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SUMMER 2017

25 Young Event Pros to Watch

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25 Young Event Pros to Watch

Every year, the Advisory Board of *Special Events* magazine points out 25 young event pros—all under age 40—to throw the spotlight on their talents and plans. If you are looking for the future of the event industry, then look right here!

By The Editors



MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME

Amanda Allen, 38, owner/creative director, MMD Events, Tampa, Fla.

About a dozen years ago, Allen saw the wedding industry changing. “Suddenly the job of planning a wedding wasn’t simple—it was multi-faceted and became an expression of the couple. It was exciting, and my husband and I wanted to be a part of it.” The couple left the West Coast for Tampa, Fla.—“a really exciting, emerging market,” she says—and plunged into planning. That business has now morphed into the production company MMD, offering design and production for a wide range of events. Says an admirer, “Amanda is moving the events industry away from traditional decor and brings a home interior style to today’s modern events.”

In Allen’s eyes, “Every event is an opportunity for a transformation.” She adds, “I have an incredible small and dedicated staff who loves to work together to create for a client. It’s amazing to see everyone come to life excited for details big and small.” There is, however, another job she’d like to tackle: boutique hotel designer.

www.mmdevents.com

PRESIDENTIAL POLISH

Andrea Barrow, 27, assistant director for presidential events, Georgetown University, Washington

Barrow discovered her knack for coordinating events while studying psychology in college, when she served as vice president for the National Council of Negro Women. Her big break came when she landed the role of secretary and event coordinator at the U.S. Supreme Court, where she discovered she could keep a cool



head during stressful situations, including the bustling holiday parties for 600 guests.

The scope of her work has grown even bigger at Georgetown. “Here, I am able to lean on my strengths of creativity and strong organization to be successful at my job,” she says. “From coordinating the executive committee board trip in Rome to assisting student organizations facilitate a high-profile visit, one of the other more enjoyable things is the opportunity to work with a wide-ranging spectrum of clients.”

And don’t be surprised if Barrow stays in Washington. Her dream job: serving as social secretary at the White House. She says, “I believe the opportunity to put a personal stamp on events that will be forever known in history is a chance too good to pass up!”

www.georgetown.edu

YOUR CAREER IS CALLING

Lydia Blanchard, 27, sales manager, Fairmont Chateau Laurier, Ottawa

Blanchard found her calling in the hotel industry when, well, calling. While studying theater at the University of Ottawa, she took a job as a switchboard communications operator at the Fairmont Chateau Laurier, which gave her an incredible overview of all the hotel’s departments. “The more I learned about the sales and marketing department, the more I knew that I wanted to pursue a career in that, since I loved that it was all about people and events,” she says. Trying to beef up her skills, she worked at other area properties before returning to the Chateau Laurier as sales manager, overseeing the greater Toronto corporate and association segments as well as the international association market.

Blanchard is doing what she loves. “I love that I get to work with some of the most inspiring, creative and talented people on some of the most exciting, innovative and

impactful events!” she says. “I wholeheartedly believe the Meeting Professionals International slogan: ‘When we meet, we change the world,’ since every meeting and event creates an opportunity for people to come together to accomplish something that they never could have on their own. That concept makes me feel great about the role I play in every event that I get to work on.”

www.fairmont.com/laurier-ottawa

CIVIC PRIDE

Christy D. Bobo, 39, City of Tuscaloosa community engagement manager, Tuscaloosa, Ala.

Sometimes, the best education for getting into events comes through experience. “Events surprisingly found their way to me while I was working in athletics for the University of Alabama,” Bobo says. “As we constructed new facilities and renovated older facilities, we gained much desired and needed event space. From scratch, we designed event rental guidelines, policies and procedures. Through ‘jumping into the fire,’ I was able to learn the industry with trial-and-error tactics, which lit the way to directing me on the path to my career passion.”

Now heading up community engagement for the City of Tuscaloosa, Bobo has nothing but praise for the city fathers—and mothers—for her municipality. “My dream job? I am waking up and living in my dream job at this very moment. It is an honor to work for the City of Tuscaloosa under Mayor Walt Maddox. Our progressive-thinking leaders at work allow me to participate in a way that is changing our downtown area to help business owners thrive through arts and entertainment. In addition to loving my actual career, I also count my blessings each day that my current superiors are supportive of the work that I enjoy with



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charitable work, which is something that keeps me going each day.”

www.tuscaloosa.com

DESIGNING THE RIGHT CAREER PATH

Cortney DeArmond, 37, regional sales manager/
Midwest, Quest Events,
Chicago



Studying social work in college led DeArmond to work in fundraising for nonprofits, and that's when the event bug bit. “As the manager of special events and volunteers for Christopher House, one of my main responsibilities was planning and executing our annual gala,” she says. “This was my first taste of the special events industry, and I realized that I wanted to make a career change.” She studied interior design and then cut her teeth working with other rental furniture firms.

What makes DeArmond good at her job? “I grew up in Missouri, the ‘Show-Me’ state, so I always was taught you have to prove yourself, and that nobody owes you anything,” she says. “I’m not a better salesperson than anyone, but I will work harder than some.” And her dream job: “Other than being a drape and scenic rental person?” she laughs. “It’s to be a country songwriter. But I figured out early, in about seventh grade, I have zero songwriting skills.”

www.questdrape.com

WRITING THE RIGHT IMAGE

Meghan Ely, 36, owner, OFD Consulting, Richmond, Va.



Gifted with what she calls “Type A tendencies,” PR pro Ely started out with event planning but gravitated to the media relations/marketing side. So, “when the time came, I opened up shop and the rest, as they say, is history.” She found a home promoting the wedding industry. And the “history” rest: She now serves as national vice president of the Wedding Industry Professionals Association and as the National Association for Catering and Events conference education chair.

The joy in her job—the discovery. “There’s nothing better than seeing the potential in an event professional and then having the privilege of making sure everyone else sees it too—be it through national press mentions, industry awards or otherwise. We love celebrating alongside them.”

Ely notes that a friend recently complimented her on her career. “And it hit me that my

extensive background in events really served me well as I made a move to wedding PR. At the end of the day, we are people-focused, and it makes all the difference.”

www.ofdconsulting.com

HEAR ME

Lindsay Fogarty, 29, business manager,
Fantasy Sound Event
Services, Livermore, Calif.



Fogarty got into special events only because an ad that she read made the business seem “really fun!” she says. Armed with a degree in communications and cinema studies, she started at the bottom as an administrative assistant. “I immediately fell in love with the entire industry, and I’ve been really lucky to grow within that same company both professionally and personally for the past six years,” she says.

Fogarty is grateful for her role with Fantasy Sound Event Services. “I’m lucky to have a boss that has been incredibly invested in my professional development, and he’s encouraged me to get involved in many associations,” she says. “As such, my role at Fantasy Sound has expanded to focus more on B-to-B interactions, which has opened my eyes to the need for continued education in our industry. The event industry is fast-paced and constantly evolving, so I love being an integral part of helping bring that education to my market.”

fantasysound.com

CATERING TO THE WORLD

John Ford, 36, global operations director, Eat to the Beat/Global Infusion Group, Watford, Hertfordshire, U.K.



Ford got his start in special events after a stint managing nightclubs and bars. Now, he oversees the world—meaning his work as global operations director for big caterer and logistics company Eat to the Beat. In his role, he oversees all aspects of the company’s operations, including business development, client management and logistics operations for a company that supported 1,000 events across eight countries last year.

What makes him effective in his work? “My team!” Ford says. “Having free-flowing conversations and making sure communication between all moving parts happens. Also the fact that all parties involved feel supported in whatever role they play to get the job done.” And what makes his role important: “I also feel

we shape how clients market their brands,” he says. “Through events and staying involved with the day-to-day operations, we ensure we supply excellent results.”

www.globalinfusiongroup.com

TREND TALKER

Sarah Gabel, 38, director of creative services and events, Regal Meetings and Events, Orlando, Fla.



Sarah Gabel knows what makes a special event special. Her professional background includes stints staging events for a niche PR firm, serving as stage manager for a cirque company, and booking entertainment for a talent agency.

“I started out merely booking talent and shortly after found I had a talent for producing events,” she explains. “I found that by offering full-service event planning, our average sale increased by 300 percent.” Her time at HelmsBriscoe taught her “the fine art” of venue section and contract negotiation, she says, leading to her current role at Regal, a third-party meeting management and event company that was a start-up only six years ago.

Gabel’s job is demanding, but rewarding. “Even with the long hours, time spent away from my family, and stress that comes along with this industry, I do love my job,” she says. “I have been fortunate enough to travel the world and plan events in places like Paris, Monte Carlo, Barcelona, Madrid, Rome, Geneva, Switzerland, and dozens of other cities all around the U.S. I get to meet and work with fascinating people, create beautiful spaces out of blank canvases, and build lasting memories. I view each challenge as an opportunity to push myself further outside of my comfort zone. It is a career path of constant evolution and requires keeping up with trends and making each event better than the last.”

www.regal-me.com

LESSONS FROM THE ROAD

Jared Golberg, 38, managing director/
producer, Fifth Element
Group, Toronto



Do you like surprises? Jared Golberg does—and that’s part of what makes him successful in events.

His background in the music business sent him out on large-scale music tours, providing invaluable insights into venue management, transportation, hospitality and production. And

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most important: “I was able to find my passion in the building blocks of how concerts were produced, and the stresses of anything can happen at any time.” As Golberg puts it, “I feed off of stress for some reason, and this brought me into the world of events.” He doesn’t seem to let the stress show; his colleagues praise this “all-around good guy” for his patience.

In his current role, Golberg serves as a concept designer and producer, “which allows me to create massive experiences for our clients,” he explains. “Developing a multi-day summit or building a program that offers change to an industry is what I love to do. The look and feel of events comes along with this, but my love for my job comes part and parcel with the foundation, infrastructure and concept of event management and production,” Golberg says.

His special skill: “Finding the one factor that makes an event extraordinary is what drives me,” he explains. “Whether it’s integrating new technology or finding that key performance that leaves a lasting impression, I try to never do the same thing twice while building on successes.”

www.fifthelementgroup.com

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Cristina Gonzalez, 26,
managing partner/lead
coordinator, Simply
Weddings, Las Vegas

Gonzalez brings the best of formal education and real-world experience to her work.

Her background includes a bachelor’s degree in the business of culinary arts from the Universidad de las Americas Puebla in Mexico plus certificates in meeting and wedding coordination from the International School of Hospitality in Las Vegas. Her hotel background opened the world of weddings to her, and she was hooked.

“I love the creative and design part of weddings,” she says. “I like to play with the different elements to make such a unique experience for the couple and their guests.”

Gonzalez’s boss, Simply Weddings founder Brit Bertino, is impressed with her—enough to nominate her as a Young Pro to Watch.

“Her energy helps shape the wedding and event community as she has a massive ‘obsession with success,’” Bertino says. “She is strongly attached to technology and media, and has developed ways to streamline and manage a high-volume wedding business that caters to several different types of clientele. With her multilingual abilities and her persona to adapt to different types of personalities, she is shaping the way we plan weddings and events with different cultures from around the world.”

www.simplyweddingslv.com



IF YOU BUILD IT ...

Daniela Grafman, 27,
chief amazement officer/
partner, Vision Event Co.,
New York

A PR pro by education, Grafman knew she really wanted to get into events—she just didn’t know how to do it.

Taking matters into her own hands, she reached out to all her contacts—personal and professional—to get her foot in the door. The result: a lineup of internships and freelance gigs in New York, ranging from small jobs to being part of a team producing 800-guest events at the famed Waldorf Astoria.

After launching her career as a special events pro associated with United Way of New York, she added a part-time role with Vision. “Fast-forward a year later, my now business partner—aka the ying to my yang, my mentor and best friend—presented me with an opportunity to join him in being a part of Vision and its growth,” she says. “I took a leap of faith—and with some supportive words from my parents—to embark on committing to Vision full time and helping build it over the last five years from a DJ entertainment company to a more-encompassing event planning and production company.”

Though she says she already has her dream job, Grafman has bigger dreams still. She says she wants to be “a driver in the evolution of this industry.”

“There’s something very selfless about doing events because it’s not about what we as the event professionals gain; it’s always about what so many others are able to walk away with from the work we do,” she says. “So my dream is to keep touching and helping others through events in differentiating and unique ways.”

www.visioneventco.com

SHARING THE TALENT

Jacqueline Hill, 32,
owner, Jacqueline Events
and Design, Dallas

Hill got off to a brisk start in the event world. Fresh out of college, she was hired as an event planner for a big nonprofit in Dallas, an experience in what she calls “the trenches” of events. “Working with an event team to produce 50-plus events a year allowed me to grow quickly in my skill set,” she explains.

The launch of her own firm has led to new adventures. “With Jacqueline Events, I am able to create memorable days in the lives of our brides in addition to working with nonprofits on their fundraisers and planning corporate soirees,” Hill explains. “I love the flexibility to



move through unique projects and develop relationships will all involved. It is the blend of creative and tactical that I love!”

Her admirers point to the love she gives to the Dallas community, volunteering for both professional associations such as NACE and for worthy charities. As one colleague puts it, “She is an inspiration to those just entering the industry and a resource for us all.”

jacquelineevents.com

THE ART OF THE EVENT

Afton Koutzun, 29, event
manager, E=MC2 Events,
Calgary, Alberta

A loss for the world of dance has been a win for the world of events.

When an injury ended the budding dance career of Afton Koutzun at age 18, she held down reception jobs while “re-finding” herself. She stumbled across a college-level event management course and recognized that she could combine her training in design, entertainment and reception all in one field. After a start working in weddings, she moved into corporate planning at E=MC2.

A favorite aspect of events, she says, is the payoff from collaboration: “I truly value everyone’s experience and expertise, and I love the challenge of balancing personalities, styles and creativity to create what is best for the client and guests in every aspect of an event.”

The secret of her success? “My mix of left- and right-braininess,” she explains. “I come from a family of accountants and have a love of spreadsheets, note-taking and organization, but my creativity has always made me the proverbial ‘black sheep’ of my family, be it through teaching dance, choreographing or designing.”

Her fans agree, with one colleague predicting, “You will be hearing her name, it will be spelled correctly, and will have a smile emoji at the end.”

emc2events.com

BATTLING BACK

Jill Lambert, 34, senior
account executive,
BBC Destination
Management,
New Orleans

A New Orleans native, Lambert enjoyed a blossoming career in her first love—events—while working in catering and convention services at the Omni Royal Orleans. But then Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. She picked up the pieces, moving to an Omni property in San Diego, where her fine work brought another promotion. But then the 2008 financial crisis hit, costing her yet another beloved job.



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Lambert would not be defeated. She returned New Orleans, handing projects in event marketing for a major corporation, then worked her way to famed NOLA DMC BBC Destination Management.

She takes the long view of what she does and why it matters. "To me, my job is more than just selling New Orleans," she says. "It is about building trust with my clients, and partnering as an extension of their team in order to provide them with the best out-of-the-box experience. I genuinely enjoy partnering with people on a common goal and seeing a vision come to life." www.bbcdmc.com

DEVELOPING THE DIGITAL LIFE

Justin Maddox, 38, associate producer, LEO Events, Nashville, Tenn.

From real life to virtual life—Justin Maddox has it handled. From his start as an actor, he pivoted to the world backstage, working on technical direction, operations and production management. His specialty now: moving the world of events into the digital space.

"Everything we do now is related to digital experiences," Maddox says, which involves



"creating better apps and gamification for clients and delving into how AI [artificial intelligence] is burgeoning." He adds, "I want to be known as one of the creators of the next great digital landscape." He is, he says, "always searching for how we can build better, faster and more personal experiences."

His colleagues at LEO agree. As one puts it, "At LEO, we believe digital is the future. Justin's understanding of technology and digital platforms is what makes him an integral piece in the future of our industry."

leoevents.com

ABOVE AND BEYOND

Amy Martin, 25, senior project coordinator, OneWest Event Design and Logistics, Calgary, Alberta

Anyone who is only 25 isn't expected to have sophisticated skills in the intricate details of event production. Except when that person is Amy Martin.

The head of her company—OneWest founder Dustin Westling—praises her professionalism. "Amy's standards for ensuring client satisfaction are not only exemplary but are some of the best I've ever witnessed," he



says. "Her ability to ask thoughtful questions and follow through with impactful solutions allow for client interactions that are relatable and empathetic. Her 'above and beyond' approach has led to high client retention rates, growing many singular projects into long-term relationships."

In Martin's eyes, her event success is due in large part to her adaptability. "I'm very open-minded; sometimes I envision my spirit animal as the sponge!" she says. "This industry is so dynamic that you have to stay open and adaptable to change—changing opinions, trends, technologies, expectations, etc. The more open you can be to your client's objectives and your guest's needs, the better you can align your talents in service to the event as a whole."

onewestevents.com

FACING THE FUTURE

Flo Miniscloux, 26, director of production services, Extraordinary Events, Sherman Oaks, Calif.

From small beginnings grow big careers.

Extraordinary Events founder Andrea Michaels shares an example with her staffer



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HOLO-WALLS

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Flo Miniscloux “She started as a receptionist, then in months showed so much initiative and promise that she became an associate producer, advanced mere months later to a producer, then a senior producer, and within a very short period of time took over management of the entire department,” Michaels says.

Michaels adds, “She is a film editor, a graphics designer, a logistics manager, and a creative visionary, and has undertaken projects of up to 250,000 people in a four-day grand opening/festival environment. She is respectful of yesteryear and a forward thinker of what’s coming next. Tomorrow is well within her sights, and she is pumped up to create and execute events in the future.”

A committed events person from her college days—“My first job in college was at the USC Events office, and I fell in love”—Miniscloux says the secret to her success is all in the details.

“My brain tends to process millions of small details every minute,” she explains. “It makes it a little difficult to gather my thoughts at times, but it’s a blessing to be able to foresee so many different scenarios without having ‘that much’ experience.”

www.extraordinaryevents.com

HOOKED ON VINTAGE
Morgan Montgomery, 33,
co-captain, Paisley and
Jade, Richmond, Va.



A cushy corporate job is the express train to success, right? Not for Morgan Montgomery. She just wasn’t meeting new people, and so ended up moonlighting as a server for a big catering and event production company.

“I found that I loved working these events more than my ‘real’ job,” she says. She joined a big catering company full-time and worked to build its special events division, all the while building an inventory of unique decor pieces to enhance the company’s displays.

Seeing the need for specialty rentals, she and partner Perkins Morgan struck out on their own, launching Paisley and Jade in 2012. “What originally was a two-woman show that operated out of storage units and a 6- by-12-foot covered trailer is now a leader in our market and industry, with 15 employees, a fleet of vehicles, and 10,000 square feet of gorgeous inventory,” she says.

The secret of her success: “A strong desire to exceed the expectations of those around me, mixed in with a good dose of fun!” she says. “I

love working, and if I’m going to dedicate this much of my time and life to it, I want to make it enjoyable for me and those around me!”
paisleyandjade.com

WEDDINGS 2.0
Angela Proffitt, 38,
event and productivity
consultant, Angela
Proffitt/Vivid
Experiences,
Nashville, Tenn.



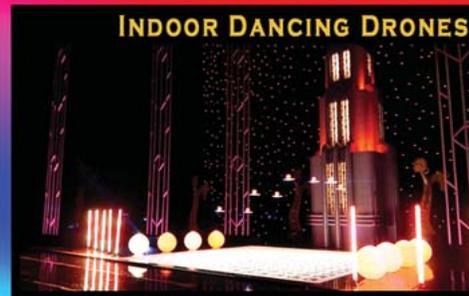
She’s not yet 40 but she’s already built two businesses that transform the way business is done.

Her Vivid Experiences company specializes in weddings and other special events, an operation that an admirer describes as “a paperless, fast-paced wedding business catering to celebrity brides and those who want to feel like one!”

Her second operation—dubbed simply Angela Proffitt—coaches entrepreneurs to become more productive. She turns to technology to make complex projects run smoothly, including her own busy days, which include classes, TV shows and her own YouTube channel.

Originally a student of psychology, she fell into events by accident. “My uncle owned a

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venue, and being around decorating while growing up taught me a few things,” she explains.

Her psychology background certainly helps, too. “I try my best to access my client and how their brain is wired by using a psychology methodology, which leads me to customize the message for that particular person,” she says. “This has made me a great communicator.”

angelaproffitt.com
www.vividexperiences.com

YEARN TO LEARN

Casee Safford, 27,
program manager,
Ultimate Ventures, Dallas

A head for business and a heart for art is a great combination in the event world. And that’s what Safford brings to her team at well-known DMC Ultimate Ventures.

After studying psychology and painting in school, she spent time traveling and soul-searching. Returning to the U.S., she landed an internship in an events company, “which changed my life completely,” she says.

More jobs in hospitality taught her that her sweet spot was “somewhere in between weddings and meetings, and that realization brought me to the DMC world at Ultimate Ventures.”

A colleague at the company says Safford is “continuously pushing the envelope with new and creative ideas that always impress her clients,” adding, “Casee represents the future of our industry because she never stops learning and is not afraid to step out of the box with new ideas and technology.”

Her dream event? “I would love to design the entrance to the Met Gala,” she says. “Those stairs are calling my name!”

www.ultimateventures.com



THE EVENT NINJA

David Santiago, 27,
event rental specialist, La
Pinata Party Rentals,
El Segundo, Calif.

Santiago made the most of a business opportunity program at his high school.

Though he initially thought he would go into banking, he was fascinated by the insider tours he got of big film and TV studios in Los Angeles. It wasn’t the actors or directors who intrigued him: “I was fascinated by the temporary stages being built and the collaborative team effort that happened behind the scenes,” he says. “I wanted to be part of this ninja-like community that most guests were blind to. Little to no



credit was given to these individuals and companies for their involvement, as they would disappear by the time the event began and would return only after all the guests had left.” He decided to give event rental—the epicenter of transformation—a try. In 2013 he started as a field laborer at La Pinata and, he says, “I have not looked back since.”

Santiago has done it all at his company, from managing teams, driving the bobtail trucks, and working on installations and breakdowns. And he’s not done yet. “I can envision myself planning and producing events, owning and managing my own venues, partnering with friends and family who own restaurants to help grow a catering division, and much more,” he says. “If there is an event happening, I want to be there.”

www.lapinataparty.com

FAMILY AFFAIR

Pawnta Shadab,
34, vice president
of special events
and marketing,
Elite Productions
International,
Laguna Hills, Calif.

Big-budget Hollywood show? Baby-budget college event? Shadab has handled both and loves both.

After finishing college with a degree in communications, she went on to earn certifications in both event management and interior design. This blend of business smarts and design skill gives Elite’s events “a dynamic edge,” a colleague says. “I believe Pawnta has a ‘millennial edge’ for veterans in the industry. She is a ‘connector,’ extending herself to become familiar with everything and anyone who may help improve her work.”

Events are the family business, and Shadab is now the second generation working in the firm founded by her mother, Lili. “I look forward to new ways to take our company to the next level,” she says.

www.eliteproductionsintl.com



THE POWER OF KINDNESS

Jamie Snively,
35, executive
producer, Innovative
Entertainment,
Los Angeles

“Knowledgeable, outspoken and kind”—three words used to describe Snively by one admirer. “Busy” also applies. Besides her schedule providing entertainment for events, she is also president of ILEA Los Angeles and serves on the board of the SEARCH Foundation.



Snively loves the diversity of her job at Innovative: “Every day is different. Some days I’m working on a custom script and listening to music edits, other days are filled with rehearsals and sound checks.” She adds, “From building custom shows with costuming and choreography to booking amazing headline and local talent, it’s a blast!”

That quality of “kindness” helps her professionally too, Snively says. “I have to deal with a lot of personalities. Being the go-between with artists and clients/planners isn’t easy. Trust me, you can get a lot more accomplished by being nice than being a jerk.”

inn-entertainment.com

START AT THE TOP

Brandon Taylor, 24,
design event manager,
Legendary Events,
Atlanta

How did Taylor climb up to his current role at leading caterer

Legendary Events? By starting at the bottom.

While working as a restaurant server, he learned that Legendary founder Tony Conway was the VIP client at his restaurant that night. Taylor asked for his card, then followed up with him on the possibility of starting at Conway’s firm. Taylor began as an hourly employee, shuffling his classes to make time for the new job. As Taylor rotated through various roles, “the team started bombarding me with notes of ‘what an amazing young man Brandon is,’” Conway recalls. From catering sales assistant, Taylor moved to his role as design event manager, “devastating his catering sales team managers!” Conway says.

Taylor’s secret to success? “I believe in myself and that I can do anything I put my mind to,” he says. “I refuse to fail because I grew up being taught that the sky is the limit.”

Conway adds that Taylor “is one the industry really should be keeping their eye on—but keeping their hands off! In our 20-year history, it has been a very long time that I have come across such a great team member.”

www.legendaryevents.com ●



Do you know someone who should
be on this list next year?

Tell us at info@specialevents.com