



BUSINESS  
NORTH CAROLINA'S

# Trailblazers

BLAZERS

2019

Since co-founding his outfitters store in Franklin in 2010, Cory McColl has added two locations amid a ruthless environment for retailers, attracting both tourists and locals alike to the downtown area. In Morganton, David Bennett helps lead expanding furniture and brewery businesses and is developing a downtown hotel to boost Burke County's appeal to tourists. The two North Carolina natives are examples of the outstanding entrepreneurs and leaders in North Carolina's smaller cities who make up our annual Trailblazers.

The feature recognizes enterprising business owners and professionals under the age of 40 who operate in N.C. cities and towns that have fewer than 100,000 residents. We sought nominations from individuals and groups across the state, including local government officials, business leaders and economic development experts. This year's list covers a wide variety of occupations including bankers, chefs, lawyers, brewers and even a mortician.

While North Carolina's overall economy is considered among the nation's most robust, it's also among the most dispersed with about 42% of its 10 million residents living in 80 counties that are defined as rural. The realities of rural North Carolina are stark: Nearly half of the state's 100 counties have fewer residents now than in 2010, the number of small-business establishments in rural counties declined by 7% from 2005-15 and small-business lending dipped 17% from 2010-15, according to the N.C. Rural Center.

Fortunately, these young Trailblazers are playing key roles in keeping their small communities vibrant and alive. Despite the odds, they continue to bring a new shine to their towns, from the mountains to the coast.



## Cameron Annas, 28

Granite Insurance, Granite Falls

**D**uring his six years at Granite Insurance, Annas helped turn his employer into a specialist in insuring adventure sports, including zip lines, ropes courses and amusement parks. Annas created a team within the firm after learning there was an insurance crisis in which adventure-sports operators couldn't get coverage at affordable rates. In the five years since its inception, the program grew to 200 clients across 46 states. The team has grown by 50% over the last three years. The Appalachian State University grad was appointed to the boards for the N.C. Aerial Adventure Association and the Association for Challenge Course Technology. He also created an event at his alma mater that helps recruit students for Granite's annual 30-person summer internship program. He received his company's "Thoroughbred Award" for being a top performer through the Keystone independent insurance agency network. It's the third time he's won the award.



## David Beaver, 36

Uwharrie Bank, Albemarle

**I**t would be hard to find someone more committed to their hometown than the Stanly County native, who is a graduate of Albemarle High School and nearby Pfeiffer University. He's worked at the 195-employee community bank since 2005 and will move from chief financial officer to president in January. "I fell in love with the mission of our bank," he says. He also fell in love with his high school sweetheart, Emily, and they have two children, ages 8 and 12. While Uwharrie focuses on small-business lending in Anson, Cabarrus, Mecklenburg and Stanly counties, it also has national lending expertise in private airplanes, hotels and other niches. Since CEO Roger Dick started the formerly named Bank of Stanly in 1993, the company's shares have outperformed the S&P 500 Index, Beaver says. Assets now top \$830 million. Beyond banking, the East Carolina MBA grad has helped lead his church, the local Habitat for Humanity and United Way chapters, and Pfeiffer's alumni group. He's also chair of the N.C. Young Bankers Association. When asked about his favorite leisure pursuit, the aptly named Beaver responded "woodworking" — of course.



## David Bennett, 38

EJ Victor Furniture/ Fonta Flora Brewery, Morganton

**B**ennett wears a multitude of hats. He serves as both chief financial officer and chief operating officer of E.J. Victor Furniture, a high-end furniture company. The business has focused on making its tables, sofas and chairs domestically, prompting the need to work "with local governmental and educational institutions in hopes of rebuilding a tradition of craft that has been all but lost," he says. The Morganton native and Wake Forest University MBA also co-founded his hometown's Fonta Flora Brewery in 2013; it recently expanded production to Nebo in McDowell County and is set to open a tasting room in Charlotte later this year. He has helped develop an 85-room Fairfield by Marriott hotel in downtown Morganton that is expected to open later this year. Bennett and his wife, Colleen, started their first venture, Caducus Folium Design Centers, in Costa Rica with "a \$6,000 cashier's check and \$100,000 in debt." The business, which opened in 2006, provides furniture and design services to residential and corporate clients. The risk has paid off, with locations in Nicaragua, Honduras, Ecuador, Colombia and Morganton.

# Katie BUTTON

By Taylor Wanbaugh

## KATIE BUTTON, 36 KATIE BUTTON RESTAURANTS, ASHEVILLE

The headquarters of Katie Button Restaurants is perched on the seventh floor of a tower at the heart of Pack Square, overlooking most of downtown Asheville and Katie Button's two restaurants: Cúrate Tapas Bar and Button & Co. Bagels. In the lobby, a massive frame displays clippings detailing some of Button's biggest accomplishments: a semi-finalist for the James Beard Rising Star Chef award and for Best Chefs in America, and one of *Food & Wine* magazine's Best New Chefs of 2015. There's a symbolic feeling about her business office being elevated, although the chef herself remains grounded. After all, her life almost took a completely different course.

In her mid-20s, the Conway, S.C., native was set to start a Ph.D. program in Washington, D.C., after earning a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering from Cornell University and a master's in biomedical engineering in Paris. But something didn't feel quite right.

"When I was first thinking about what I wanted to study in school, there's all these people saying what types of degrees you should get in order to get a job, be successful," Button says. "To tell you the truth, I was kind of just pushing myself through all these things. I wasn't super passionate about what I was studying."

She was cooking as a hobby, a skill she picked up from her mom, who had a home-based catering business. "I had thought, 'Oh, this is just what life is: You work, and you study something hard, and you grind through it, and you have your hobby that gets you through the grind.'"

Button quit the Ph.D. program and entered the culinary world. But nothing came easy. Without restaurant experience, no one would hire her. "Most people kind of laughed at my resume," Button chuckles. "It was like, you know, 'Ph.D. dropout.' I think I even had my GRE scores on there because I had no professional experience at a restaurant."

Her break came with a server job at a José Andrés restaurant in Washington, D.C. Andrés is a Spanish-American chef who helped popularize Spanish-style small plates, or tapas, in the U.S. "Once I got my foot in the door, it just rolled from there."

She went on to work under world-renowned chefs in New

York, Los Angeles and Spain, where she lived for nearly two years. With backing from her family and her husband, Félix Meana, an expert in restaurant management and consulting, Button moved to Asheville and opened Cúrate, a Spanish tapas restaurant, on downtown's Biltmore Avenue in 2011. She was then 28. It has since been named one of the 40 Most Important Restaurants in the Past 40 Years by *Food & Wine* magazine and as one of America's 100 Best Wine Restaurants by *Wine Enthusiast* magazine. *Food & Wine* noted that Button helped "nudge along the country's love affair with the once-sleepy town in the Blue Ridge Mountains, which continues to attract the country's top culinary talent (and the most discerning eaters)."

In 2016, Button published her first cookbook, *Cúrate: Authentic Spanish Food from an American Kitchen*, which includes recipes for classic Spanish dishes. Last fall, Button opened Button & Co. Bagels on nearby Lexington Avenue. Both restaurants boast locally grown ingredients and utilize art and pottery from Asheville artisans. Since 2011, Katie Button Restaurants' revenue has nearly tripled, and the company now employs 130.

"There's something about creating something and then serving it to somebody and seeing their immediate gratification or enjoyment and being a part of that," she says. "Food brings people together."

Button's restaurants, along with many peers, regularly provide family-style meals for hungry locals at the Haywood Street Congregation's Downtown Welcome Table. The program serves homeless and impoverished people. "I love their approach toward meals," Button says. "They offer roundtables of family-style plating and real china. You come in, you sit down, and you talk and share with people. It's not an assembly line cafeteria."

Button's latest community food venture is overseeing downtown Asheville's first annual Chow Chow festival on Sept. 12-15, which will bring together artisans and chefs in a showcase of live music, a makers market, and lots of food and beer.

"Why I ended up living [in Asheville] is because it's this amazing community of makers: farmers, beekeepers, distillers, brewers, mixologists, chefs, potters, woodworkers, glassblowers," she says. "We wanted a festival that gave them a platform to share what they do and their story so we could ensure that the growth continues in that same independent, unique craftsman style."

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# Adam & Nichole & Zane HOLROYD VOGEL

By Harrison Miller

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## ZANE VOGEL, ADAM & NICHOLE HOLROYD, ALL 32 SPIRITUS SYSTEMS, ABERDEEN

America's strategy for war has changed. Before 9/11, volunteers would serve as soldiers, the U.S. would supplement its forces with a draft and soldiers would deploy for a year before their service was up. But America's wars in the Middle East have spanned nearly two decades. The forces are composed entirely of volunteers, now dubbed professional soldiers, who may spend years overseas deployed on multiple tours. While America's standard-issue military gear ranks among the best in the world, it hasn't been updated to adapt to the longer deployments in combat zones, where equipment tends to deteriorate or malfunction.

Aberdeen's Spiritus Systems, founded by lifelong friends Zane Vogel and Adam and Nichole Holroyd, is combating those issues by creating improved nylon tactical gear for law enforcement and military personnel. The three grew up in Rapid City, S.D., then reunited in North Carolina, where Vogel was stationed with the 82nd Airborne Division and the Holroyds had relocated for a job opportunity for Nichole at the local hospital.

Vogel and Adam Holroyd came up with the idea for Spiritus Systems while both were on tour in Afghanistan in 2014. Dissatisfied with their gear, they often modified equipment to fit their personal needs. After leaving the military two years later, Adam started creating gear in his attic at his home in Aberdeen, using an old sewing machine he bought on Craigslist.

"The parts creation, that's just all based on experience," Adam says. "Those things we knew we had trouble with or things that we modified ourselves, we just started translating that into the products."

Using American-made components in their products to comply with a federal law requiring the military to use domestic products, the trio scored with their flagship product, a tactical vest called the Micro Fight Chest Rig. "We just wanted to address one problem that we had, and it turns out that was a problem that a lot of people were facing," Vogel says. "We'd

build them from hand and we'd get them up for sale on the website and sell out immediately." Now their website features more than 70 different products and they sell thousands of units annually.

In 2017, Spiritus leased its first 3,000-square-foot manufacturing site in Aberdeen. The next year, the company tripled its production space and hired 19 by the year's end. This year, the company is on track to double last year's sales and employ 40 people.

A majority of the growth has come from direct sales to soldiers, though the company hopes to move into government contracting. "If it's good enough for that soldier to spend his E1 payment on, they're going to be thrilled when they get it issued," Vogel says. "If we market it toward the person we design it for... that's the product we bring in front of the purchasing department."

But Vogel and the Holroyds see themselves less as a tactical equipment producer and more as a manufacturing company. "We learned very quickly that everyone in the world has good ideas," Nichole says, "but the people who actually make it happen are the manufacturers — the companies that embrace manufacturing."

Spiritus is incorporating new technology in its facility, providing comfortable working conditions, automating repetitive tasks and offering competitive benefits and wages.

The goal is to "change the narrative to the younger generation to say, 'This is not a sweatshop. It's not dangerous conditions,'" Vogel says. The company's approach "allows the workers to take pride in what they do."

By keeping close relationships with equipment suppliers, the trio provide feedback on new technology.

Spiritus plans to expand its space by 30% this fall, which will increase the company's production capacity as it expands into other markets, Nichole says.

But the company's future may include product lines for completely different markets. "With our sewing-manufacturing base, we're going to start making consumer products that don't have anything to do with the military," Nichole says.

"The future is very bright and very broad," Vogel says.



## Graham Corriher, 34

City of Salisbury, Salisbury

The Corriher family has lived in Rowan County since the late 1700s, so it isn't surprising that the UNC Chapel Hill-trained lawyer loves his community. "I like where I am from," Corriher says. "It's filled with interesting people. I can walk to work, and I like the work I do. I can drive 15 minutes and be on my family's farm. There isn't much traffic on that drive. I hate traffic. It's affordable here. People can spell and pronounce my name. I could go on about the things I like." After earning degrees at N.C. State University and UNC, Corriher taught social studies and coached basketball at North Rowan High School for two years before heading to law school. He worked at Raleigh and Salisbury law firms for five years, then succeeded Rivers Lawther as Salisbury's city attorney in July 2018. Lawther had been a contract lawyer, while Corriher is an in-house counsel. He's been active at the Rowan Museum and Rowan Rotary and once acted in a community theater production.



## Jason Cox, 39

Press Coffee+Crepes/ Fitzgerald & Faulkner/ Aedos Group, Graham

For downtowns to thrive, Cox says, "you have to turn over buildings and bring in interesting people." He's doing that in Alamance County. He and partner Brett Devries opened Press Coffee+Crepes in 2017, then added the Fitzgerald & Faulkner cocktail bar, helping change Graham's image from being "lost in the '60s," Cox says. His Aedos Group has since acquired buildings totaling 32,000 square feet and leased the space for offices, a yoga studio and other uses. It's a switch from his previous career as a manager and broker of hedge fund-owned distressed properties, lucrative work that also left its scars: The N.C. Real Estate Commission took away his license for 11 months in 2014 for "improper dealing" of a property sale. Cox fought the matter for six years and says it was an expensive lesson, adding that the banks involved in the dispute still do business with him. While lacking a college degree, the Greene County native serves on an advisory board for entrepreneurship at Elon University. "Alamance County has long had a fear of anything new," he says. "But we have the belief that Graham can be very cool."



## Zackary Cranford, 28

Foothills Distillery/Standard Oyster Co./The Charolais Steak House, Hickory

After graduating from N.C. State's Poole College of Management, Cranford founded Foothills Distillery in 2014. The distillery, which uses grain grown less than 7 miles from its campus, is known for producing the first legal bourbon whiskey made in North Carolina, Seventeen Twelve. Cranford, who grew up in Burke County's Icard, then opened Standard Oyster Co. in 2016, relying mainly on N.C. fishermen and seafood farmers to fill much of its menu. He is working with his family to revitalize and reopen Hickory's oldest steakhouse, The Charolais Steak House, by the end of the year. "It's a surreal feeling to see customers enjoy their experience at Standard and to watch bar professionals all over North Carolina craft cocktails with my Seventeen Twelve Bourbon," Cranford says. "I'm thankful and grateful for our customers that allow me to do that." Foothills Distillery liquor is sold in ABC stores in North Carolina, Michigan and Washington, D.C.



## Andrew Crone, 31

Chaddock Furniture Workroom, Morganton

Under Crone's leadership as president and CEO, Chaddock Furniture Workroom has experienced consistent growth. It opened a 15,000-square-foot showroom at the High Point Market in fall 2018 and launched a company rebrand that included a new, user-friendly website. The artisan-crafted furniture company has provided workroom tours to hundreds of local middle school and high school students, showing them career opportunities. The UNC Chapel Hill grad also led an internal professional development team that sent six employees to take upholstery and sewing classes at Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute over the last two years. The staffers' tuition was reimbursed, and they now work in the company's upholstery department. "There are many reasons, and honestly people, that set Chaddock apart from other furniture manufacturers," the Hickory native says. "However, I think our ability to solve problems through personalization and customization is absolutely our market differentiation."



## Paige Dowling, 32

Town of Sylva, Sylva

Dowling is credited as the state's youngest female town manager after being appointed to the position at age 25. She's one of North Carolina's two town managers who also serve as Main Street Economic Development directors. Sylva's Main Street program aims to revitalize downtown by promoting local businesses and preserving historic properties. Under her leadership, the program received national accreditation from Main Street America, and Sylva won the 2018 N.C. American Planning Association Great Places Award in the great downtown category. During her time as town manager, Dowling has implemented a pay and classification plan that reduced city employee turnover by almost 25%; initiated a grant for electric vehicle-charging stations downtown; overseen completion of a new police building; and helped get downtown Sylva added to the National Register of Historic Places. She has a bachelor's degree from N.C. State University and a master's in public administration from Western Carolina University.



## Bryan Hunter, 36

Community of Hope Funeral Service, Hobbsville

A graduate of Fayetteville Technical Community College, which boasts North Carolina's only mortician training program, Hunter worked in the industry for nearly 20 years before he and his wife, Mattea, started their business in Hobbsville. The unincorporated town of about 1,100 people is 30 miles west of Elizabeth City and is in Gates County, which has a population of about 11,500 and three mortuaries. Mattea adds lots of business experience, having worked as a customer-service manager at American Express Corp. and Nordstrom Inc. While Hunter is also licensed in Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C., he says he always wanted to return to serve families in the community where he was raised. An active member of the Gates County Chamber of Commerce and a minister, Hunter and Mattea have two children, Zayah, 6, and Zachary, 4.



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# Kristen BRABBLE

By David Mildenberg

## KRISTEN BRABBLE, 28 FIRST CAROLINA BANK, ROCKY MOUNT

Like many young professionals, Rocky Mount banker Kristen Brabble wasn't excited when members of the town's Rotary Club invited her to join. Her vision was "a bunch of old fogies walking in with canes to listen to boring speeches." She joined anyway, quickly learned her image was inaccurate, and started planning a distinctive community event sponsored by the service group. In its fourth year, Tackle the Tar 5K race attracted 850 runners and walkers in May to compete through a muddy obstacle course that leaves participants tired, filthy and proud. This year's benefit raised \$114,000, with proceeds after expenses split for scholarships at Nash and Edgecombe community colleges and N.C. Wesleyan University.

Brabble has shown similar energy at First Carolina Bank, the Rocky Mount-based institution that had more local deposits than its rivals as of June 2018. While noting that every bank offers important services, she doesn't mince words. "If you want to call a bank where a local person answers the phone, call us. If you don't care and like to be treated like crap, go to the big banks."

That feistiness has served Brabble as she's risen quickly at the bank. While earning an associate degree at Pitt Community College and an online bachelor's degree from Arizona State University, Brabble worked full time for local banks. In 2012, while working at First Carolina Bank in Greenville, she was itching for a new challenge, probably outside the industry.

But veteran N.C. banker Ron Day urged Brabble, then 21, to sit tight while he and an investor group acquired First Carolina from an out-of-state company that was failing because of soured recession-era loans. Day's group has since built a \$556 million institution with branches in Rocky Mount, Raleigh and Reidsville and lending offices in Wilmington and Virginia Beach, Va.

Brabble, who moved to Rocky Mount at Day's invitation, has

been instrumental in that growth. Starting as an intern working on branding the bank, Brabble's role has steadily increased. In August, she was named chief operating officer with responsibilities in human resources, shareholder relations, marketing, information technology and many other functions at the 44-employee bank. CEO Day, a former chief administrative officer at RBC Bank, calls her "uniquely qualified to lead us to new heights at a very opportune time in community banking in the Southeast."

A native of Ahoskie, Brabble says she has a renewed optimism in Rocky Mount, aided by the move of more than 400 N.C. Division of Motor Vehicles jobs from Raleigh and the growth of the Rocky Mount Mills development that includes offices, restaurants and a brewery incubator. "I had a meeting there at 5 p.m. last week, and there were young folks everywhere. You didn't see that three or four years ago," she says. "We have so many more options now, so you don't need to drive to Raleigh all the time."

One of Brabble's tasks at First Carolina involves building its digital presence. "I told Ron we needed to get active on social media and he said, 'Isn't that for high school girls?' It took some selling, but they eventually got it." Her role now includes boosting revenue through the bank's digital network.

The few remaining N.C. community banks can thrive by living up to their name, Brabble says. "We are extremely involved in the community. We don't just show up for meetings. You've got to get more involved." Joining the Rocky Mount Chamber of Commerce was pivotal in her success, she adds.

Brabble's biggest personal project, Tackle the Tar, was inspired by several trips with her father to races at a muddy obstacle course near Charlotte. Both competitive runners and the less physically fit take part in the Warrior Dash event. "Everyone is intimidated at first, and I sure was. But there was a 360-pound man who made it through the course, so I said, 'I'm doing this.'"

Taking that aggressive approach throughout her life is paying big dividends for Brabble — and Rocky Mount.

# Gina SLOAN

By Alyssa Pressler

## GINA SLOAN, 36 MICROBAN, HUNTERSVILLE

**A** day in the life of Gina Sloan involves a lot of stinky behavior. The Wake Forest University Ph.D. is the director of innovations at Microban International Inc., a Huntersville-based research organization specializing in odor-control science and creating products that kill bacteria. Sometimes, her expertise requires her and her colleagues to sign up to “be smelly” for a day while the others, well, sniff them.

It’s all to further the odor-control research studied by Sloan’s team at Microban, which was formed in 1984. The odor control arm of Microban focuses specifically on textiles. When you sweat, Sloan explains, you don’t actually smell until the perspiration interacts with bacteria on your skin and clothes. Athletic apparel companies are particularly interested in controlling these odors.

Sloan’s contributions in textile-odor control earned her a research service award from the American Association of Textile Chemists and Colorists in May. The group sets standards for testing fibers and fabrics for odor control, color fastness and other metrics.

“I was not expecting to be recognized in any way,” says Sloan, who earned a bachelor’s degree in biology at Western Carolina University. “It’s all because of smelling armpits and stinky socks.”

Sloan’s team also works on innovative solutions for antimicrobials, a bacterium that can cause disease or fermentation, and is particularly dangerous in food and health care settings. In June, the innovation team’s first antimicrobial product went to market through Woodcliff Lake, N.J.-based PDI Healthcare Inc., which makes disinfectant wipes. Sloan started working on Sani-24 Germicidal Spray in 2012 to reduce excessive harmful bacteria on surfaces.

“It makes a big difference in food service and health care,” Sloan says. “If you’re in a hospital room and someone had MRSA [a skin infection] in the room before you, you are two times more likely to contract MRSA. The goal with this is to completely eliminate it, and we’re continually running clinicals to be sure it’s true.”

The spray goes deeper than existing brands such as Lysol Disinfectant Spray, which clean surfaces of bacteria until the area is touched again. According to Sloan, Sani-24 should keep surfaces free of bacteria even after they are retouched.

Sani-24 led to the creation of the innovation department at Microban, which is owned by Memphis, Tenn.-based Barr Brands International Inc. Sloan started with the company as a senior scientist about eight years ago, following a postdoctoral fellowship at Wake Forest. After she was promoted to run the microbiology lab, her bosses noticed she was developing a lot of new products and research. Executives then encouraged her to create a position as director of innovation. She’s since built her team to include four others.

Four years later, Sloan says she’s starting to see the fruits of their research. “We’ve created a couple of groundbreaking technologies that are set to launch this year and next year,” she says. “It’s nice to see that four-year march lead to the commercialization of products.”

Sloan can’t be specific about the pending innovation, but she says it is centered on making food service and health care safer. Much of the work involves coordinating testing and compliance with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Environmental Protection Agency and Patent and Trademark Office.

Sloan’s passion for science extends beyond her day job. When her two children, ages 7 and 9, started attending the Iredell-Statesville School District, she wanted to get involved. Speaking with teachers, she learned that many limit science studies because of a pressure to focus on the math and reading curriculum — the areas of the most significant statewide testing.

Sloan started working with kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers to create science experiments that kids can perform in school or at home. Through her guidance, young students have learned about sound waves, DNA extraction and other topics. Most recently, she’s been visiting Central Elementary School in Statesville to share her knowledge.

“[Kids] should know that science is everywhere,” Sloan says. “They should understand at an early age that science isn’t this weird, daunting thing. It’s very attainable, and we see it every day, so we shouldn’t be afraid to talk about it and play with it.”





## Cory McCall, 37

Outdoor 76, Franklin

A native of Macon County, McCall sold real estate in the region for five years after graduating from Western Carolina University in 2004. He concluded expanding interest in outdoor recreation wasn't being well-served by local merchants. So he and Rob Gasborro, a former civil engineer, started an outdoor equipment and apparel store. It was at 76 E. Main St. in downtown Franklin in 2010 and served hikers, paddlers, climbers, campers and anglers. They've moved to a bigger site that includes a taproom and added stores in Cherokee and Clayton, Ga. Outdoor 76 is perhaps best known for helping hikers from the nearby Appalachian Trail find more comfortable footwear. Creating a niche in retailing is no snap, but Outdoor 76 is working, McCall says. "We constantly reinforce to our employees the importance of customer service and the knowledge we are able to share." That includes McCall, a collegiate cross-country and track athlete who now spends more time on his mountain bike, looking for waterfalls and trails that most visitors pass by.



## Thomas Rhodes, 32

John Hackney Agency, Rocky Mount

You could describe the UNC Chapel Hill graduate as an overachiever: The risk management specialist and Rocky Mount native holds eight professional designations related to the insurance industry and has licenses in property and casualty, personal lines, life, health, surplus lines, broker, and Medicare supplement. He also serves as chairman of iLEAD — formerly known as Young Agents Committee — is on the board of directors for the Independent Insurance Agents of N.C., and was elected president of the eastern North Carolina chapter of the Society of Chartered Property and Casualty Underwriters last year. In addition to his insurance work, Rhodes is vice chair of the Nash Health Care Foundation and a member of the Rocky Mount Chamber of Commerce, where he connects entrepreneurs to resources to help grow their businesses. The self-proclaimed "foodie" and soon-to-be father — he and his wife are expecting a baby girl in October — loves spending time outdoors kayaking, running or playing sports.



## Carol Nguyen Steen, 37

Biltmore Farms, Asheville

As a first-generation Vietnamese-American, Carol Nguyen Steen finds strength in her parents' experience as refugees and their struggle for the American Dream. "The refugee experience is so significant to how I show up each day," she says. "It creates the utmost love for a country that has opened its doors to people who were escaping war. I owe much of my success to this country and, in many ways, have tried to honor that gift with showing up as a good citizen. I try to find ways to pay it forward on a daily basis." The N.C. State Poole College of Management master's grad oversees human resources at Biltmore Farms, an Asheville-based real estate developer. She's also active in the community outside work. The Charlotte native started a conference for the unemployed and under-employed to build job-readiness skills. Nguyen Steen is president-elect of the local Society for Human Resources Management chapter and a founding member of the WNC Diversity Engagement Coalition and has been involved with the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce, WNC Human Resources Association, Asheville Museum of Science and Young Professionals of Asheville.



## Troi Thomas, 23

Boys & Girls Club of Tar River, Nashville

As club director of the Nashville unit for the Boys & Girls Club of Tar River, Troi Thomas is motivating kids to boost their educational attainment. Thomas, who has worked at the club since he was 18, was surprised that only 40% of his 9- to 11-year-old club members knew basic geographical facts. He created the “Project Learn” program, which reinforces and enhances skills and knowledge using games, trivia and other activities to create a fun, enjoyable learning environment. All of the kids are now up to speed on their geography, while most have raised their test scores by at least one letter grade. Thomas is most proud of the work he does helping inspire students to reach their full potential as productive and caring adults. A graduate of Nash Central High School, Thomas attended UNC Charlotte before returning home to continue working with the club. To expand his skill set, he’s pursuing an online degree in interior design from Penn Foster University.



## Jessica Throneburg, 35

Little Details Boutique, Garner

Throneburg launched a monogramming business in 2012, creating custom personalized products at her dining room table. Since opening a storefront in Garner in 2017, she’s expanded the business to include boutique clothing, jewelry and gifts. She took a hiatus from Little Details in 2015 when her son, Ford, had to spend 160 days at UNC Hospitals’ neonatal intensive care unit. Worried she would have to permanently close the business, Throneburg’s customers and community rallied around her family. “It’s because of their support that we not only survived that year, but thrived,” she says. The N.C. State grad now does the same for others through her #PayingItFord campaign, hosting events and raising funds for the Ronald McDonald House of Chapel Hill. Throneburg, who went to high school in Gaston County, also volunteers with the Junior League of Raleigh and has gone on international mission trips to Belize and Uganda, focusing on empowering women in impoverished circumstances.



## Matthew Vincent, 36

VPC Builders, Banner Elk

The Appalachian State University grad and Boone native is owner of a High Country construction business that builds both homes and commercial properties. He recently helped oversee construction of Rocky Knob Park, a mountain biking park operated by Watauga County. He’s also worked on adding new hiking trails on nearby Holloway Mountain, which is a favorite of mountain climbers. Vincent helps build the region’s economy as a board chairman for the Watauga County Tourism Development Authority. Earlier this year, VPC Builders was named Business of the Year by the Blowing Rock Chamber of Commerce. Vincent requires his staff to volunteer in the community for at least 16 hours annually. When he’s not working, Vincent enjoys hiking with his wife, son and German shepherd, Thor.



## Rachel Withrow, 29

Crooked Door Coffee House/Old Dutch Management, Marion

When the owners of Crooked Door Coffee House told then 22-year-old Withrow that they were planning on retiring and closing the only coffee shop in Marion, she knew she couldn’t let that happen. “The Crooked Door had been a staple in my life growing up: the hangout for all ages for so long, the only place left in town for people to come and spend time with each other,” she says. So she bought it, and over the last six years, it has become a thriving business and a social hub for McDowell County, hosting events such as the annual Give Back Drive, block parties, open mic nights, community classes and more. Withrow also created Old Dutch Management Co., which manages rental homes and storage rental buildings in multiple rural N.C. counties. The Marion native earned an associate degree from McDowell Technical Community College and has participated in the N.C. Rural Center’s Rural Economic Development Institute and Marion’s Growing Entrepreneur Program.

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# Trail BLAZERS

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# Mike **WOLIANSKY** & Sadrah **SCHADEL**

By Harrison Miller

**MIKE WOLIANSKY, 39**  
**SADRAH SCHADEL, 37**  
**NO EVIL FOODS, WEAVERVILLE**

**M**ike Woliansky and Sadrah Schadel started No Evil Foods based on their passions for healthy eating, environmental sustainability and animal welfare. What began as a simple plan of selling plant-based protein alternatives at local farmers markets quickly transformed into a phenomenon, with their products sold in more than 3,000 stores across the nation and thriving in a multibillion-dollar plant-protein industry.

“We started No Evil Foods very innocently,” Woliansky says. The duo formed their alternative meat company in Weaverville, roughly 10 miles north of Asheville, in 2014, after moving to the area from upstate New York.

The two weren’t happy with the organic options available at different supermarkets, which sparked the idea to do it themselves. While Schadel was raised a vegetarian and worked in restaurant management for top dining locations in Philadelphia and New York, their culinary experience as chefs was limited. Previously, the two were heavily involved in the punk-rock scene; Woliansky played in a number of different rock bands. The music and rockstar attitude was a major inspiration and influence on the company, and it’s still apparent in the brand today.

The husband-wife pairing started out at local farmers markets, selling organic, plant-based dishes aimed at providing the same taste and experience as the meats they emulate. The couple was surprised at the strong demand from a diverse range of customers, laying the seeds for No Evil Foods.

Woliansky and Schadel expanded their business at Blue Ridge Food Ventures, an Asheville-based business incubator, sharing roughly 1,000 square feet of kitchen space with other culinary startups. Consumer response was robust: No Evil Foods’ revenue has more than doubled annually since 2014, including a 250% gain last year.

The number of stores carrying company products has grown from fewer than 200 in January to about 3,000 now, including Walmart Inc., Whole Foods Market Inc. and Ingles Markets Inc. Woliansky expects that number to double by the end of the year. A big part of that is due to No Evil Foods’ May announcement that its products will be available at 1,000 Kroger Co. locations across the U.S.

The company now has about 40 employees, doubling its number of production and administrative positions since last December. It recently purchased a 16,000-square-foot building with 4,000 square feet of production space in Weaverville, at the former site of DVD-maker Arvato Digital Services. It quadrupled the company’s production capacity.

Woliansky credits the growth to customers’ demand for healthier, flavor-filled food options with high levels of protein and clean ingredients from sustainable sources.

“I want people to think about the food that they eat in the same way that they think about a solar panel when it comes to sustainability,” Woliansky says. “They see a solar panel and they’re like, ‘that’s more sustainable. That’s more renewable.’ Food is like that too.”

Producing one calorie of animal protein requires 11 times as much fossil fuel as producing a calorie of plant protein, with half of global greenhouse gas emissions due to livestock and their byproducts. “We’re offering this great combination of simple ingredients and that really great meat experience. We’re giving consumers something different,” Woliansky says.

No Evil Foods hit the market at the right time, with plant-based protein becoming a national craze and a jewel of Wall Street. Analysts at JPMorgan Chase & Co. predict the plant meat alternatives industry will reach \$100 billion value over the next 15 years. In May, El Segundo, Calif.-based Beyond Meat Inc. went public for \$25 per share; it was trading around \$162 in mid-August with a market value of \$9.9 billion. Unlike No Evil Foods, which hasn’t raised outside capital, Beyond Meat received \$112 million in backing since 2013, according to the CrunchBase website.

Schadel and Woliansky didn’t expect this much excitement around No Evil Foods. “We had an idea that came out of our own kitchen. We were excited about what we were making, we enjoyed it,” he says. “Friends and family enjoyed it. We wanted to create something that had our voice in it, that was ours. Something we could be passionate about for what it was, in the sense of what the products were, what the mission behind it was.”

Spreading the mission of sustainability and healthier lifestyles is their main focus. “We felt like the more people we reach that are trying our products, the more we’re being successful at our mission.” By advocating for a cleaner environment and improved public health, “as we grow, we have a platform as a company to say something around those issues.”