

MASTERING THE BALANCING ACT

WHEN JUGGLING WORK, FAMILY AND FAITH, IT CAN BE TOUGH TO FIND BALANCE. FIVE RELIGIOUS MEETINGS INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS TELL US HOW THEY KEEP THEIR PRIORITIES IN PERSPECTIVE.

BY LISA PLUMMER

Photography by Chris Savas



Whenever he's away from home for more than a few days at a time, Scott Graham makes a point of doing something special for his 12-year-old twin daughters. As the director of meetings for the Christian Booksellers Association, Graham's job can often demand long hours at the office and on the road, especially during the two annual events he plans for the organization. But that doesn't stop him from being a doting dad and husband.

"Especially if I have to take an extended trip, I'll make my girls a card to open every day so they know I'm thinking of them and then I'll talk to them in the evenings," he says. "My children and my wife are my hobby. If I can spend time with them, that's my hobby."

Like many meetings and hospitality career professionals, Graham works continuously to balance the demands of his career with his personal life and make all the pieces fit. And for him, achieving harmony between job and family is well worth the effort, because like many working parents, Graham understands that work-life balance is fluid and ever-changing.

Parents have always felt pressure to perform at both work and home, but recent workplace trends reveal a few factors making it more difficult than ever. A 2010 report by the Center for American Progress shows exactly how overworked Americans are. Employees in the United States report much higher levels of work-family conflict than workers in other industrialized countries. Americans work 137 hours more per year than Japanese workers, 260 more per year than British workers and 499 more hours annually than French workers, according to the International Labour Organization. Even the 40-hour workweek standard is becoming obsolete. Visual Economics, a website that analyzes financial data, conducted a study that shows 85.5 percent of U.S. working males and 66.5 percent of females work more than the standard 40 hours.

How, then, do modern working professionals climb the career ladder while maintaining fulfilling personal lives? And in the meetings industry, which tends to demand long hours in the office and on the road, how do people juggle their work schedules with their family time and personal interests while making time for their faith? And ultimately, is true work-life balance really possible or is it merely a delusion?

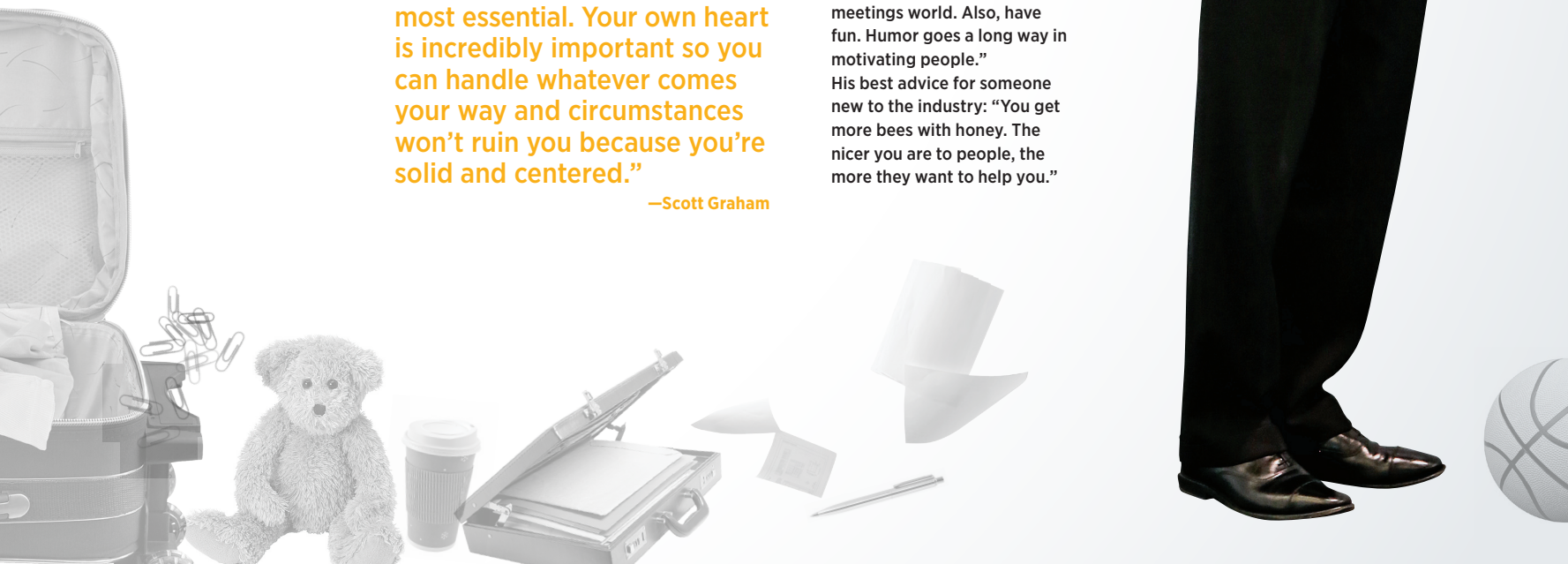
"The spiritual quiet time is the most essential. Your own heart is incredibly important so you can handle whatever comes your way and circumstances won't ruin you because you're solid and centered."

—Scott Graham

Scott Graham

Director of Meetings, Christian Booksellers Association

- Age: 49
- Years in the industry: 14
- Number of children: 2
- Number of hours worked per week: 50 during work weeks, 60-70 during two annual events
- Number of relocations: 7, all for work
- Starting salary at first industry job: \$45,000
- Best advice he received when starting out: "There's no problem that can't be solved, especially on-site, and don't sweat the small stuff. They're two very common sayings, but they hold very true in the meetings world. Also, have fun. Humor goes a long way in motivating people."
- His best advice for someone new to the industry: "You get more bees with honey. The nicer you are to people, the more they want to help you."



Jonathan McKinney

Director of Group Sales,
Marriott Shoals Hotel and Spa

- Age: 33
- Years in the industry: 4
- Number of children: 3
- Number of hours worked per week: 55
- Number of relocations: Once for work and once for personal reasons
- Starting salary at first industry job: \$6.50 an hour at the Holiday Inn Sunspree Resort, Panama City Beach, Fla., in the summer of 1999. "I dressed like a pirate and greeted all our guests."
- Best advice he received when starting out: "Smile!"
- His best advice for someone new to the industry: "Continually develop your passion to love and serve others. If you do this, your passion for the service you provide will be magnetic and others will be drawn to do business with you."

SETTING PRIORITIES

As the director of group sales at Marriott Shoals Hotel and Spa in Florence, Ala., Jonathan McKinney views work-life balance more as an imperfect, ever-changing juggling act. As a devoted husband and the father of three children, including a special needs child, McKinney is serious about his career but knows that when it comes down to it, family always comes first.

"I'm not saying your work isn't as important as your life sometimes, and both of those things can interchange at different times, but for me family is more important than work and gets priority," says McKinney. "That doesn't mean I don't care about what I do, but for me it's never about trying to balance those things, it's about trying to make sure I manage my priorities enough, that I take care of my wife, take care of my family first and then take care of my work priorities."

In order to keep things in sync at work and home, McKinney has found several solutions to help maintain harmony, including being more efficient with his time, keeping travel to a minimum and maintaining open lines of communication with both his wife and his boss.

"As a Christian, I want to make sure I'm serving those closest to me and I think about that in the same light in my work, so to me it's extremely important I'm managing those priorities at home well and then openly communicating with my wife," says McKinney. "We discuss our schedules at the beginning of the week and I'll either go into work early on certain days or try to reorganize my work schedule so I'm meeting my deadlines and responsibilities. To me, it's extremely important to keep my wife happy. Happy wife, happy life," he jokes.

Adjusting his work hours and cutting back on unnecessary travel have also been successful tactics for Graham, who doesn't typically participate in familiarization trips or go on site visits unless absolutely necessary.

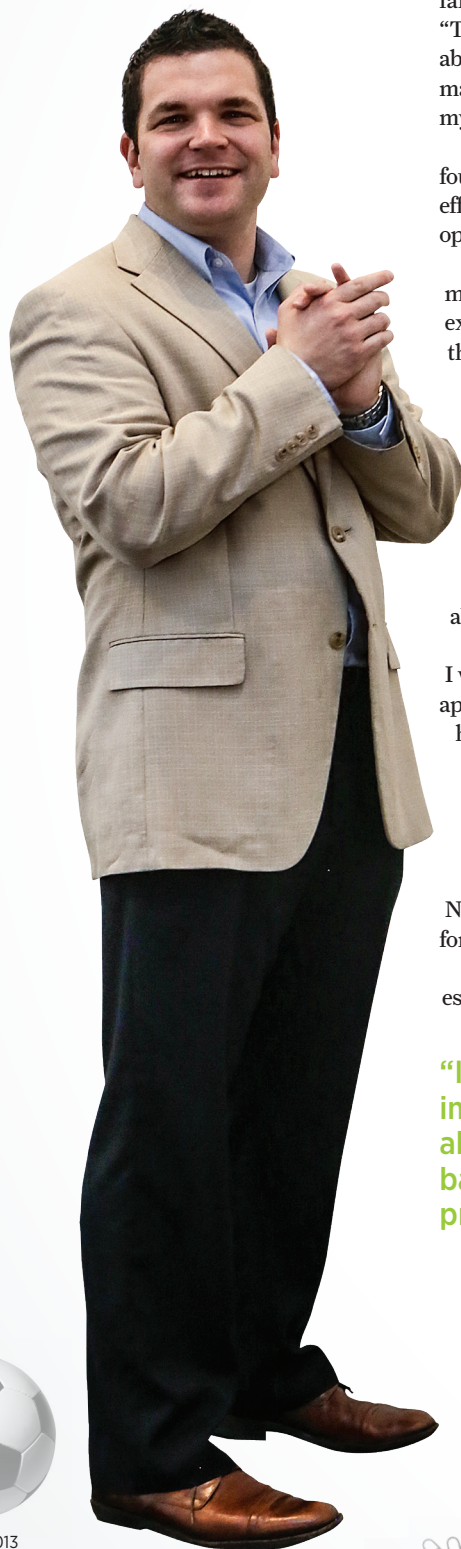
"I didn't marry until my mid-30s and didn't have children until I was almost 40, but I didn't do that to throw it all away and not appreciate it," says Graham. "Pre-children, I was working even longer hours, so I decided that I had to balance more. I started working my overtime in the mornings, so I have been known to start working at 5:30 in the morning but I'm leaving at 4. I'm going to have dinner at the table, see my daughters and be part of their lives."

But for professionals who can't cut back on travel, having support from understanding loved ones is essential, says Tommy Nobis, operations administrator of Christ in Youth, who is on the road for his job about 90 days out of the year.

"Work-life balance is possible but it is difficult," says Nobis. "In essence, my wife is a single parent for one-fourth of the year. So the

"I don't want to give the impression that I have this all figured out. [Work-life balance] is always a work in progress."

—Jonathan McKinney



biggest success is three-fold: Getting your spouse to buy in to what you do, delegating more on the road to free up my time so I can talk to her and the kids, and I try to give my wife time off when I am home.”

Before she became a parent, Toni Green was a self-professed workaholic. In fact, the senior sales manager at the Greenville (S.C.) Convention and Visitors Bureau says it was nothing for her to tackle a 60-hour workweek and put in several hours on weekends. But since the birth of her daughter a year ago, things have changed.

“Once I had her, life made sense because I knew what my purpose was and found out who I was supposed to be,” says Green. “Now I’m learning to balance that time with her but also know what I can and can’t take on. So I’ve established parameters and boundaries because if not, you can go crazy trying to be everything to everybody. I enjoy my work, I love it and I value it, but in order for me to feel complete, productive and successful, I have to have a balance.”

As the single mother of three children, an independent meeting planner and a graduate student, Alysha Cobb, president and owner of Fire and Ice Fusion Inc., understands that one essential ingredient in the work-life harmony recipe is a strong support system comprised of family, friends and colleagues. “Sometimes you need six hours to sit still. So having people around you in your business you can trust to turn things over to is important,” she says.

While work-life pressures can be equally challenging for both sexes, it can be especially difficult for new mothers, says Green. “We’re just wired differently,” she says. “From a new mother’s perspective—from any mother’s perspective—when do you let go? It almost seems impossible to do because you’re so connected with that instinct, that physical and emotional connection you have.”

A MORE FLEXIBLE WORKPLACE

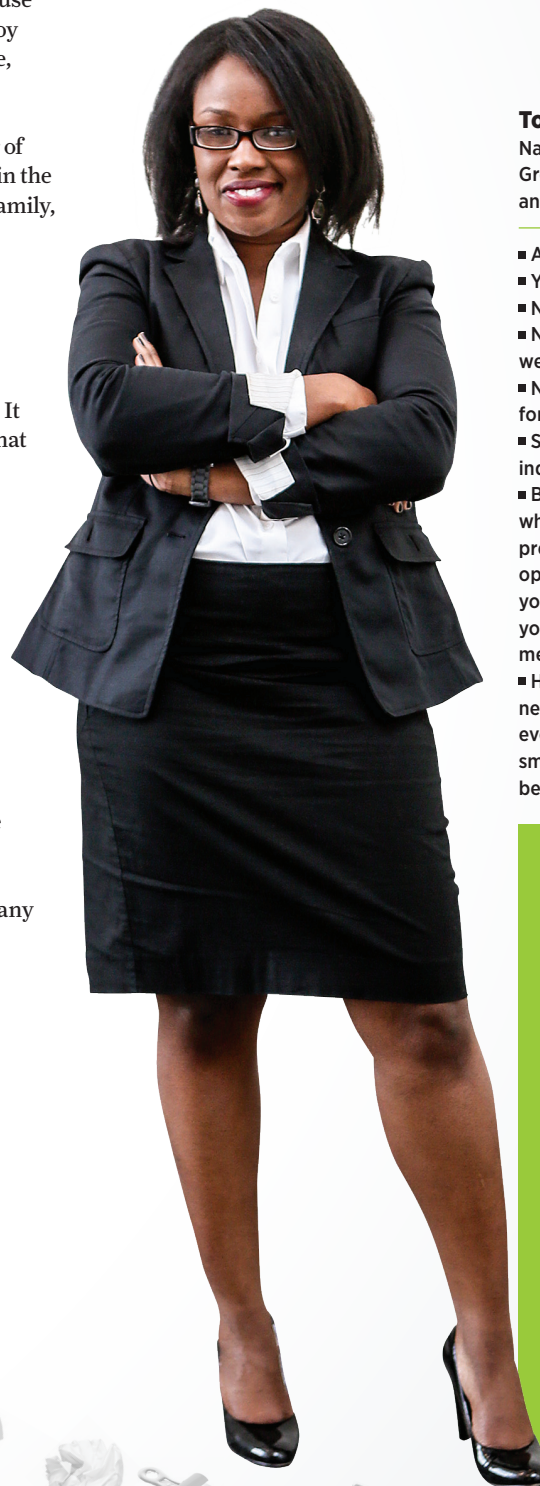
The meetings and hospitality industry is inherently demanding simply because of the nature of the field, but some organizations are recognizing that flexible workplace cultures foster greater employee satisfaction and productivity, while also increasing employee loyalty and retention.

Marriott International, for example, was recently voted one of the 100 Best Companies to Work For by Fortune magazine. In the late 1990s, the company introduced its Alternative Work Arrangements program, which includes an employee telework program. In the past three years, Marriott also has ramped up the program as part of a strategic talent management strategy that’s aimed at hiring and retaining the best workers in the industry.

Meetings and hospitality companies also can take a cue from many innovative software and tech companies that have made work-life

“If you have a family and you feel your family is worth it, fight for your family. Balance is critical for your sanity and your health.”

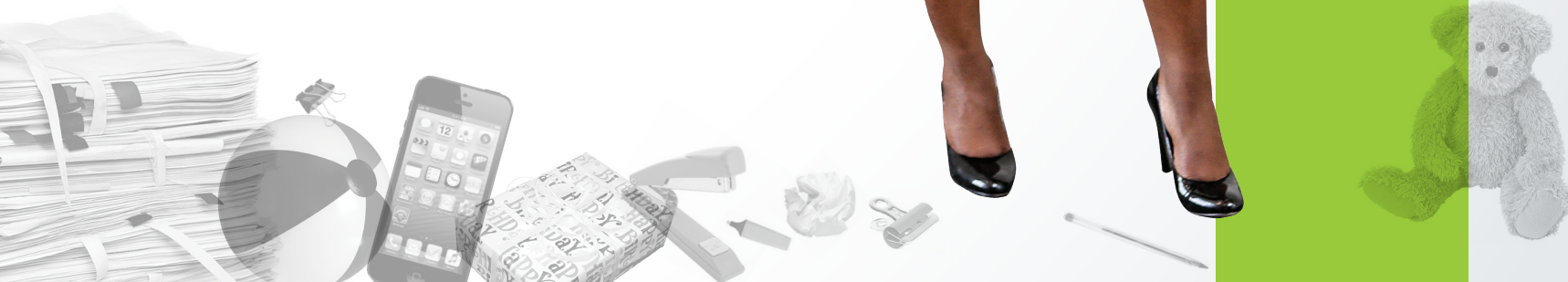
—Toni Green



Toni Green

National Sales Manager,
Greenville Convention
and Visitors Bureau

- Age: 29
- Years in the industry: 7
- Number of children: 1
- Number of hours worked per week: Varies, but at least 40
- Number of relocations: Once for work
- Starting salary at first industry job: \$25,000
- Best advice she received when starting out: “Be prepared for every opportunity and always have your business cards because you never know who you’ll meet.”
- Her best advice for someone new to the industry: “Enjoy every day, live it to the fullest, smile, be true to yourself and be gracious.”





Alysha Cobb

President and Owner,
Fire and Ice Fusion Inc.

- Age: 30
- Years in the industry: 6
- Number of children: 3
- Number of hours worked per week: Never counted
- Number of relocations: None
- Starting salary at first industry job: \$15,000
- Best advice she received when starting out: "Only take on events that you're passionate about. Don't ever do something solely for the money and don't ever turn down something that doesn't pay enough if it's something you're passionate about."
- Her best advice for someone new to the industry: "Don't let anybody discourage you from what your end goal is. Always be working toward it and take advantage of every opportunity."

"I think the key to achieving work-life balance is knowing that you're always going to be working at it. It's never going to be perfect. It's more of a balancing act than finding an even balance."

—Alysha Cobb

flexibility part of their culture. 37Signals, a Chicago-based software company, has experimented with four-day workweeks during the warmer months of May through October. CEO and co-founder Jason Fried says his employees tend to accomplish more quality work in four days versus the traditional five.

Graham says he's blessed to work with a company that's flexible. "I have the best boss in the world," he says. "A good boss is another thing that's worth a lot of money. You might get more salary offers in different positions in different companies, but it's not always worth it. A good work environment is worth its weight in gold."

Emerging technologies are also making it easier on the working and traveling parent. Email, instant messaging, smartphones and videoconferencing programs such as Skype can be instrumental in helping career professionals keep in touch with home at minimal cost.

Those same technologies are also making telecommuting a more viable option. According to a recent Ipsos/Reuters poll, one in five workers around the globe telecommutes frequently, and nearly 10 percent work at home daily. "There are a lot of organizations, hotels and CVBs that are becoming more open to the remote aspect of business, which is great," says Green. "After I had my daughter, I worked at home for the first six months, so I was able to be with her during that very critical time and also work. I kind of see the industry going toward that, but you still have a lot of traditional presidents and boards that want [employees in the office]. With the way the world is going and with technology being as advanced as it is, it's just the natural progression of things.

"My daughter is a year old, and when they're that that small, every moment is monumental," adds Green. "When you're traveling for four or five days at a time, you miss those small moments. But with technology being as great as it is and my help being as great as it is, everybody is always there, hands-on, ready to capture those moments and send them to me."

Telecommuting is only one of a number of employee-satisfaction measures being introduced at workplaces nationwide. More flexible work schedules are a big bonus for parents who have to juggle school schedules.

"With the recession being as it is, I think there's more pressure now than ever for companies to really push hard to make sure they're meeting some obligations and get to the bottom line, yet at the same time, people are wanting to be home," says McKinney. "I feel like I'm best and more efficient for my company when I'm rested and



“Leave work at work. My wife and kids are without me enough during the year; they don’t need to be without me while I’m home.”

—Tommy Nobis

re-energized. So if more companies realized that about their employees, they’d be more apt to allow some flexibility there.”

Faith-based planners who work for Christian organizations often find that they’re the types of companies to work for because they value home life. “One of the great things about working at CIY is they care about my family,” says Nobis. “It’s like a big family here, which makes it so much easier to be gone. There are times where I sacrifice family time for my job but then my job graciously gives me time off for family time.”

WORK-LIFE IN PROGRESS

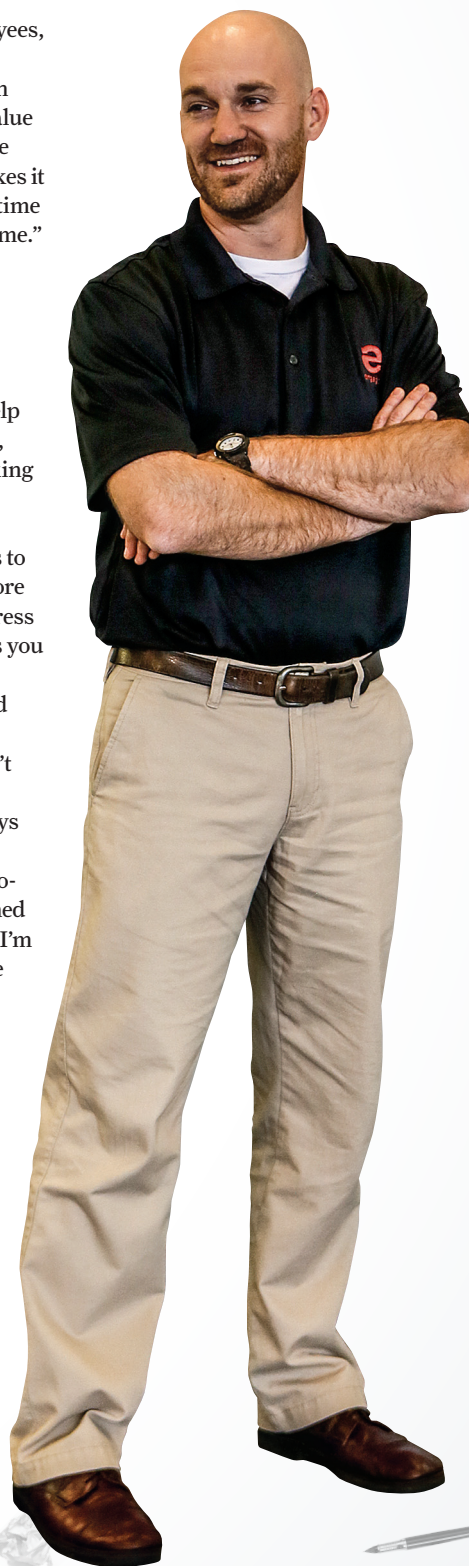
What work-life balance looks like for each individual can vary over time, depending on the phase of one’s life. At every stage of life, finding time for exercise, friends, faith, vacation and career development remains important. And while finding solutions to help balance work and life can be a fluid process, with the right support, attaining an equilibrium is possible. For professionals of faith, making time for spirituality helps to keep them grounded and balanced, especially when schedules get hectic, says Graham.

“You at peace and calmness with your walk with Christ, that has to take priority,” says Graham. “That has to come before exercise, before going into work too early because you’re stressed out. The whole stress factor lessens when you’re connected spiritually to a God who loves you and is for you.”

And while many industry professionals may love their careers and understand that at certain times the work portion of their lives may require more of their attention, it’s hard not to feel their families aren’t being sacrificed in the process.

“I’ve definitely had to sacrifice time with my family for my job,” says Cobb. “As a single mother, it’s already a little more difficult because I already feel like there’s a lot more on my plate than if we were in a two-parent household, so I do feel a lot of mom guilt sometimes. I’ve learned to value my time with them more, do more hands-on activities when I’m home and Skype when I’m away. That way I can see them and still be involved with homework.”

Finding that place where you’re fulfilled at work, at home and in your faith isn’t easy, but it’s worth it. “Finding success in that balance is continuous because you have to keep relearning it,” says Graham. “It doesn’t matter if it’s the meetings industry or whatever industry, it’s always that challenge of work versus family, work versus you. But you kind of have to own it. You’ve got to make the priorities.” ■



Tommy Nobis

Operations Administrator,
Christ in Youth

- Age: 32
- Years in the industry: 5
- Number of children: 3
- Number of hours worked per week: 40 when not traveling; more than 80 hours during events and travel weeks
- Number of relocations: Once for work and once for personal reasons
- Starting salary at first industry job: \$27,500
- Best advice he received when starting out: “Don’t ever hide anything from the attendees and don’t manipulate the situation to best fit your needs. Always be upfront and accommodate people when you can.”
- His best advice for someone new to the industry: “Don’t forget about the people working for the venue and their needs, thoughts and opinions. They are the face of your organization even though they don’t work for you. They can make or break your event, so treat them with respect, dignity and love.”

