

# 30 IN THEIR THIRTIES



The 2019 Class of 30 in Their Thirties volunteered their time during Life Remodeled's Six-Day Project in Detroit (Aug. 5-10). The nonprofit group, located at the Durfee Innovation Society (formerly Durfee Middle School), helps transform neighborhoods and lives of residents.

PROFILES BY DAN CALABRESE, TIM KEENAN, R.J. KING, ILENE WOLFF | 📷 E.E. BERGER





## 38 CHRISTOPHER BROWER

Global Director of Strategy and Commercial Diligence Advisory • DuckerFrontier, Troy  
Employees: 300 • Revenue: NA  
University of Michigan

**WHEN CHRISTOPHER BROWER ADVISES HIS AUTO-** motive clients at DuckerFrontier, a consulting and research firm in Troy, he does so from a perspective that includes experience on the factory floor.

During summers as an undergraduate, Brower took jobs at Ford Motor Co. and FCA. Immediately after graduating, he managed a team of more than 100 workers at FCA's Warren Truck Plant.

"It really gave me a solid understanding of how a vehicle is built," Brower says. "It's one thing to read about it and another thing to be in the plant, being on the assembly line, and making sure you get through-put and quality."

From FCA, he worked at Capital One, J.D. Power, KPMG, Stage 2 Innovations, and Aluminum Blanking Co. before he landed at what was then Ducker Worldwide in 2018. Washington, D.C.-based Frontier Strategy Group acquired Ducker Worldwide in February 2019.

DuckerFrontier provides what Brower calls cus- tomizable and actionable information to companies

that are launching new products or are looking to move into new markets.

"We'll give them a granular-level visibility of their market, the technologies, their competitors, and com- peting products or solutions," says Brower, president of the Society of Automotive Analysts, an industry trade group in Farmington Hills. "There's so much happening in the auto industry today."

"That's why it's important to be part of industry groups and associations and work with consultants, because things are moving so fast and technology is blurring the lines within automotive and mobility. The future looks very different. You can't stand still."

He points to the looming electric vehicle market, which makes suppliers of parts and material for internal combustion engines nervous.

"They're looking to better understand the implica- tions if the market moves to an EV solution," Brower says. "Forecasting the future and tracking that back to specific parts and components on the vehicles is where our value lies." ■ — *Tim Keenan*

**TWO MONTHS AFTER JOINING ROCKET FIBER, A** **TECH**nology company in Detroit that provides high- speed data services to businesses and residents, Zach Carroll was appointed director of business development. The move — he started as an account executive in 2018 — proved fruitful. From January 2019 through July, average sales among Carroll's team have jumped 78 percent.

"I had owned a Verizon Wireless store and two other wireless stores, so I knew how to run the op- erational side of a business, especially sales," Carroll says. "What I did at (Rocket Fiber) was offer a training and on-boarding program for new employees so they can become more productive and successful quicker, and I added more structure to how we operate."

Carroll says he continues to enhance the sales process, including adding software tools that allow his colleagues to be more efficient. "We really stress that we'll provide all of our customers with the same white-glove treatment," he says. "It doesn't matter if you have an apartment in downtown Detroit or you

have a company that uses a lot of bandwidth; we want you to be happy with your services from us."

The sales leader says he learned the lesson of hard work from a young age, based on encourage- ment from his parents. He began cutting lawns at 11, and became a baseball and hockey referee two years later. "I bought a car with the money I saved," he says. He also worked at a fitness center and in col- lections for a national bank, followed by a yearlong stint at a Verizon location before opening a store as an authorized dealer.

"As a store owner, I got a lot of experience working with B2B and B2C customers," Carroll says. "From there, I joined AT&T and worked in sales for Michigan and Wisconsin, and then I met Edi (Demaj, co-founder and COO of Rocket Fiber), and I really liked the company's culture," he says. "He was somebody I wanted to work with. I think the sky's the limit for us because most everyone wants high-speed fiber to improve their business or their recreation time." ■ — *R.J. King*



## 32 ZACH CARROLL

Director of Business Development  
Rocket Fiber, Detroit • Employees: 75  
Revenue: NA • Western Michigan University

solutions with software development and systems integration.

"We're a one-stop shop. We handle all facets of making a building smart, with zero dependence on third-party firms," Demaj says. "We've been growing quickly, and we're on pace to triple our revenue from our seven-figure results last year."

In addition to running and streamlining building systems for both interior and exterior uses, along with providing clients with energy savings, Kode Labs helps property owners better communicate with their customers. Wherever possible, the company's hardware works with new mechanical systems, while sensors attached to existing energy infrastructure make for a seamless control system.

At Kode Labs, Demaj says he's a big proponent of offering continuing education to his colleagues. "With technology changing so fast, we want our team to stay ahead of the competition," he says. "We feel that provides a better work environment, it helps our cus- tomers, and our team is more engaged." ■ — *R.J. King*



## 30 ETRIT DEMAJ

Co-founder and CEO • Kode Labs Inc., Detroit  
Employees: 36 • Revenue: NA  
Oakland University

**ARRIVING IN ROCHESTER HILLS AS A REFUGEE FROM** war-torn Kosovo in 1999, Etrit Demaj didn't take long to learn that America is the land of opportunity. He and his older brother, Edi, bought and sold homes, and most of the transactions led to a profit.

"Not every house we sold made money, but most did," says Demaj, co-founder and CEO of Kode Labs Inc., a technology firm in Detroit that offers smart building solutions. "I went to school here, got my first job as a busboy in my uncle's restaurant, and after college I joined JPMorgan Chase & Co. as a relation- ship banker working with high-net-worth clients."

Never straying far from real estate (the broth- ers still invest in homes), he joined Hepta Control Systems in Detroit, where he worked for a few years before venturing out and co-founding Kode Labs. The company provides technology that allows property owners and managers to access, monitor, and adjust mechanical and other building systems using a smartphone or a tablet. Demaj says the enterprise is the first to offer a platform that combines technology



As part of Life Remod- eled's Six-Day Project in the heart of Detroit, volunteers cleared ev- ery blighted alley within four-square miles of the Durfee Innovation Society (2470 Collingwood St.). The cleanup team includ- ed Blake George, Shobit Gupta, and Steve Oben.





JOE  
FIELD

Senior Director of Operations for North America  
Global Transportation Management, Livonia  
Employees: 50 • Revenue: \$20M  
Penn State University

**WORKING SUMMERS IN HIS YOUTH FOR A TRUCKING** company owned by the parents of a friend, Joe Field never knew he would one day be navigating the intricacies of international tariffs. Among his biggest challenges today is navigating the ongoing trade war between the U.S. and China. “Our heaviest trade lane was China to the U.S.,” says Field, senior director of operations for North America at Global Transportation Management in Livonia.

“We’ve seen a pretty rapid deceleration in our trade volume with China as a result of those tariffs. We’ve had to focus on replacing that business. We’ve had to think a little bit differently and target some business that we wouldn’t have been well-equipped to handle in the past. It’s been good for us.”

From his early experience with trucking, Field has become an expert in freight transportation logistics. “That led me into the field,” he says. “I studied business administration in college and freight, trucking, logistics, and supply chain management was something I knew and kind of migrated toward.”

He started his career with Penske Logistics, and from there spent a couple of years at Whiteline Express as regional manager of operations.

He joined Global Transportation Management (GTM) in 2014. Using the assets of its global network of transport and warehouse providers, GTM has the capability to meet global freight, warehousing, or packaging needs anywhere, anytime, Field says.

“My focus, currently, is on overseeing our fleet operations, our warehousing activities, our international air freight product, and bulk and project cargo, which is the fastest-growing area of our business right now.”

A couple of examples of GTM’s bulk and project cargo assignments include moving passenger train cars from China to the U.S. for assembly, and shipping lumber from Europe through the St. Lawrence Seaway into the Great Lakes. “We’re a small fish but we’re doing big things,” Field says. “My personal focus is always on delivering the best experience for our customers and fueling our growth into new product lines.” ■ — *Tim Keenan*



LOU  
GOLDHABER

Chief of Staff • Broder & Sachse Real Estate and  
Sachse Construction, Detroit • Employees: 230  
Revenue: NA • Washington University, St. Louis

**LOU GOLDHABER’S JOURNEY FROM HIS NATIVE** Pittsburgh to his position as chief of staff at Detroit’s Broder & Sachse Real Estate has been a road with many twists, turns, and adventures.

While playing collegiate baseball and studying business at Washington University in St. Louis, Goldhaber became fascinated with the music industry. He spent every college summer in New York City as an intern for various record labels, including Atlantic Records. “I was living the dream, going to concerts every night, and wearing T-shirts and jeans to work,” Goldhaber recalls.

He spent two years in New York after graduation before moving to Chicago to be near his future wife, who originally was from the Detroit area. In the Windy City, Goldhaber worked at an agency that specialized in entertainment and sports sponsorship consulting.

At the same time, he opened a Leo’s Coney Island around the corner from Wrigley Field. “There were so many displaced Detroiters in Chicago who appreciated it, and it did great,” he says of the eatery. “I think the

first year we did \$1.6 million in revenue selling \$2 hot dogs. It was great, but it was literally the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my entire life.”

Two years of the restaurant lifestyle was enough, and Goldhaber moved on to Lightbank, a venture capital firm that focuses on disruptive startups and entrepreneurs.

Six years ago, Todd Sachse, a lifelong friend and mentor, talked him into coming to Detroit to help with his real estate and construction operations.

“My job is to make sure all of our people, processes, and projects are moving in the right direction,” says Goldhaber, who uses his hospitality background to enhance each company, especially the apartments.

“I view them as communities with amenities and lifestyle curation, (and I) help residents have an experience while living in our building, which is way more than just living in an apartment,” he says. “That’s my passion. That’s what gets my juices flowing. It can be just like checking into the Four Seasons or a Ritz Carleton.” ■ — *Tim Keenan*

**KAJON FRANKLIN HAD A 15-YEAR CAREER IN THE** credit union industry that saw its share of disappointment, but her experience working in the financial sector helped her make the transition to health care.

After landing a position in the business office at Henry Ford Health System in Detroit, her background in customer service and her knack for standardizing front desk operations propelled her from a supervisor to a manager to operations director in eight years.

It was as regional manager of the Henry Ford Medical Group, the system’s physician group practice, that Franklin helped standardize operations and train front line staff to capture patient information relevant to billing.

The efforts led to the creation of the Department of Business Operations. “Prior to the creation of the group there were lots of disconnects in front desk operations,” Franklin says. “There were no co-pay collections, (and) they weren’t verifying addresses.”

The standardization and training made front desk staff accountable for capturing billing-related

information at the time an appointment is made. “It seemed like such a small task, but we were lacking,” she says. “The leadership knew what was needed.”

That small task in cash collection and insurance verification resulted in a 70 percent increase in revenue in several facilities. As a result, the practices have been adopted in all of Henry Ford’s clinics, freestanding emergency departments, and medical centers.

As Franklin took on more responsibility, she earned an MBA and is a doctoral candidate in business administration at Walden University.

The health care professional also stays involved with other activities beyond her time at work. She’s the chair of the health system’s Women Improvement Network, one of 10 employee resource groups. Franklin first joined the group in 2015 as event coordinator after attending an event. The occasion was a panel discussion during which the system’s then-CEO, Nancy Schlichting, and other CEOs of its hospitals discussed their career paths. “It was a profound event for me,” Franklin says. ■ — *Ilene Wolff*



KAJON  
FRANKLIN

Group Practice Operations Director  
Henry Ford Health System, Detroit  
Employees: 30,000 • Revenue: \$6.0B (2017)  
Cleary University

**ALTHOUGH SHOBIT GUPTA COMES FROM A REAL** estate family, his father wanted him to become a dentist. But after five years of practicing oral care, Gupta had a change of heart and sought out other opportunities.

As part of the search, he submitted his resume to an online ad posted by a large hedge fund in Dubai. The firm needed someone to be responsible for the disposition of its commercial assets across the Middle East, Africa, and Europe.

“They were impressed that I knew so much about the industry,” says Gupta, who had tagged along with his father to construction sites since age 12. “These were our conversations around the dinner table.”

After working with the Dubai fund, Gupta earned a master’s in real estate finance. From there, he increased his knowledge base with a Real Estate Investment Certification from Cornell University, which is known for its emphasis on the hospitality industry and financing hotel construction projects.

Since then, Gupta’s global work has grown to

include mixed-use projects, hotels, office buildings, residential development, and industrial centers. In total, he has spearheaded more than 12 million square feet of Class A office space in cities such as New York and Chicago; a massive industrial project in Atlanta; a 50-story, mixed-use tower under construction on London’s South Bank, where his team sold \$30 million worth of office space and Versace-branded condos in one day; and DAMAC Towers by Paramount Hotels & Resorts in Dubai.

Gupta enjoys his current position with Imperium Property Group, where he’s responsible for sourcing deals, underwriting, market analysis, financing, and portfolio management.

In addition, earlier this summer he and some friends started a tech venture to develop an artificial intelligence-based real estate mapping application to help with making better real estate decisions. Summing up his real estate work, he says: “It just excites me. It’s the input and output of taking nothing and converting it to something.” ■ — *Ilene Wolff*



SHOBIT  
GUPTA

Vice President, Investments and Acquisitions  
Imperium Property Group, Troy • Employees: 9  
Assets: \$40M • Georgia State University



BLAKE  
GEORGE

Founder and President • BMG Media Co.,  
Birmingham • Employees: 15 • Revenue: NA  
Michigan State University

**HAVING BEEN BORN INTO A FAMILY WITH A PROVEN** track record of successful entrepreneurship, Blake George wasn’t out to top them. He said he would just be happy to walk side by side.

In 2009, after earning a degree in general business and entrepreneurship from the Eli Broad College of Business at Michigan State University, he launched a full-service branding, custom web design, software development, and e-commerce solutions company.

“It was great timing for us (with the Great Recession),” says George, president of BMG Media Co. in Birmingham (the company also has offices in Detroit and Marrakesh, Morocco). “Costs were low, and people wanted to invest in their brand.”

When he was 10 years old, he began working at Melody Farms, the ice cream and dairy foods company founded by his grandfather, Michael George. Although the company has since been sold, he gained valuable experience in accounting, real estate, logistics, and food handling.

Today, beyond BMG Media, George is founder of

Crown Jewel Investments, a holding company for his investment portfolio. He’s also a key investor in B-File, a customer relationship management firm.

His current circumstances are quite different from what they were six years ago when George was a contestant on the ABC television reality series “Shark Tank,” along with his cousin and his cousin’s former college roommate. Their pitch was for Magic Moments, an app that uses smartphone pictures as the design for T-shirts, mugs, smartphone cases, and more. The entrepreneurs were asking for a \$500,000 investment in return for 15 percent of their company.

The panel of investors on “Shark Tank” was fairly brutal and picked apart the trio’s idea on issues such as utility, IP rights, and valuation. George and his partners went home empty-handed.

Although the app wasn’t well-received, George says the advice the panel gave him was central to his growth as an entrepreneur. “It was an amazing experience,” he says. “And according to the people at ABC, we had the best (entry) video.” ■ — *Ilene Wolff*



AUDREY  
HARLING

Vice President and General Manager, Global  
Emission Control Aftermarket • Tenneco Inc.,  
Southfield • Employees: 80,000 • Revenue:  
\$11.8B • Lawrence Technological University

**WHEN AUDREY HARLING WAS TOURING THE COUNTRY** on the pro-am ballroom dancing circuit for two decades, little did her competitors know that she was an up-and-coming automotive executive.

Beyond dancing, Harling, who is responsible for Tenneco Inc.’s global aftermarket exhaust business, has a love for using tools — an infatuation she developed at an early age. “I always liked building things,” she says. “The best gift I ever received was a tool box my mom found that had child-sized metal tools.”

Before her schooling was complete — she earned a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering and two master’s degrees, one in engineering management and another in manufacturing systems — Harling was working for the air conditioning department at Behr, where she spent 10 years in engineering, cost accounting, and program management.

“I found program management to be my passion,” she says. “(I enjoy) working with a team and having an influence on so many different cross-functional (activities) to make a program successful.”

Harling became director of North American program management for Valeo’s Circle Division in 2012. Two years later, she was heading the supplier’s Ford business unit.

In 2016, she moved to Tenneco as vice president of that company’s Ford exhaust system business unit, and in January 2019 she transitioned to the aftermarket side of the business, where her global team manufactures and markets aftermarket emission control components. She also works with sales, engineering teams, manufacturing, quality control, pricing, and on the development of new products.

After Tenneco — which has its global headquarters in Lake Forest, Ill. — acquired Federal Mogul in Southfield last fall, the companies were divided along OEM and aftermarket lines. Harling sees a bright future for herself. “This is a really fun opportunity and I’m thrilled to be part of it,” she says. “I’d like to continue my growth and responsibilities inside Tenneco, and eventually run a company myself. That would be fantastic.” ■ — *Tim Keenan*





## CHRISTOPHER LETTS

Co-founder and Vice President of Wealth Management • The Pine Harbor Group at Morgan Stanley, Bloomfield Hills • Employees: 5  
Assets Under Management: \$400M  
Michigan State University

### EAGER TO STRIKE OUT ON HIS OWN, CHRISTOPHER

Letts began detailing planes at Marine City Airport when he was 15 years old, and in his freshman year at Michigan State University he started a painting company. "You learn how to paint pretty quickly, and that first summer I painted 30 homes, which was a lot of work," Letts says.

The following summer, in 2004, he did an internship at Chrysler Group in Auburn Hills, where he worked in the executive office under Tom LaSorda, who was COO at the time. "I actually was named Employee of the Month, which was pretty rare for an intern," he says. "I don't think it had ever happened."

Letts then interned at General Mills, before working his last summer at Morgan Stanley. "I'm the first person in my family to graduate from college," he acknowledges. Staying with Morgan Stanley, Letts, who earned a finance degree, began to specialize in assisting successful individuals and families in selling their businesses. Often, these sales involve working across one or more generations.

"When someone sells a substantial company, they transition their holdings from a manufacturing asset to a financial asset," Letts explains. "It's a huge event for the timeline of a family (and) often includes inter-generational considerations. We specialize in advising families through these important financial events, and we identify their goals going forward that are in line with their objectives."

Through The Pine Harbor Group at Morgan Stanley, a wealth management group he co-founded, Letts says he's become an expert in understanding the culture of a given family. "It's a huge transition for multiple family members, and there's often one or several charities that benefit from the sale (of a company)."

In addition, Letts is the current president of the 450-member Association for Corporate Growth Detroit Chapter. Letts is the youngest president to ever serve ACG, both locally and throughout ACG Global (59 chapters and 15,000 members). "ACG is a great way to share best practices and give back to our community," Letts says. **— R.J. King**

### EVEN THOUGH ADAM MANIX IS WORKING AT THE COM-

pany his grandfather founded and his father still runs, it wasn't a slam-dunk that he would join the business. His first two jobs out of Kalamazoo College were with Applied Partners in Madison, Wis., and Colliers International in Southfield. In Madison, Manix acquired old factories and sold what was salvageable for scrap. At Colliers, he was a broker of industrial real estate.

Working outside the family company "was a chance to get out and make my own network and connections," Manix says. "It was a great experience for me. I learned a lot about the business, and touched different aspects of the business."

He joined Kirco Manix — the construction arm of the Kirco development company formed in 2009 via a merger with the Manix construction operation — in 2014 as director of business development, and met with influencers, brokers, and past and potential clients. Manix explains he did anything to increase what he calls "deal flow."

"In the back of my mind, (joining the family

business) was always something I thought was a strong possibility, but I didn't want to jump into it without making a name for myself first," he says.

In May, he was promoted to director of corporate real estate, and now handles all of the company's development and construction projects in its two areas of focus: corporate and health care/senior living. He also manages client relationships.

One current Kirco Manix project is automotive roofing and climate control supplier Webasto's new 109,000-square-foot headquarters in Auburn Hills. Other recent work includes Dow Chemical's headquarters in Midland and a new facility in Plymouth Township for Oerlikon, a Swiss 3-D printing company.

Ultimately, Manix expects to play a leading role in managing the company that bears his name. "By far the biggest motivation is carrying on the family business, the family name," he says. "I grew up going on job sites as a kid, and worked on jobs throughout high school and college. I've been around it. I love it. I'm having fun doing it." **— Tim Keenan**



## ADAM MANIX

Director of Corporate Real Estate  
Kirco Manix, Troy • Employees: 100  
Revenue: \$100M • Kalamazoo College (B);  
University of Michigan (MBA)

### MOST BUSINESS OWNERS SAY THEIR CUSTOMERS

comes first but for Adam Merkel, his employees are front and center. "We rarely have a manager leave, and we put our workers first, and that translates into great customer service," he says.

Merkel, owner of three restaurants in downtown Howell — Diamonds Steak & Seafood, Cello, and Silver Pig Bar & Oysters — along with a Diamonds and Pinky's Rooftop at Main Street and 11 Mile Road in downtown Royal Oak, says things never looked better.

It's a remarkable turnaround from 2010, when he used the last of his savings in a silver piggy bank to help feed his young family. To get through the cash crunch, he continued to do the only thing he knew best.

"I've worked in restaurants since I was 9 years old," he says. "My parents had a family diner on Detroit's west side, and I was cooking when I was 11 years old. When they sold the diner, I worked at other restaurants like J. Alexander's, Ocean Prime, and Mitchell's Fish Market. It was a great experience, because I saw how the big restaurants worked."

All five of Merkel's restaurants were designed by Ron Rea, principal of Ron & Roman Inc. in downtown Birmingham. "I like Ron's style, especially since he's designed dozens and dozens of restaurants," Merkel says. "As we worked more closely together — it's a long, but fun, process — (we discovered) we're related. We're like third or fourth cousins."

In the beginning, Merkel says he benefited by being one of the few fine-dining establishments in Howell, which has an area population of around 7,500 people. Going into downtown Royal Oak, there was plenty of competition, in spite of the fact that there are some 60,000 people in the immediate area.

"We have a strong following in Howell, so when we opened up Diamonds (in Royal Oak last year), we were able to draw some of our regular patrons," he says. "To get more of the word out, we've had some really good media exposure. And if we keep taking care of our employees, the customers will come. That, in turn, will lead to more restaurant openings for us in the region." **— R.J. King**



## ADAM MERKEL

Owner • Adam Merkel Restaurants, Howell  
Employees: 210 • Revenue: NA

The Avengers Youth Mentoring Summer Camp for 150 K-8 students was a key component of Life Remodeled's Six-Day Project. Here, Kajon Franklin, Jacob Zuppke, and Lou Goldhaber play a friendly game of volleyball with camp participants.







The recently renovated gym at the Durfee Innovation Society was the setting for activities run by The Family, a nationally-renowned nonprofit organization that worked with Life Remodeled during the Six-Day Project. Joining in the fun during The Family's basketball camp for middle and high school students are Jessica Robinson, Etrit Demaj, Zach Carroll, Trevor Pawl, and Christopher Letts.





## CHELSEA MILLS

Owner • Behind Your Design, Fenton  
Employees: 6 • Revenue: NA • Albion College

**GROWING UP IN FLINT WITH ENTREPRENEURIAL AND** artistic grandparents, it was a pretty good bet that Chelsea Mills wouldn't end up in the banking world, which is what she studied in college.

Before accepting any of the offers she received from various banks around the country upon graduation, she decided to work as a ranch director at a summer camp. That's where she met her U.K.-born husband. After a year at the camp, she was hired by the Flint City School District to work at the Base Camp Challenge Center, which teaches people how to communicate and work better together via group activities. From there, Mills went to the Fenton Regional Chamber of Commerce.

"When I worked for the chamber, I realized how important chambers are to a community and how important it is to make those connections," says Mills, who left the chamber when one of its members hired her to build his company's website, which she could do from home while raising her 2-year-old child.

When the Great Recession hit and businesses

were laying off their marketing people, her original employer started sending his associates to her for things like logo designs, websites, business card designs, and brochures.

Now, Behind Your Design has 300 clients. "We do everything that has to do with a company's brand," Mills says. "Our clients started to figure out that it was much easier to have everything done in the same place. That's how we ended up growing."

In addition to her professional career, Mills was appointed chair of the Fenton Regional Chamber of Commerce in 2015. Under her leadership, the chamber started a program called Career Connections. Twice a year, Career Connections introduces 100 high school juniors and seniors from the three Flint-area high schools to 11 influential businesspeople.

"I really enjoy teaching people about these tools and little tips that can help them succeed and spread their brand," Mills says. "I also enjoy working on things that make my community better, making it a great place to live and work." — *Tim Keenan*



## JOSH MOSS

Vice President • Advance Plumbing & Heating Supply, Detroit • Employees: 50 • Revenue: \$20M  
Michigan State University

presence across multiple channels."

It was all about bringing the company into the 21st century. When those efforts yielded positive results, Moss's father had another challenge for him. Advance sells decorative plumbing fixtures, but has never had a Detroit-area showroom where people could come in and pick out what they'd like. Moss was charged with designing the space.

As the new operation opened on Cass Avenue in Midtown in 2016, Moss took on more responsibility within the company. He now serves as vice president, overseeing both the Detroit showroom and a newer one in Walled Lake. He also manages hiring, and has gained experience in both sales and operations during his rise to his current position.

"For the Detroit market, there's been nothing here," Moss says. "We had the riots in the '60s and everyone left the city. Decorative plumbing became very big in the '90s, and that's when everything came from overseas. Now you can get it right here in Midtown." — *Dan Calabrese*



## RANDY NAJJAR

Owner and President • Sapphire Luxury Homes, Birmingham • Employees: 5 • Revenue: \$10M  
Oakland University

**RANDY NAJJAR HAS PARLAYED HIS EDUCATION IN** architecture and an innate ability to read the housing market into a \$10 million business building luxury custom homes, primarily in Oakland County.

While attending Lawrence Technological University in Southfield as an undergraduate student, Najjar started working in the real estate industry. In 2009, he became a licensed real estate associate and started working for Re/Max in Bloomfield Hills as a buyer's agent for a top-producing agent. The next year, he joined Keller Williams as an independent agent.

Najjar launched Sapphire Luxury Homes in 2012. "I felt there was a window of opportunity for me to start my own business building houses," he says. He sold his first home under the Sapphire brand in 2013, hired a construction manager, and began to look for other opportunities in the luxury housing market.

"Building typical new-construction homes is a volume business, and you're competing with big players with deep pockets," he says. "It requires capital to acquire so many lots, and you have to build most of

the homes on spec.

"As a new builder, it's impossible to get financing for something like that. I decided to go the custom route, where the purchaser can finance it through a construction loan. We were just coming out of the recession and I noticed that the builders who survived tended to be in the higher-end market."

Najjar says he and his team now work on 10 to 15 homes at a time. Each is between 4,000 and 6,000 square feet in size, and starts with a \$1 million price tag. "It's a lot more fulfilling and a lot more fun and challenging doing something custom," he says.

One might expect that a 30-year-old entrepreneur has ambitious growth goals. That would be underestimating Najjar's potential. "I like the size of my team and the number of homes we're building. I'd like to bump up my average sales price and my annual revenue to closer to \$15 million per year, and maybe bring on a couple more people. My next step is to get into multifamily homes, to diversify the portfolio, and set up a steady, sustainable income stream." — *Tim Keenan*

A vacant lot at Woodrow Wilson and Rich-ton streets east of the Durfee Innovation Society was mowed and trimmed by Robert Platt, Adam Merkel, Jonathan Quarles, and Adam Manix. The area was once a vibrant residential neighborhood.







## AHMAD NSOUR

Founder and CEO • Eagle Technology Competence, Rochester • Employees: 15  
Revenue: NA • Oakland University

**AHMAD NSOUR TAKES PRIDE IN BEING ABLE TO COM-**bine his technical expertise in computer engineering with the softer skills of mentoring others. "I'm a people person, very sociable," he says. "That personality comes from living around the world."

Nsour was born in England, lived in San Diego during his early school years, and then moved to Jordan. His father gave Nsour the choice to attend college in Jordan, his ancestral country, or elsewhere. "I told him, 'Dad, I want to see the world,'" Nsour says.

He attended college in Pakistan before heading to Oakland University for graduate school, where he earned his master's and doctorate degrees in electrical engineering. Even now, he travels a lot for his business, and has been to India nine times for work.

While at OU, Nsour taught undergraduate classes and began an almost 10-year position at Harman International, a Samsung company in Farmington Hills.

At Harman, he led a team of more than 200 engineers and oversaw nine customers and 20 product lines related to auto infotainment systems. As a

manager, Nsour launched more than 10 infotainment products in less than two years.

He also contributed to the testing of more than 100 high-end infotainment systems for U.S.-based vehicle makers FCA US, General Motors Co., and Harley-Davidson, and foreign-based automakers such as Audi, BMW, Daimler, Ferrari, and Porsche.

In addition, Nsour was Harman's voice in the Bluetooth Special Interest Group, a standards organization, which was defining the wireless technology for vehicles. "Wireless communications, that has been my passion as an engineer," he says.

In 2015, Nsour launched Eagle Technology Competence in Rochester to provide consulting and engineering services to the automotive and consumer electronics industries. He has since expanded to the Middle East and Australia to support OEMs and Tier 1 suppliers with testing and other engineering services.

"If there's one thing I've enjoyed over the last 20 years, it's probably mentoring people," Nsour says. "This is something I really take pride in." ■ — *Ilene Wolff*

**STEVE OBEN CAME FROM A FAMILY OF LOCAL FORD** dealers across metro Detroit, but when the time came to choose a career of his own, he set his sights on other destinations.

After studying finance and accounting at Boston College, he worked for Ernst & Young, ING Capital, and RBC Capital Markets, all in New York City. At any given time, Oben was helping clients structure deals in telecommunications, media, and entertainment. It was everything he'd gone out east to do.

But he also knew the day would come when his father, Walter, would be ready to step away from Southgate Automotive. And while there would be no pressure to return home and take over leadership of the Ford and Lincoln dealerships, Oben knew he would have to make a decision at some point.

That moment arrived in 2016, when his father told him it was time to decide. And as much as Oben had enjoyed the challenges of high finance in New York, he knew what the best decision would be.

"I spent a year wrapping things up and giving my

notice," he says. In April 2017, Oben returned home and assumed the title of vice president of Southgate Automotive. His brother, Christopher, wound down his career pursuits in Chicago, and the two of them are now partners in the business.

Early on, Oben says he learned the value of a strong work ethic. "There were so many days when I'd be in the office at 6 a.m. and I'd still be there at 3 a.m., and then I'd be home at 4 a.m. still making changes on my work laptop," he says.

That doesn't necessarily mean he'll be putting in 22-hour days, but Oben has a lot to oversee. Both dealerships are being renovated, and he is working to improve all aspects of the business.

"We need to look at how to improve our used car sales, how to be more efficient in getting vehicles through our Quick Lane Oil Change Centers, and how to do better with our service center. There's a lot to focus on. I think my favorite part of this job is going over the financials," Oben says. "It's familiar territory."

■ — *Dan Calabrese*



## STEVE OBEN

Vice President • Southgate Automotive, Southgate • Employees: 160 • Revenue: NA  
Boston College

a very lean and mean mentality. Around 2012, as the company was growing more, we were moving to an SaaS model."

That's Software as a Service, a reference to programs accessed via the cloud, and Oberhausen took on the role of director of infrastructure. His job was, and is, to make sure all the company's services are scalable and performing at optimal levels.

The company continued to grow, and eventually the owners sold the enterprise to a private equity firm in New York. As the new owners planned to invest capital to facilitate further growth, they looked to identify which team members they would like to keep — and they didn't want Oberhausen going anywhere.

"Private equity groups aren't only buying a product, they're also buying the key players," Oberhausen says. "I was identified as a key player (and was asked to stay). The small businesses (clients) we serve rely on us for everything — their scheduling, their credit card processing, and everything else. I don't want to let them down." ■ — *Dan Calabrese*



## TREVOR PAWL

Senior Vice President of Business Innovation MEDC, Lansing • Employees: 273 • Appropriation: \$260.6M (FY19) • University of Detroit Mercy

**FROM A YOUNG AGE, TREVOR PAWL SAYS HE WAS AN** "intrapreneur," where he helped other people launch and run their businesses. That experience, along with working as a hotel bellman and in the men's department at Nordstrom, among other endeavors, offered a sound footing to his recent appointment as senior vice president of business innovation at Michigan Economic Development Corp. in Lansing.

"After college I worked at Doner, an advertising agency in Southfield, on such accounts as Expedia and AAA Michigan, before joining ePrize in Ferndale (now HelloWorld in Southfield)," he says. "We created online contests to help drive visibility and sales for clients like Wendy's. From there, I joined the Detroit Regional Chamber because I saw a lot was going on in the city and I wanted to be part of it."

At first, Pawl helped run a federally funded program that served as a matchmaker for small machine shops in metro Detroit. The goal was to assist the companies in reducing their share of revenue relative to the automotive industry.

**CITY CLUB APARTMENTS STARTED IN 2016 AS A COLLAB-**oration between area real estate magnate Jonathan Holtzman and Robert Platt. It now is a company with 260 employees who operate 22 apartment buildings in 17 cities, including downtown Detroit.

Platt started working for Holtzman's previous company, Village Green Apartments, right out of college. He quickly rose through the ranks to become the owner's right-hand man. After just a few months of training, Platt was put in charge of the Village Green Apartments in Canton Township, followed by Village Green in Farmington Hills, before moving into a corporate-level position.

Platt's first job in the front office was running the company's ancillary income division, before moving to the asset management department, where he was in charge of acquisitions, dispositions, refinancing, capital improvements, and rehabilitation projects.

After serving the Village Green operation for more than 11 years, Holtzman asked Platt to help him start an urban development business, which became City

Club Apartments. "We were just going to be a small development company of about 15 people, and now we have ... a massive development pipeline for the next several years," says Platt, who is in line to be appointed CEO for the company early next year. "It's just been very, very crazy, to be quite honest."

In his current role, Platt oversees investor relations, construction financing, the refinancing of existing projects, selling assets, and the local design, communications, and human resources departments.

With all of the success City Club Apartments has seen in a relatively short span of time, Platt outlines some very lofty goals for the enterprise.

"We want to become an international brand. We're in the Midwest today, but the intent is to expand toward the East Coast — Boston, Washington, D.C., and New York City. Our 50-percent partner (Alan Greenberg) lives in Toronto, so we'd like to be in Toronto, Montreal, maybe Quebec. Ultimately, the 10-year goal is to expand to London, Hong Kong, Singapore, and locations like that." ■ — *Tim Keenan*

"It was a two-year grant program, and at some point the MEDC saw the success we were having (\$320 million in additional opportunities were generated for the participating firms), and it ultimately became Pure Michigan Business Connect."

At that time, in 2012, Pawl went to work for the MEDC, where he helped introduce buyers representing aerospace, agriculture, energy, and retail operations to companies across the state. "Everyone wins because the buyers got valued suppliers, and the companies got new business," he says.

Over time, he helped oversee an international trade program where the MEDC assists state-based businesses with gaining work overseas. In 2017, the MEDC recognized there were gaps in the marketplace where targeted grants and assistance would help companies gain a foothold in emerging markets like mobility, and PlanetM was formed.

"We work on making Michigan the mobility center of the world. We also support entrepreneur programs and help businesses expand and grow." ■ — *R.J. King*



## ROBERT PLATT

Chief Investment and Operating Officer City Club Apartments, Farmington Hills  
Employees: 260 • Revenue: \$125M  
Michigan State University

council for 25 years, so I saw how health care and policy can work together."

Between 2013 and 2016, Petzko-Sweet was a policy adviser for Republicans in the Michigan House of Representatives. "The first or second day there I sat down with the leadership and they said, We're going to do Medicaid expansion and we need you to figure that out for us," she recalls.

In February 2016, Petzko-Sweet could sense things changing in the state House, as a result of term limits. So when Beaumont Health called with an offer to be its senior director of state government relations, she took the position.

At Beaumont, she leads the company's strategy for relationships with state government and government agencies. She also monitors and identifies state legislation, rules, and issues that would impact the hospital system. "This has been a fascinating career for me," she says. "I love it. I feel incredibly lucky. Sometimes I have to pinch myself (when I realize) I get to work on all of these amazing issues." ■ — *Tim Keenan*



## ADAM OBERHAUSEN

Director of Infrastructure • Daysmart, Ann Arbor  
Employees: 85 • Revenue: \$22M  
University of Michigan

**ADAM OBERHAUSEN PUT HIMSELF THROUGH THE UNI-**versity of Michigan, in part, by working part time handling customer service issues for Daysmart — at the time a small, up-and-coming technology company.

Following graduation in 2005, the firm offered him a full-time position, but Oberhausen felt he couldn't pass up an opportunity to work in Texas as an engineer for Lockheed Martin. Soon after moving to the Lone Star State, he realized working for a large company had its drawbacks.

"I didn't like the huge corporate lifestyle," Oberhausen says. Knowing he still had a good relationship with Daysmart's founders, he paid them a visit upon a trip home. And he's never sought greener pastures again.

Daystar services a specific niche of clientele — developing scheduling and management software for hair salons and dog groomers. It might sound limited, but the company has more than 13,000 subscribers using its software via the cloud.

"Initially I was just doing software development," he says. "The company remained small, and we had





## JONATHAN QUARLES

Founder and CEO • The BTL Group, Detroit/SolAir Water Inc., Flint • Employees: 7/2 • Revenue: NA  
Florida A&M University

**A NATIVE OF FLINT, JONATHAN QUARLES SAW THE** impact the water crisis — caused by leaching leaded pipes — had on the city's residents and businesses. Eager to offer a solution, he launched SolAir Water Inc., which installs and maintains small solar panels and renewable technology that, combined, harvest water from air. There's no electricity and no pipes. Set on 10 acres, around 1,000 panels will be operational by the end of the year. The water is collected in a tank and transported to a bottling facility. Over time, Quarles wants to operate his own bottling facility.

"We are a for-profit company, but we're a social impact company. Our mission is that a portion of the sale of every bottle goes to the Flint Water Fund, and they decide how best to help the community as it relates to a water-related project," Quarles says.

In addition, the entrepreneur launched The BTL Group in Detroit in 2015, where he assists companies like Uber and Airbnb with government relations, social impact efforts, and identifying revenue growth opportunities.

Quarles began work as a paperboy when he was 8 years old, and has operated a T-shirt business, a color-printing firm, and a vending machine company.

"I've always loved learning about finances and how to grow money," he says. "I also like to say one of my high school businesses was applying for scholarships. My father said I had to go to college, but he couldn't pay for it. So I applied for more than 100 scholarships and got a full ride at Florida A&M University."

During college, and afterward, Quarles worked for Tavis Smiley, an American talk show host and author. From there, he became a senior adviser for the City of Detroit before joining the Detroit Economic Growth Corp., where he helped identify and manage federal funds for business and civic improvements at places like Campus Martius Park and Capitol Park.

He also worked at W Industries and Covisint, both in Detroit, before launching The BTL Group. "My life mission is to eradicate poverty through entrepreneurship," he says. "You can make money and make changes that benefit your community." ■ — *R.J. King*

**"I'VE ALWAYS BEEN AN ORGANIZED PERSON, AND** anyone who works with me would say so," says Robert Reaves, who at age 30 is the youngest executive-level leader at the Wayne State University School of Medicine. "Some would say I'm too organized, but that's just part of my nature."

That organized nature is one of the reasons Reaves was able to help the WSU School of Medicine, the nation's largest single-campus medical school, rebound from a 2015 warning of probation due to violations of accreditation standards. Reaves was recruited in 2016, right out of the WSU Mike Ilitch School of Business, to help the medical school prepare for the 2017 return visit of the accrediting organization.

To get ready for the evaluation, Reaves established short- and long-term strategies to drive operational improvements, educational quality, and institutional effectiveness. He played a critical role in rearticulating institutional values and priorities, and developing and executing action plans to address the 12 issues holding the university back from full accreditation. The

effort was a success and marked a pivotal moment for an institution responsible for producing some 40 percent of doctors in Michigan.

With that crisis in the rear-view mirror, Reaves now works to make sure the school maintains its accreditation. "I've been in this world for three years now, and I'm working with the executive management team to focus on strategic planning and organizational effectiveness," he says. "I oversee compliance and accreditation, and I also help govern our Critical Management Committee, Operations Committee, and Institutional Effectiveness Committee."

In addition to his regular work, Reaves developed the school's first learning community program, which provides professional development for 2,000 incoming freshmen. He also helped create the Detroit and the Leader in Me youth development program, in conjunction with the Detroit Police Department. "Through my volunteer work, I have successfully forged cross-discipline collaborations and multisectoral partnerships," he says. ■ — *Tim Keenan*



## ROBERT REAVES

Director of Accreditation  
Wayne State University School of  
Medicine, Detroit • Employees: 1,200  
Revenue: NA • Wayne State University

**FEW PEOPLE HAVE JUMPED FROM IMPORTING AND** selling tea to offering next-generation mobility, but for Jessica Robinson, the transition proved nearly seamless. "At the end of the day, people want a quality product with excellent customer service," she says.

Following graduation from the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, she began selling tea and became part of the product development group at a large importer. She stayed in the business after moving to Seattle, until an opportunity arose to join Zipcar — where she held roles in growth, operations, and marketing across North America.

"At one point in San Francisco, I was responsible for managing 1,500 cars in terms of where they were parked and where they were needed," she says. "I stayed through their IPO, then moved to Portland, where I was a market launch manager. One of the markets I thought we should go into was Detroit. And while I was laughed at, I wasn't fired."

To help prove her point, she moved to the Motor City and began working with Wayne State University

and Bedrock, the real estate arm of the Quicken Loans Family of Companies. Within a few months, she became fascinated by the "entrepreneurial activities I saw downtown (and) I began to take a lot of courses and focused on entrepreneurial ecosystems."

From that experience, she joined Techstars, a business accelerator program, and became an active startup mentor and micro lender who invests in women entrepreneurs and business owners in Detroit. Soon after, she left to lead the development of next-generation mobility efforts at Ford Smart Mobility, where she was director, city solutions.

As she worked to better connect people and vehicles, she noticed there was a lack of well-trained experts and college programs centered on mobility. To help fill the gap, in January she was appointed executive director of the new Michigan Mobility Institute. In August, the institute and WSU launched the Center for Advanced Mobility. "It will be a game-changer for Detroit," she says. "If we want to stay at the forefront of mobility, we need well-trained talent." ■ — *R.J. King*



## JESSICA ROBINSON

Executive Director • Michigan Mobility Institute, Detroit • Employees: 1 • Budget: \$550,000  
University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth



When Durfee Middle School, now Durfee Innovation Society, opened in 1926, it was joined by Central High School and Roosevelt Elementary School. The trio of schools was the first K-12 campus in the nation (Roosevelt was eventually demolished). Working to install a tile floor on the third floor of Durfee are Chelsea Mills, Joe Field, Audrey Harling, and Nathan M. Steiner.





During Family Fun Day on Aug. 10, which included horseback riding and carnival games, Life Remodeled offered what was billed as the world's largest bounce house. Joining in the revelry are Megan Petzko-Sweet, Christopher Scott, and Josh Moss.





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## CHRISTOPHER SCOTT

Senior Electrical Engineer • U.S. Army CCDC Ground Vehicle Systems Center, Warren  
Employees: 2,000 • Budget: NA  
University of Michigan–Dearborn

**ALTHOUGH CHRISTOPHER SCOTT BATTLED AND OVER-**came clinical depression and anxiety while an undergraduate student, it didn't stop him from earning two advanced degrees and becoming a senior electrical engineer at the U.S. Army CCDC Ground Vehicle Systems Center in Warren (formerly TARDEC).

He's even started his own company, Positive Thought Solutions, which provides motivational speaking and positive life lessons to high school and college students, as well as corporations.

Scott started with the CCDC in high-performance computing systems. He's currently the lead engineer on a project focused on designing and developing armor for military trucks. Previously, he led a team that worked on robotics standards and capabilities. The unmanned ground vehicles Scott worked on are currently deployed on battlefields around the world.

In May 2018, Scott decided to bring the lessons of positive thinking that got him through his depression and anxiety to a wider audience. "In therapy, my counselor and I focused on (the idea that) positive thinking

plus positive action leads to positive results," says the Cass Technological High School graduate.

Today, he uses his free time to deliver motivational talks while training students in academic success strategies in STEM subjects. In addition, he offers personal and professional development services.

Ultimately, Scott says he would like to make Positive Thought Solutions a full-time enterprise, perhaps in seven years. He also would like to take his message international.

In addition, he's a volunteer with the Salvation Army, leads a neighborhood patrol, and works with inner-city students to get them interested in science and technology careers.

His list of honors includes the National Black Engineer of the Year Award, the U.S. Army Achievement Medal for Civilian Service, and the University of Michigan–Dearborn Young Alumnus of the Year Award.

"Bringing positive change to individuals and getting them to be a better version of themselves is what makes me happy," Scott says. ■ — *Tim Keenan*

**"I TRY TO AVERAGE AT LEAST ONE CLOSING PER DAY,"**

says Nathan M. Steiner, who specializes in residential mortgages at Troy-based Flagstar Bank. It's a pace that puts him among the elite in his chosen field, bringing in between \$80 million and \$100 million in loans every year. "My growth has been kind of unusual for the market," he says.

Also somewhat unique was his entry into the mortgage banking business itself, which occurred while he was a junior at Michigan State University. "I needed money to go on college break," he says, "and I took a job at Flagstar and made cold calls to leads I got from visiting county buildings." Steiner has been at Flagstar ever since.

While 17 years at one company might not be the norm for others of his generation, Steiner learned about longevity and consistency from his father, who owned and operated a textile company. "He was very firm in saying you stay in one spot and people know where you are," Steiner recalls.

In 2018, 320 families knew where Steiner was and

allowed him to help them finance their new homes. As a result, he was the top-producing Flagstar Bank loan officer in the country, originating more than \$91 million in home loans.

"For me, providing home loans is more than navigating complex financial products and industry regulation; it's about helping people with one of life's most important financial decisions — one with a far-reaching impact on their future," he says.

Steiner says he has a passion for helping people buy and finance a primary, secondary, or investment home. "It's a privilege for me to make a difference in the stability and growth of a community," he says.

Steiner also strives to make a difference in his own Grosse Pointe Farms community, where he sits on the board of the Grosse Pointe Chamber of Commerce.

Steiner says that going forward "there's going to be a huge technology aspect that's going to accelerate some companies and decelerate other companies. I'll be interested to see how I can accelerate my business while times change." ■ — *Tim Keenan*



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## NATHAN M. STEINER

Senior Vice President of Sales • Flagstar Bank, Troy • Employees: 4,100 • Revenue: \$936M  
Michigan State University



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## KLEMENTINA SULA

Chief Development Officer • Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital, West Bloomfield • Employees: 30,000+ • Revenue: \$5.9B  
University of Michigan

**MANY PEOPLE'S AMBITIONS ARE INSPIRED BY SOMEONE** who helps with their life's journey. Klementina Sula immigrated to the United States from Albania at the age of 9, along with her family, and remembers very well how much assistance they received from an immigration attorney who helped with paperwork and other aspects of the process. That inspired Sula to assist people in similar ways, and she developed a goal: To one day be the U.S. ambassador to Albania.

As the chief development officer for Henry Ford Health System, Sula has already accumulated an array of credentials toward that goal. Much of it was the result of a chance encounter with Peggy Burns, now executive director of corporate and foundation giving at Harvard University, but senior vice president of development at Henry Ford until last year.

Sula was speaking to a group and shared her ambition to become an ambassador, but also related that she didn't want to work for the U.S. State Department on the way up. Peggy Burns was sitting next to her, and leaned over. "She said, 'If you want to become an

ambassador and you don't want to work for the State Department, you need to learn how to raise money, and I'm going to teach you how,'" Sula recalls.

And she did. Sula, who had started her career with the State Department, joined Burns at the University of Michigan and later followed her to Henry Ford. When Burns left Henry Ford for Harvard, Sula remained as chief development officer. She says she's applying everything Burns taught her to serve both Henry Ford and its donors.

"My primary focus has been to build a culture of giving gratitude and engagement, so we can transform the communities we serve," Sula says. "I don't want development to be like, 'Oh, it's people that go and have lunch with donors.' I feel my greatest contribution has been to leverage philanthropy strategically to advance the mission of the organization."

It's also important to Sula that she set a standard for her fellow millennials. "I want to be a voice for, and a champion of, strategies and solutions for the millennial mindset," she says. ■ — *Dan Calabrese*

The Durfee Innovation Society creates substantial and impactful opportunities for children, families, and single adults while advancing collaboration among eight major educational sectors (arts, business, education, faith-based, government, human services, media, and philanthropy) in both Detroit and its surrounding suburbs. Helping to clean the area are Randy Najjar, Klementina Sula, and Robert Reaves.







## NATE TALLMAN

Vice President • Metro Wire and Cable, Sterling Heights • Employees: 40 • Revenue: NA  
Central Michigan University

**WITH A BACKGROUND IN HIGHER EDUCATION, HOW** did Nate Tallman transition to a high-level position with an electrical distributor of wire and cable products, along with warehousing and supply chain services? It came down to one thing: Listening.

Before joining Metro Wire and Cable in 2012, Tallman served as director of governmental relations for Ross Medical Education, an educational program that saw Tallman working with different states, as well as the federal government, to secure funding for students looking to pursue medical degrees.

"In the educational arena, you have to listen first, and I feel as though that is a skill I've been able to be cognizant of in previous roles, and in my current role," Tallman says. "You have to listen first before figuring out what the means to the end are. Listening in its most simplistic form has allowed me to have some new levels of success."

When he joined Metro Cable and Wire, Tallman got up to speed on the technical details of the operation. A fast learner, he now oversees crucial functions like

hiring, marketing, sales, and community relations in his position as vice president. And he's learned more about management and leadership.

"They're used interchangeably a lot, but I really feel strongly there's a difference between management and leadership," Tallman says. "You have to have a balance because, in my eyes, they're two totally different opportunities to work with employees, the community, and customers."

Going forward, he's creating a seamless business development program. "We don't want a shotgun/buckshot approach to the way we go to market."

Apart from work, Tallman serves as Alumni Board president for Central Michigan University, and he previously was chairman of the Sterling Heights Regional Chamber of Commerce. Contributing to the community is a principle he learned at an early age. "My parents would always say it isn't about how many points you scored or rebounds you got, or whether you won the game," Tallman says. "It was about whether you're being a leader on the court." ■ — *Dan Calabrese*

**JORDAN WOLFE ONCE THOUGHT THAT COMPANIES** existed solely to make money. But along the road of acquiring and renovating older structures in Detroit, he and his business partner, Kyle Polk, saw an opportunity to assist startup firms.

"We're focused on leasing space to small businesses and helping them grow," says Wolfe, principal of Town Partners in Detroit. "In a sense, we operate as an economic development agency. We may invest in some of the companies (tenants), or they may need assistance with landing new customers or growing their operations, or need financial advice."

Early on in life, Wolfe says he had the entrepreneurial bug. From grade school through college, he bought and sold baseball cards, worked as a caddie, and power-washed homes and decks. From there, he specialized in investment banking and private equity, both in the Netherlands and San Francisco. A few years later, he came back to metro Detroit to help care for his father, who had multiple sclerosis, and his mother, who suffered from heart conditions.

"Taking care of my parents, I realized I wanted to get out of pure investment work," he says. "I wanted to do something that drives impact rather than money. From that period, it allowed me to say life is short and I should throw myself into what I believe in, and let the business experience flow in from there."

Working with Matt Lester, founder and CEO of Princeton Enterprises Inc., a multifaceted real estate firm in Bloomfield Township, Wolfe helped renovate Claridge House Apartments and the Ashley Apartments in downtown Detroit. At the Claridge House, he set up a co-working space called the Department of Alternatives. After forming Town Partners with Polk, the pair acquired several buildings in Detroit's Milwaukee Junction and Eastern Market.

"We're doing angel investments in tech-enabled businesses while sharing our experiences to help the companies grow," Wolfe says. "We're also looking at creating a fund for micro grid development, both locally and globally, using wind and solar energy that plugs into an existing grid." ■ — *R.J. King*



## JORDAN WOLFE

Co-founder and Principal • Town Partners, Detroit • Employees: 4 • Revenue: NA  
Indiana University

His work at the pet-related business was clear from the start: "They were a little outdated as far as marketing, and that's my passion," Zupke says.

Under his co-leadership with founder and inventor Brad Baxter, AutoPets' revenue increased to \$27.6 million last year, up from approximately \$7 million when the digital marketer joined the company.

Zupke and Baxter complement each other's skill sets. While Baxter, an engineer, excels at inventing and finance, Zupke oversees the marketing, business development, and manufacturing operations teams.

The company recently introduced an app that tracks and gives cat owners insight into their felines' bathroom habits. The information can be useful in detecting maladies such as urinary tract infections or more serious digestive ailments. With that digital data, health problems may be detected sooner.

AutoPets has even more plans for growth. Zupke recently oversaw the launch of *Litterbox.com*, an online destination where cat owners can shop for their pets' needs. ■ — *Ilene Wolff*



## JACOB ZUPPKE

Executive Vice President • AutoPets, Auburn Hills  
Employees: 89 • Revenue: \$27.6M  
University of Michigan–Dearborn

**JACOB ZUPPKE AND HIS COLLEAGUES AT AUTOPETS IN** Auburn Hills, which produces an automated kitty litter box called Litter-Robot, like to compare their product to the washing machine. Given a choice between the two, Zupke would pick the Litter-Robot over a front-loader washer any day. "Frankly, I would rather do laundry by hand versus scooping my cat's poop," says Zupke, executive vice president of AutoPets.

Apparently, a lot of other people feel the same way. The Litter-Robot is the highest-rated self-cleaning litter box on the market, according to customer reviews.

To keep pace with demand fostered by its customers' brand loyalty, the company will move to a new, 50,000-square-foot headquarters in Auburn Hills in the coming months. Right now, the enterprise operates from a 7,000-square-foot space. In addition, the company's production facility in Wisconsin will more than double in size to 63,000 square feet.

Zupke was recruited to AutoPets in 2015 after taking a buyout from a digital marketing agency he co-founded with one of his college professors in 2012.



Ending a long day of improving the area around the Durfee Innovation Society, Adam Oberhausen, Ahmad Nsour, and Christopher Brower load landscaping equipment into a large trailer. A special thank-you for the cleanup effort goes to Chris Lambert, founder and CEO of Life Remodeled, who was part of the 2018 Class of 30 in Their Thirties.