirra not only is an advocate for the planner, but for the entire city of Las Vegas," says Ana Aponte-Curtis, one of Junior's clients and the vice president of events planning at the NAACP. "I would not be surprised to one day see her running either the bureau or one of the major hotels in Vegas." —M. Boisclair

### What was the best advice you got when you started in the industry?

"When a person shows you who they are, believe them."

I ONE-MAN SHOW |

## Brett Sterenson

**President, Hotel Lobbyists**  
Washington, D.C.  
Age: 34

"I always envisioned doing something on my own," says Brett Sterenson. That's certainly what he's doing at Hotel Lobbyists, a conference site-selection firm. He's the president, but he's also the marketer, accountant, salesman, secretary and coffee-making intern. He's been a one-man show since he left Kimpton Hotels in 2007 to start the company. "I didn't leave my old job because I didn't love it," he says. Kimpton is a boutique company, and a number of meeting planners calling Sterenson for hotel space couldn't get the space they needed. "So, I thought, 'What if I could help them every single time they called me?'" Since April Fool's Day 2007, I haven't said no to anyone." That commitment to customers has served Sterenson well. He was the SGMP Sam Gilmer Supplier of the Year in 2010, an SGMP Gilmer Trustee this year, member of the SGMP National Capital Chapter board member for five years, and Kimpton's sales manager of the year in 2006. Like many in the industry, he loves to travel, but he's not afraid to take a different route. He road tripped to the SGMP conference in Kansas City, Mo., last year and didn't take a single interstate highway from D.C. He wrote about that trip on his blog, which also includes other travel stories and industry info, at [hotel-lobbyists.com](http://hotel-lobbyists.com). —L. Hoppe

### What's your advice for someone just starting out in the industry?

"Stay visible. You want to make sure your clients are thinking about you as much as you're thinking about them. Attend every function you can. Join committees. Stay involved. The moment you go invisible, you're no longer relevant."





I HUMANITARIAN |

## Lindsey Rosenthal

**Chief Event and Fundraising Strategist, Events For Good**  
Washington, D.C.

Age: 27

When Lindsey Rosenthal sat down for this interview, it was less than three weeks after the devastating tornado that ravaged Joplin, Mo. In that short time, she'd helped organize "Show Me" Support For Joplin: A Red Tie Affair at Union Station in Washington, D.C., which raised \$10,000 and hopes to reach \$50,000 by the campaign's end. That's an example of the events Rosenthal helps plan: ones that have positive impacts on people and communities. Rosenthal always has been driven; she dreamed about being the general manager of The Waldorf Astoria at the age of 10. By 26, she'd earned a degree in hotel administration from Cornell University and master's in tourism administration from The George Washington University, worked in public relations for Loews Hotels and Hyatt corporate sales, and founded her current company, Events for Good, which helps nonprofits with their events and fundraising strategies. The rest of her time is filled teaching at Marymount University, planning EventCamp East Coast (an un-conference for event planners who want to leverage social media and technology to create enhanced event experiences), matching corporations with nonprofits, producing webinar series, and spending whatever personal time that's left at Nationals' baseball games, swimming or playing kickball on the National Mall. —J. Garrett

### What was the best advice you got when you started in the industry?

"Hospitality is not just one component of your business. It is your business."

I YOUNG PIONEER |

## George Kong

**Independent Meeting Planner, Corporate Planning Specialty**

New York, New York

Age: 28

With two checked bags, one carry-on and no job, George Kong moved to New York City fresh out of the Rosen College of Hospitality Management at University of Central Florida on Oct. 10, 2010. Kong floundered a bit before he zeroed in on event management, but his belief in education and work experience has created an upward career trajectory, proven by his range of roles: catering, business development with Song Division (providing a twist on experiences like team-building through songwriting) and event management with Universal Studios' Orlando team for The Wizarding World of Harry Potter's grand opening. Kong likes to be on the front end of things. He was tweeting at conferences before it became part of event plans, the first active president of MPI Student Club and first student to sit on the Greater Orlando Area Chapter of MPI's board as director of administration. Compelled to "give back to this industry that has done so much for me," Kong has been actively involved in four associations (PCMA, ISES, MPI and NACE) and is currently director of membership for MPI's Global Emerging Leaders Committee. Now he's taking his biggest leap of all: forging another new path as an independent event planner focusing on corporate events and multigenerational differences. —K. Manfredi

### What's your advice for someone starting out in the industry?

"Neurologists say a brain's creative ability is influenced by new experiences. Be adventurous. Go for the other option. Exercise your brain."



Read more on what the top 40 candidates said was the best advice they received when they first started in the industry in "Talking Meetings," page 148.