

## 25 Young Special Events Pros to Watch: 2016 Edition

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[Lisa Hurley](#)

Wed, 2016-06-29 13:51

Every year, the Advisory Board of Special Events points out 25 young event professionals—all under age 40—to throw the spotlight on their talents and insights.

### DELIVERING THE BEST TO THE BEST

**Rebecca Abram, 29, director of business development, [Blue Danube Productions](#), Seattle**



Abram is praised by colleagues as an event professional who is "passionate about events, brand messaging, and bringing the unexpected to life through her work."

Her career in event started with her music studies in college. "In my second year was offered a hospitality internship working for the Walt Disney Company. I didn't want to halt work on my degree, so I researched colleges in Florida and stumbled upon University of Central Florida's Event Management degree program, part of the Rosen College of Hospitality Management. The events industry was larger and had more opportunities than I realized, and instantly struck a chord with me."

Today, Abram is responsible for designing, pitching and executing some 300 events a year. "My role as director of business development entails managing the business development strategy and sales department with a goal of doubling revenue in 2016, brainstorming with our team and vendors to develop creative components that meet our clients' objectives, managing on-site event production, calling shows, and building strong industry relationships. I also maintain an active volunteer role as a Director for ILEA Seattle Chapter."

Abram know that the event industry is where she belongs. "I thrive in the dynamics of this career because of the various skill sets that are required," she says. "I'm incredibly strategic and detail-oriented. At the same time, I function in a creative space and remain open to making the impossible possible. I genuinely care about my clients and their events--they get nothing less than my best."

### FOLLOW THE LEADER

**Amber Allen, 37, CEO and chef strategist, [Double A Events](#), Austin, Texas**



Praised as a "strategic leader who's been to the Super Bowl and back" by her fans, Allen has more than 15 years' experience working with high-impact brands and campaigns including arena events, a takeover of New York's Times Square, and large-scale corporate retreats. In 2012 she left the brand side to launch Double A Events--a branded experience marketing agency with in-house technology that activates and engages consumers with brand partnerships, technology, and service to maximize ROI. The company has additional offices in Los Angeles, San Francisco and London.

"I'm fascinated by taking a brand off paper and translating it into a memorable and fun experience," Allen says. "I like the challenge of creating a strategy, finding a way to make it real, organizing all the logistics, and seeing it come to life in a meaningful way. Yes, we have drinks and food, but we are really using marketing

techniques and technology to create an experience that attaches the brand and that moment in time to someone's lasting memory."

Her agency gives her a bigger canvas to explore. "Working in-house, I supported one brand," she says. "Through Double A, I can support 40 to 50, while upping everyone's game. I love being able to go beyond what my client thought was possible and amplifying an opportunity for them."

## A BRIT OF ALL RIGHT

**Brit Bertino, CSEP, 32, founder/owner [Brit Bertino Event Excellence](#), Las Vegas**



There's her wedding business. And business producing a tool belt especially for event producers--The Totty Belt. And her role as an expert speaker. And as international president of the Wedding Industry Professional Association. And advisory board member for the International School of Hospitality. Who really can do it all? Brit Bertino.

She started early. At age 13, she threw dance parties for the neighbor kids in her parents' garage, complete with strobe lights, plastic table-cloth "drapes" to hide storage boxes, a boom box playing the latest hits, and taco bars. "No one ever told me that I could make a career out of this later in life," she recalls, "until I worked for a local radio station in the special events department, which eventually led me to a cruise line." After coming back home, she launched her own business 12 years ago, "And I have never looked back," she says. "Only forward!" She calls the event

industry "a thrill ride," and "a creative industry that has no limitations, which allows me to produce remarkable innovation every day."

## DESIGNING WOMAN

**Raquel Bickford, 29, owner and creative director, [Roque Events](#), Napa, Calif.**



Raquel Bickford stitched together a degree from the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising with an extensive background in hospitality to forge her own career path. "I wanted to merge my two passions to create a career that was rewarding and limitless," Bickford says. "Event planning and design is a creative platform where I can provide outstanding service to clients, something I have always found highly rewarding."

The result: her company Roque Events, which offers social and business events designed to "celebrate a signature style that conveys the client's visions and voice," Bickford says.

The event's industry's focus on artistry is an everlasting lure for her.

"My favorite part of this industry is the opportunity to offer both personalized service and artistic expression," Bickford says. "Plus, each event is a collaborative process, and I treasure the relationships created with vendors. I consider myself an orchestrator leading a group talented people to deliver on-point design and event execution. The friendships make all the difference."

## WINNING THE EVENT GAME

**Tracie Domino, CSEP, 34, founder and creative director, [Tracie Domino Events](#), Tampa, Fla.**



As the daughter of a former college football star and student during the Florida State Seminoles' "most glorious football years," Domino was sure she would end up working for the National Football League. But an internship with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers taught her she would have a better time as a fan than an employee so she moved into corporate events for marquee brands including Tiffany and Co.

The greatest thrill for her, though, is weddings. "There is nothing like the rush you get from being responsible for the success of the biggest day in your clients' lives," she explains. "Collaboration with my clients is the most critical aspect of my job, and I want their wedding to be the best reflection of them as possible while embracing all the advancements in technology to make it happen. I also help my clients spend their money as if it was my own and tell them when something is totally worth it and when something while lovely, might go unnoticed and

recommend they save that money in the budget for something else."

## TECH TALENT

**Jim Dorroh, 36, technical director, [LEO Events](#), Memphis, Tenn.**



One of the original employees of LEO Events, "Jim Dorroh is one of the most highly sought-after technical directors in the country," his employer says. "His ability to produce both B2B events and festival events makes him one of only a few people in the nation with this ability." As technical director for LEO, Dorroh is responsible for KAABOO, Walmart Shareholders, Sherwin Williams 150th Celebration, and other large events annually.

Dorroh's secret weapon: His determination to make an event work for all stakeholders. For example, under his leadership, the KAABOO music festival addressed concerns over audio levels within the community by devising a plan of attack never before attempted in an outdoor environment. After getting input from everyone from the equipment manufacturer to audio designers to city officials, he developed a winning plan with unanimous approval "a direct result--as one board

member noted--of Jim's command of the matter, and the authority he brought to the presentation."

## IN THE GROOVE

**Bobby Dutton, 34, director, [Groove Boston](#), Woburn, Mass.**



Aubri Nowowiejski, founder of the Student Event Planners Association and an alumna of last year's "Young Event Pro" list, is a backer of Bobby Dutton, saying he is "the future of live entertainment in the events industry."

As Dutton himself puts it, entertainment is no longer "a spectator sport." Focusing on the college concert market, he and his team strive to offer "sustainable engagement" for audiences by incorporating elements of music festivals--more remixes, high-quality sound, dramatic stage designs, VIP decks and special effects --into the concerts.

"While the hours can be rough at times, I wouldn't have it any other way," Dutton says. "To stand on wobbly legs, after an 18-hour day, with a team of passionate experts, and watch the moment when a show begins; to feel the chills on the back

of your neck as everything comes together and the audience screams for more--it's the best feeling in the world."

## IVY LEAGUE CUISINE

**James Filtz, CMP, CPCE, 32, managing director of catering, [Yale University](#), New Haven, Conn.**



As manager director of catering at Yale, Filtz oversees all aspects of daily operations, including sales, service and culinary operations. His department services more than 1,000 events a year, from intimate dinners with world leaders to student events with more than 6,000 guests. "We pride ourselves on providing sustainable, innovative cuisine, personalized service and maximum value for our customers," he says. "With over \$5 million dollars in annual revenue, we operate a world-class organization with a 15,000-square-foot production facility and venues with event space for over 1,000 guests."

Filtz got his start at age 14 planning parties at church. From there, he worked in a fine dining restaurant and then headed to the Culinary Institute of America. "I focus on the small touches that make big impacts to clients," he says. "Whether it's a special ingredient they crave from back home, or something that triggers a

nostalgic response, I like to make memorable experiences through food and beverage."

## ELEGANT INDIAN WEDDINGS

**Shawna Gohel, 38, CEO/editor in chief, [Maharani Weddings](#), San Francisco**



Hungry for coverage of gorgeous Indian weddings? The site MaharaniWeddings.com will give you your fill. Created by Shawn Gohel, the site serves as a stylish wedding resource for the luxury South Asian bride. The site offers photos and videos of actual weddings along with a vendor guide.

"When I got engaged in 2008, there were no resources dedicated to modern South Asian weddings," Gohel explains. "No information, ideas, or vendors were being exchanged, and I thought it was sad that Indian brides didn't have a place of their own to share in their excitement and planning. So, I set out and created the largest Indian weddings resource in the world." Her goal: "To inspire South Asian brides with vivid imagery and talented vendors to help make their own wedding dreams a reality."

## GROWN-UP STUFF

**Lewis Grell, 33, founder/CEO, [LG Entertainers](#), Houston**



Grell and team provide event production for weddings and corporate events, including sound, lighting, dance floors, video mapping, custom booths, special effects and photo booths. "There are a few companies that hire us for business consulting," he notes, a new service that "we are strongly considering in the near future."

At first, Grell saw events as more of a hobby than a career. It was his invitation to a NACE meeting that showed him new possibilities. "As I became more of an entrepreneur, I had to remind myself how it all started," he says. "It's funny how I go back and think of all the moments in school that I thought how it would never apply to what I want to do in life. I was wrong in so many ways."

## PASSION FOR PARTNERSHIPS

**Barb Harris, CSEP, DMCP, 33, senior program manager, [On the Scene—The Event Co.](#), Chicago**



Barb Harris is the woman about town for the Windy City. A former president of the city's ILEA chapter, she's also deeply involved in other local industry organizations. As one fan says, "Barb is truly a wonderful role model for young people entering the special event industry."

It was a college course aimed at helping freshmen find their career path that led Harris to tourism. Her babysitter from childhood gave her her first temp job as a planner. A month later she was hired full time "and on the journey," she says. Her career has included experiential marketing and incentives, which led her to destination management.

"A planner is nothing without great suppliers, and building relationships from a 15-minute coffee meetup to deep, trusting partnerships--and friendships--is one of my favorite parts of the job," Harris says. "I believe in the philosophy that we are only as good as the information

we have, so I try to give as much as I possibly can to empower my partners, and we work together to design the ultimate experience."

## THE RIGHT LIGHT

**Michael Kuhlmann, 35, director of event design, [Got Light](#), San Francisco**



This lighting expert has an impressive roster of events under his belt, from the San Francisco Ballet Gala (winner of a *Special Events* Gala Award in January) to a general session for 1,200 to a wedding for only 20. His specialty, says Got Light marketing director Kristen McDonnell, is "a dash of five-star customer service and a pinch of Got Charm make him the perfect recipe for a stunning event and production experience."

As Kuhlmann puts it, "Lighting is one of the most powerful visual tools at your disposal to transform an event and I love helping people create the environment they want for their event. We're really able to transform a room into a completely different space," he says. "Whether you're looking for a Midsummer Night's themed wedding at a private residence or a coral-reef themed gala, I love working with people to create their vision for an event."

*Photo by Show Ready Photo*

## SHARP SHOOTER

**Don Mamone, 39, owner, [The Mamones](#), Dallas**



Not many event photographers bring a rich background in events—but Don Mamone does.

Formerly director of events at the Beverly Hilton in Los Angeles—home to the famed Golden Globe Awards—Mamone and his wife, Emily, now photograph weddings, events and fine art from their base in Dallas.

"Much of our motivation originates in our dedication to our couples, clients and professional partners; however, a great deal is also found by way of the charitable causes we support and our sincere desire to help better the existence of those less fortunate," Don Mamone says. "I have worked tirelessly to refine my craft as a professional photographer and planning and executing a great many events over ten years has uniquely qualified me to photograph any special event regardless of

its size and scope. With that said, talent and experience will certainly get you there; however, it is caring that will keep you there and take you even further."

## THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

**Gabrielle Mourino, 25, account executive, [T. Skorman Productions](#), Orlando, Fla.**



She's just a newbie 25, but Gabrielle Mourino is already an old hand at entertainment for special events. As account executive with entertainment powerhouse T. Skorman, Mourino manages client accounts across the U.S., developing entertainment concepts that best suit their events. "I am with them from the initial proposal to the on-site logistics," she explains. She also finds time to service as first vice president for the Orlando chapter of NACE.

"I've always had a passion for entertainment and a knack for planning," she explains. "While in college, I landed a job at an event venue and stayed involved with Rock for Hunger, an organization that planned benefit concerts and events to raise awareness to the hunger and homelessness problem in Orlando. This solidified my interest in the event entertainment world, so when I was presented the opportunity with T. Skorman Productions, I was sold!"

## FEED THE NEED

**Jackie Eisen Nathan, 30, sponsorship director for the Food Network and Cooking Channel [New York City Wine and Food Festival](#), New York/Miami**



When big brands want to make big partnerships to promote philanthropy, they have a friend in Jackie Eisen Nathan. Marquee names such as Bank of America and Delta turn to her and her team to integrate their messages and launch activations of a nearly \$4 million sponsorship portfolio. The four-day festival takes a year of planning, work, dedication and effort but the event "is one people wait for all year long!" Nathan says.

Nathan has been attracted to events since childhood--she wrote a paper in middle school on her dream job: planning the Grammy Awards. Today, "I have the opportunity to work with passionate people, who have become close contacts over the years and I feel privileged to work with on a daily basis," she says. "I love the event world and providing guests first-class experiences, surrounded by great food,

fabulous wine and incredible partners, while giving back to two organizations near and dear to my heart--Food Bank for New York City and No Kid Hungry!"

## IN THE PINK

**Nicole Osibodu, 34, founder/CEO, [Pink Pineapple Event Design](#), San Diego**



Osibodu racks up some pretty sweet compliments from colleagues, along the lines of "Working in this industry has its moments of stress, but she fills those times with laughter and solutions," and "It's like planning an event with your best friend."

One week after graduating with a bachelor's degree in hospitality management, Osibodu went to work for "amazing" experiential agency AgencyEA, which gave her opportunities to work for on events for Harpo Productions and the White House. "It was like I started my bucket list upside down," she says.

Her company Pink Pineapple Event Design, which she opened this year, produces corporate and social events, with the focus on the client. She says, "I am good at what I do because I recognize that this is not, nor will ever be, the 'Nicole Show,'

and that I would be nowhere without the partners and friends I have made—and will make—along the way."

## THE EVENT CHANNEL

**Silvia Pellegrini, 35, managing director, [Events Uncovered](#), London**



Want to view event professionals sharing their knowledge? Then visit Events Uncovered TV, where Pellegrini posts a series of video interviews with event professionals for event professionals. Her online channel is now viewed in more than 55 countries. "Experts share their knowledge with me and the rest of the industry," she explains. She also reports on live events. All told, Pellegrini has published more than 230 interviews, she says.

"I love people, connecting them and finding out what they do, why they do it and try to share that knowledge for other professionals to better themselves, the industry and the world," Pellegrini says. "Experts seem comfortable when talking to me. I think I am good, because I am genuinely interested in what they are saying and I really want to learn."

### DRAWING INSPIRATION

**Mary Phan, 35, creative director, [The Sketchbook Series](#), San Francisco**



Phan is the brains behind The Sketchbook Series, a workshop for creative professionals. After using her sketching skills as both an interior designer and an event planner, she developed a workshop that aims to teach creative professionals--from event designers and planners to cake bakers and florists, and "any creative individuals in between"--how to use sketching to bring ideas to life.

"What I teach is an invaluable skill for these designers," Phan says. After taking her class, "They can now simply sketch a cake, drapery and design piece for their clients. That is something so unique that guests and clients love. "

### FROM LAW TO EVENTS

**Michael Henry Radolinski, 34, owner/principal, [Michael Henry Events Creative](#), Bethesda, Md., and New York**

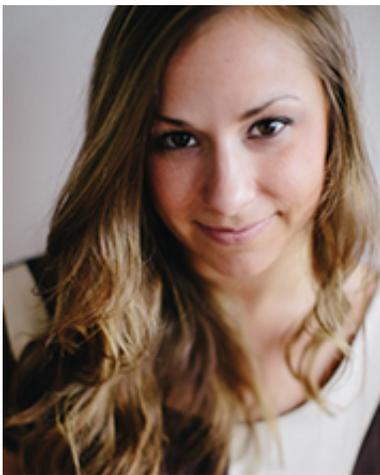


This full-service event planning and design firm keys on "coupling unique, creative, dramatic and stylish environments with seamless logistics to allow guests to celebrate life's greatest moments," Radolinski says. The company produces produce luxury weddings and other special events predominantly in the Washington and New York metro areas, "although we have been fortunate enough to have been asked to plan events throughout the United States, Mexico, and the Caribbean as well," he says.

Radolinski was originally a practicing attorney, but worked in events during both college and law school. "I quickly realized that, as a lawyer, I wasn't following my passion. So, over the next several years, I started and grew my own successful event planning company, leaving the practice of law behind to focus on my calling."

### HOME EVENT MAKER

**Brianna Riley, 27, events and meetings specialist, [The Home Depot](#), Atlanta**



Riley grew up dancing, and her first job was as a dance teacher. But she did volunteer event work for nonprofits in college, including concerts and 5K races, and held internships with wedding coordinators and conference centers. It all paid off: "After graduating I landed in the corporate events sector with Fortune 50 company The Home Depot," she says. In her current role, she plans and executes dozens of events a year for the mega-home improvement chain.

The secret to success in events? "In this industry, you must be nimble and stay calm under pressure," Riley says. "For me, it's an adrenalin rush to know that I must always expect the unexpected, and that no day is ever the same! I am a balance between a Type A and Type B personality--a control freak with a spirit to serve."

### THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS

**Saffold Barksdale Smith, 37, catering consultant, [Affairs to Remember](#), Atlanta**



*Special Events* Advisory Board member Patrick Cuccaro, managing director of high-end caterer Affairs to Remember, well remembers first meeting Smith, a student in his Catering Boot Camp. "She struck me at the time as miles above others in terms of her inherent understanding of the science of catering," he says. "But what impressed me were her impeccable customer service skills." No surprise, then, when Smith came to Affairs looking for a job, "I jumped at the chance to hire her," Cuccaro says.

Today, Smith offers catering and event design services including menu design, logistical knowledge, design concepts and vendor management, "all while honoring the client's budget," she says. "While I am present at the beginning of each of my client's events, I set up the event for success by making it easy for a fellow event professional to seamlessly step in, giving the client the event they dreamed of."

### NETWORK KNOW-HOW

**Megan Tate, CMM, 30, senior manager finance and events, [Petco Animal Supplies](#), San Diego**

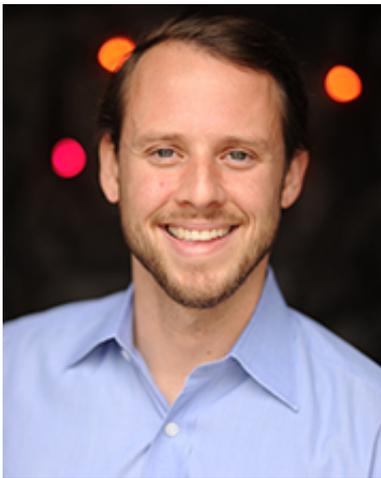


Described by colleagues as "a real dynamo," Tate leads a team that produces from 75 to 100 domestic and international meetings and events annually. "We are working on building a robust virtual/hybrid meeting and event platform to supplement our tradition meeting and event services," she explains. Her team also manages our corporate travel program. Not only that, "I also have separate responsibilities and staff that I manage who perform finance-related work; they perform finance and accounting project management and the administration of our company contracts management tool and program."

Tate sees her business relationships as a powerful tool in her arsenal. "Developing a strong network and utilizing it continually has helped me add value in my role and become better at what I do," she says. "There are so many incredibly talented and inspiring professionals in this industry, I'm grateful to have been able to work with and learn from them."

### THE RIGHT LIGHT

**Lonnie Thompson, 36, designer/account manager, [Images by Lighting](#), Los Angeles**



Part of what makes Thompson a lighting pro: "I've always liked production," he says. "I come from a very technical family." He takes that technical talent to artistic heights, designing and installing lighting for everything from small affairs to a seven-day installation for a 3,000-guest Super Bowl party earlier this year. He has shared his talents with the world; he recently returned from a speaking engagement for the wedding community in Beijing.

Thompson enjoys his company's role in creating stunning events. "We pay special attention to detail and the needs of our clients," he explains. "We are a part of the entire design process. We don't just show up on-site and build. We put a lot of time and effort into pre-production logistics, so we can make sure we are efficient and putting out a great product on-site."

## TESTING LIMITS

**Josh Volney, 31, account manager, [George P. Johnson](#), Austin, Texas**



GPJ is a powerhouse of talent, but Volney stands out, a colleague says: "Josh brings a breadth of experience in creating impactful activations that connect brands to their audience—whether that is employees, businesses or consumers—in both a physical and digital environment."

He started his career at a small software company "doing everything from media planning to copywriting to event planning," he recalls. From there, "I was lucky enough to transition to George P. Johnson, which allowed me to continue to expand my knowledge of many experience and audience types, as well as strengthen my strategic thinking and management skills across multiple clients." He likes the pace and variety of the industry. "We all know that no two days are the same and each day brings its own set of challenges and opportunities. You must continue to adapt to evolving client needs, stay on track and positive during

stressful times, and proactively test the limits of what can/can't be done – all while continuing to dedicate yourself to delivering awe-inspiring experiences."

## HITTING THE ROAD

**Alisa Walsh, 29, director of business development, [EventWorks](#), Los Angeles**



Walsh brings a lot to her role at EventWorks, her colleagues say, including energy, dedication, and "the best attitude." Since joining the company earlier this year, she makes it her business to attend as many industry events as possible and travel the globe, "meeting anyone and everyone," she says, "constantly networking up a storm with my ear to the ground uncovering potential leads!"

Her introduction to events came with a summer job at a hotel on Maui. "I was in awe of the amazing special events the property held, and from there I was hooked," she says. She worked a wide range of jobs at various hotel brands, including director of event planning at a top southern California property. She is delighted with her new role. "I am consistently placed out of my comfort zone and provided opportunities to troubleshoot, creating authentic experiences for every customer,"

she says. "At EventWorks, we have the fun job of turning even the craziest of ideas into reality for our clients--how many industries can say that?"

*Do you know someone who should be on this list next year? Tell us at [info@specialevents.com](mailto:info@specialevents.com).*

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