

BUSINESS
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Trail BLAZERS

2020

**BY TAYLOR WANBAUGH
ALYSSA PRESSLER
MEGAN BIRD
DAVID MILDENBERG**

The joys of small-town living came into greater focus over the last six months as the pandemic induced fear of close contact associated with living in denser urban cities. For many of this year's Trailblazers, though, life in smaller communities was an easy sell long before COVID-19. Emily McCurry spent a year in Boston after graduating from UNC Asheville before deciding to return to her roots in Haywood County, where the financial adviser says strangers still smile at each other.

This annual feature recognizes thriving business owners and professionals under the age of 40 who work in N.C. cities and towns that have fewer than 100,000 residents. We received nominations for talented people based from Jacksonville near the coast to Waynesville in the mountains. This year's list spanned a wide variety of occupations, including a coffee roaster, lawyer, hotel manager and engineer.

Demographers say it's too early to know if the pandemic will reverse the long-term trend in which most population growth in North Carolina occurs around the Charlotte and Raleigh-Durham metro areas. State leaders, the N.C. Rural Center and others are emphasizing investments in rural broadband service that is required for businesses to operate effectively in an increasingly digital economy.

These Trailblazers are having a significant impact in sustaining their communities. We appreciate their participation and those who made nominations.





Zach **BARRICKLOW**, 38

Wilkes Community College, Wilkesboro

Zach Barricklow has a passion for community building that shines through his career. A graduate of Hope College in Holland, Mich., he spent nearly five years with the Peace Corps in Panama before co-founding Raleigh-based Versado Training, which provides training software. While there, he started working with Wilkes Community College on developing a five-year strategic plan, which led to a job offer as vice president of strategy. His mission is to maximize the impact the college has on upward mobility in Wilkes, Ashe and Alleghany counties. In the community, he's helping create teams to save financially stressed education programs in the area, while serving as a board member of the Alleghany County Community Foundation and as a committee member of Alleghany County Economic Development Corp. He's also pursuing a doctoral degree in organizational change from the University of Southern California. He and his wife, Lauren, have three children, ages 10, 8 and 5.



Laura **BARRY**, 34

Peak Basketball, Boone

Laura Barry was 7 when she discovered her love for basketball. Dribbling across the court at summer camp, she already had an innate athletic talent, fueled by her mom's job as Cary's parks and recreation director. She still remembers the thrill of running across the squeaky court, shooting hoops and working as part of a team.

"Just immediately, I loved it," Barry says. "I was good at it, it was fun, and from there, it was something I continued getting better at. I liked working at it. It became something that I was pretty serious about by the time I got to high school."

Barry's love for the game inspired both her own basketball career and those of young athletes, whom she mentors as head basketball coach for the men's and women's teams at Watauga High School in Boone and as director of Peak Basketball.

Her path to coaching and Peak Basketball has taken her across the state. The Cary High School grad played as a walk-on for UNC Wilmington's basketball team before transferring to UNC Chapel Hill her sophomore year, where she majored in exercise and sports science and communications studies. An NCAA rule required her as a transfer to sit out for a year before joining the UNC team her junior year. The Tar Heels won ACC championships during her two years on the team and played in the Final Four in 2007.

"That was life changing for me," Barry says. "Being surrounded by a program like that really made me want to be a coach and want to give kids opportunities both in high school and beyond."

She served as an assistant coach at Allegheny College in Pennsylvania, a graduate assistant at St. John's University in New York, and as an assistant coach at East Tennessee State University. At St. John's, Barry earned an MBA in executive management, while helping coach the team to beat undefeated University of Connecticut in the regular season and earn the program's first NCAA Sweet Sixteen spot.

In 2016, Barry moved to Boone to become Watauga High's head women's basketball coach and teach marketing, then she added the men's team job in 2019. Teaching in a classroom wasn't her true passion, so she founded Peak Basketball in 2018. Peak, which stands for Process, Effort, Accountability, and "Keep at it," offers individual and group training, teams, and camps to young athletes from elementary to high school.

Boone-area players didn't have the same opportunities as Barry enjoyed in Cary, "and I think they need it," she says. "I learned a lot about myself and was able to develop as a person and an athlete. So I created a place in the image of that, where kids could grow their game and come because they love basketball but realize that they could learn more through basketball than they realized."

Though COVID-19 restrictions have put a damper on this year's in-person programs, so Peak has conducted remote training sessions.

"It worked out really well," Barry says. "Kids were able to set up in their driveways and log on and do some work with me. And they really enjoyed the social aspect of it. So maybe I had a group of five seventh- and eighth-grade boys on Zoom. And we talked about some personal development for 10 minutes, and then they did a 20-minute workout. ... It was at a time where I think the kids really needed to see some friends."

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“Being surrounded by a program like that really made me want to be a coach and want to give kids opportunities both in high school and beyond.”

Gregory BRADY, 31

Anchor Coffee, North Wilkesboro

Like many small businesses, Gregory Brady's enterprise started in an unusual spot: his kitchen. Brady and his business partner, Nate Griffin, began roasting coffee in 2014 in old-school popcorn pots and selling the beans to their friends. They opened their first site in downtown North Wilkesboro when both were 26 and are planning another site in Winston-Salem once the economy recovers.

Griffin focuses on the business and finance aspects, while Brady concentrates on his passion for coffee. Brady can remember the precise moment he realized he loved a cup of joe: He was at a small cafe drinking an Ethiopian blend roasted by Durham's Counter Culture Coffee.

"Everything before that with coffee was just stuff my dad would drink and was from a can or instant," Brady says. "You have these beautiful flavor notes being expressed out of this thing that you've only ever thought of as coffee. I started digging in on that and realized there's this whole community of farmers and importers and these really cool systems that bring coffee to the states."

Brady and Griffin had been friends for years after playing praise-band music together at their church. After leaving Brady's kitchen, they occupied a make-shift garage that had a small coffee bar before moving into their current location.

For Brady, a joy of the business is building relationships with farmers and coffee processors and ensuring everyone receives a fair wage for their work. This has become more commonplace in the coffee industry, with Starbucks disclosing how it sources its coffee. When Brady and Griffin were starting out, however, this was a relatively new idea.

Anchor Coffee has found success in its small town, drawing crowds pre-pandemic with beer offerings in addition to coffee and frequent live shows by local and regional musicians. You won't catch Griffin or Brady on stage anymore, however. Brady jokes his music days are over. Now, it's all about coffee and community.

He loves living in Wilkes County with his wife and two kids, ages 3 and 1. He's heavily involved with Unified City Church and volunteers with the Justice Proj-

ect, a church-affiliated organization that works with the local elderly and homeless populations.

With an expanding business, two young kids and other community work, Brady acknowledges he doesn't sleep much. But it's OK, he says. "That's one of the perks of having coffee around me all the time."



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Trey BRASWELL, 35

Braswell Family Farms, Nashville

The Braswells put an emphasis on the word “family,” with each generation laying a brick in the foundation of a four-generation business that is among the top producers of eggs and feed on the East Coast. It supplies 220,000 tons of feed and more than 60 million dozen eggs annually. With nearly 2 million hens, the 77-year-old company sells eggs under Eggland’s Best, Natural Choice, Nature’s Finest, Land O’Lakes and other private label brands.

Trey Braswell’s great-great-uncle, J.M. Braswell, and great-grandfather, E.G. Braswell, started the company in 1943 when they purchased Boddie Mill in Nashville, producing corn meal. E.G.’s sons, Ronald and Gene, joined the business in 1956 and grew the farm with the purchase of an old mill in Nashville from the Wayne Feeds franchise. They expanded into pullet production — growing young hens to sell to egg producers — and providing feed for chicken, pigs and cows.

“It’s grown over time, and each generation has added a little bit to that,” Trey says. “The Lord has been very kind to us. That’s kind of how I got started: a lot of blood, sweat, tears, sacrifice and God’s grace.”

Trey’s dad, Scott Braswell, joined in 1979, focusing on developing modern pullet and laying hen complexes that sped up production efficiency while maintaining a quality product. In the late ’80s, the Braswells invested in a franchise of Eggland’s Best, a Malvern, Pa.-based industry cooperative formed in 1990 that is credited with reversing a slide in U.S. egg consumption. The Braswells now run the second-largest Eggland’s Best franchise in the U.S.

Trey, an N.C. State University grad with an executive MBA from the College of William and Mary, started working for the family business at a young age, sweeping the floors of the processing plant and other manual labor around the farm. He returned to work full time in 2008 after his dad struggled with some health issues.

“It was probably before I was prepared to or wanted to, but I just feel such a strong respect and gratitude for what the people in our company and my family members before me have done to steward the business,” Trey says. “It’s been hard at times, certainly been challenging. I really had no experience, and I just kind of jumped in. ... There were different kinds of people in my life that helped give guidance and, by God’s grace, things have continued well, and the Lord has grown me as a leader.”

Trey helped expand the farm, adding pullet and hen houses and overseeing the construction of the company’s first pasture-raised organic farm, which began production in early 2018. The business has achieved various certifications for humane treatment of animals and organic production.

In 2017, Trey became president and oversaw a rebranding of the 200-employee company from Braswell Foods to its current name. “We just didn’t give consumers a good idea of who we were and what we do,” Trey says. “There’s just such



a need to tell our story. ... Braswell Family Farms provides a much better portrayal of our brands... and helps people understand you may work on the farm or at the feedmill, but you’re part of this family and this company and here’s what we stand for and what we do.”

Braswell’s Caring Team, made up of employees from each of the four company locations, helps care for the needs of company employees, families and the community. The business supports a variety of primarily Christian-based philanthropies including Samaritan’s Purse, Baptist Children’s Homes of North Carolina, Second Harvest Food Bank, and Corporate Chaplains of America. In the midst of the pandemic, Braswell Family Farms donated 70,000 dozen eggs to regional food banks.

“Because we believe this business is the Lord’s, it compels us to say our resources are not really just our resources,” Trey says. “Giving is a very important part of why we run the business.”

Trey also serves as president of the North Carolina Egg Association, as a member of the national United Egg Producers’ board of directors, and on the North Carolina board of addiction recovery nonprofit Hope Is Alive Ministries. He enjoys spending time with his wife, Wimberly, and three children in the outdoors fishing, hunting and hiking.

“I’m a rural guy,” Trey says. “I love going to Raleigh, but I like going home, too. ... I love a small town, a rural community because it is agricultural. It’s based on hard work and people know each other and pitch in and help each other.”



David CASPER, 37

Union Diversified Industries, Monroe

As executive director, David Casper oversees a nonprofit organization that provides behavioral health care and industrial jobs to adults with disabilities. A Monroe native, he leads 40 employees who provide services to about 80 individuals. The Wingate University grad joined the group in 2017 as chief operating officer and was promoted to his current post in July 2019. Since then, Union Diversified has added 10 positions, increased staff pay and benefits, remodeled its office and earned a three-year accreditation from a national group for rehabilitation facilities. He retained the group's employees during the coronavirus pandemic and increased UDI's presence on social media and in the community. Casper is also involved in the local Rotary and Boys & Girls Club organizations.



Melinda COVERT, 29

Fluor, Clayton

Many millennials set out in their careers with the hope they will make a tangible difference in the world. Melinda Covert believes she has that opportunity at Fluor, a global engineering, procurement, construction and maintenance company.

As the project manager for Fluor's advanced technologies and life sciences segment, Covert oversees massive engineering projects for the life-sciences sector, including in pharmaceuticals and biotechnology in Clayton. Essentially, "we design and build tough jobs," Covert says. "That means starting with nothing but a blank sheet of paper and designing and building facilities for companies that create life-saving drugs.

"We do really cool stuff. It's the best way I have to summarize it," Covert says. "My job is hard to explain to my parents without showing them a photo and saying, 'This used to be a blank piece of paper, and now it's something that's making a drug product for someone.'"

Covert has always had a love for math, science and engineering, earning a bachelor's degree from Northeastern University in Boston in 2013. She worked as a process engineer in Albany, N.Y., for several years on the engineering-design side but wanted to explore larger and more challenging projects.

In January 2016, she joined Irving, Texas-based Fluor, where she says the scope of projects has enabled her to expand her engineering expertise. She started as a process engineer before landing her current position. She says she loves her job but didn't really understand the potential for a career like hers existed before falling into engineering as a major by chance. Now she's trying to help introduce young girls to science and technology careers as a volunteer with the Roper Mountain Science Center in Greenville, S.C., where Fluor has a major operation.

"Looking back, I can see where I had that engineering mindset as a kid, but it wasn't fostered," Covert says. "We're introducing them to career choices and things that are maybe not so prevalent, or at least weren't when I was a kid."

When she's not working, Covert loves to travel, read and do yoga. During the week, she says she stays happily busy with her work.

"I'm really passionate about what I do," Covert says. "We change the world one day at a time. I really believe that."

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Gary CURRY, 39

Hampton Inn, New Bern

Gary Curry moved to New Bern in 2006 by chance when a good friend relocated to the Craven County city and invited him to make a similar move. Curry didn't expect a long-term stay, but instead he fell in love with the area.

"I moved here and thought, 'I'm going to live here forever and visit other places,'" he says. He worked for other local hotels before becoming general manager of the town's Hampton Inn four years ago.

He spends his time outside work traveling and bouncing to different nonprofits in the area to spread his expertise and support. His goal is to serve on every nonprofit board in the area before he retires. He's known for having created the large MERCI on Middle fundraiser event in which 750 community members gather for a five-course meal at a long table in the middle of the street. A Rotarian, he's a past chair of the local tourism authority and is on the boards for downtown development in New Bern and the Tryon Palace Foundation. He and his wife, Ashley, celebrated their 10th wedding anniversary in June and are parents of Evie, 4.



Shane **FRASER**, 32

SNA Today, Waxhaw

For businesses in Union County that need help with social media, Shane Fraser has become a go-to source. He founded his business in New York in 2012, then moved to North Carolina when he was one of the few social media companies in the Charlotte area. (SNA stands for Social Networking Assistance.) Though competition has increased dramatically, he's carved a niche and now manages work for 23 different clients. His work covers pretty much anything social media-related, including organic and paid reach, scheduling, posting and idea generation. When he's not working on expanding his business, he serves on the board of directors for the Union County Chamber and the Union County Community Shelter, which serves the area's homeless population. He's also an adjunct professor in social media at Houghton College, his alma mater, in Houghton, N.Y.



Peyton **HOLLAND**, 34

National Technical Honor Society, Flat Rock

Peyton Holland has dedicated his professional life to career and technical education, which has a principal mission of preparing students for skilled jobs. A Chatham County native and alumnus of N.C. State University, Holland credits career-education courses with changing his own life. The nonprofit society started offering scholarships to encourage students to seek technical careers in 2005 and has since provided more than \$2 million in aid. Holland succeeded co-founder Allen Powell as the group's executive director in October 2019. He led the first virtual NTHS graduation this spring, in which more than 600 students were celebrated, and he helped develop a virtual toolkit for teachers. About 47,000 students participated in the society's programs during the 2019-20 school year. He oversees about 14 full- and part-time staffers. Holland previously worked for the state's public school and community college agencies as executive director of Raleigh-based SkillsUSA North Carolina, where he increased membership by 93%. He enjoys speaking at schools and conferences and is launching a podcast, *CTE @ Work*.



Andrew **LANIER**, 34

Lanier, Fountain, Ceruzzi & Sabbah, Jacksonville

Andrew Lanier is busier than most as a father of two sons, an attorney with 300-plus open cases, a Rotary member, a Juvenile Crime Prevention Council board member, and a former president of the Jacksonville Jaycees. But the graduate of East Carolina University and Charlotte School of Law doesn't seem worn down. In fact, he's an easygoing jokester with a big desire to support the community: He helped raise money for a local charity by agreeing to lip sync James Brown's 1970 R&B hit, *Sex Machine*. Lanier passed the state bar exam in July 2014, then joined the nine-lawyer firm that his father, Charles, founded in 1972. He's heavily involved in the community and often takes on pro bono cases. "My dad always told me, 'Don't worry about money. If someone comes in and needs help, you help them.'" He focuses on all aspects of civil and criminal law and enjoys volunteering in his neighborhood when he's not working.

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Harley MASTERS, 29

Southern Ridge Café, Bakersville

Harley Masters is a Mitchell County restaurant owner who is giving politics a fling. After earning a degree in aviation mechanics from Northeast State Community College in Blountville, Tenn., Masters moved back to her hometown four years ago to work in her uncle's restaurant. Shortly thereafter, she converted an old barbershop into the Southern Ridge Café in August 2018.

The community-oriented restaurant serves soups, sandwiches and desserts and was awarded the Amazing Customer Service/President's Award by the Mitchell County Chamber of Commerce in 2019. "Most days I'm cooking, but sometimes I'm on deliveries," she says. Masters also enjoys serving her community, including teaching line dancing at the local senior center and planning the first annual N.C. Mountaineer Festival. Now, she's running for county commissioner in the November election, hoping to become the youngest person and second woman to hold the office. She says she wants to show that politics isn't just for "old white men."



Emily MCCURRY, 31

Edward Jones, Waynesville

Emily McCurry helped pay her way through UNC Asheville by working as a waitress at a corporate-owned restaurant, where she learned quickly about her approach to sales. The manager set a quota on selling appetizers, which McCurry rejected, curtailing her restaurant career. "I'd say, 'This appetizer isn't any good, and people don't want it. It's not my job to trick people to do things for my benefit.'"

Now, McCurry is in her fourth year as a financial adviser for Edward Jones, a St. Louis-based broker-dealer with more than 19,000 advisers who work from about 14,600 U.S. offices. Many are in small towns, including nine in Haywood County; McCurry's office is in downtown Waynesville across the street from the First Baptist Church.

A Haywood County native, McCurry worked at a Boston trust company after college but missed her small-town roots. "Here, you look at people and they smile. Up there, they look at the ground."

She started at Edward Jones as an office manager in 2013 and quickly realized that the praise the brokerage receives for its working conditions — 21 years on *Fortune* magazine's list of 100 best workplaces — is deserved. "It's not hype, it's true," she says. "After six months here, I realized that I was pretty sure this is what I was meant to do. It's been everything I hoped it would be."

The brokerage paid for her MBA at Western Carolina University and assisted her as she received certifications to become a full-time adviser. The daughter of a pastor, she views financial planning as an equally important type of service.

"My business plan has been to attain enough high net-worth clients so I can serve smaller clients," she says. "It's the high net-worth people who keep my lights on, but I know I can make a difference for small and middle clients. I don't take my job lightly at all."

Convincing clients that she will be around for the long haul remains challenging. "Being a woman is a little different in Waynesville. People ask me what happens to their account when I quit to have a baby. I tell them that I have a higher chance of getting hit by a city bus than not returning to work if I get a kid."

About a fifth of Jones' advisers are women, who McCurry says are making a difference at the company. She cites the recent decision to stop requiring new advisers to spend their first five weeks knocking on doors of potential customers. It had been a trademark for the brokerage, but the change makes Jones more appealing to women and minority advisers who weren't comfortable making those visits, she says.

To build her business and support her area, McCurry stays very active in civic affairs, including young professionals, women in business, networking and arts council groups. She's also been an actor and volunteer at Waynesville's HART Theatre since she was 15, reflecting her passion for community theater.

"I've built my business through networking and doing lots of civic work," she says. "The only thing I can get fired for is not supporting my clients and treating people right."

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Matthew **RAKER**, 39

Mountain Bizworks, Asheville

A longtime advocate for entrepreneurship in western North Carolina, Matthew Raker became executive director in January after five years at the 19-employee nonprofit that operates as a Community Development Financial Institution certified by the U.S. Treasury. CDFIs provide loans and consulting services to small businesses and community organizations. Mountain BizWorks has a \$2.1 million annual budget for its region covering the state's 26 western-most counties. Much of Raker's work this year involved Paycheck Protection Program loans, especially for businesses in rural areas that had limited access to banks. He also has partnered with the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority to establish the Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund, aided by \$5 million from the state to help the county's hard-hit hospitality industry stabilize amid the pandemic. In 2020, the Lexington native and UNC Asheville graduate oversaw \$18.3 million in loans to small businesses across western North Carolina, a fourfold increase from the previous year. The PPP loans and other programs involving Mountain BizWorks have saved an estimated 8,000 jobs, at least temporarily.



Neil **ROBINETTE**, 32

CF Smith Property Group, Rockingham

With a master's degree in real estate development from Clemson University, Neil Robinette is following in a tradition at the family business the late Claude Smith formed in 1965 and expanded into more than 20 states. After working for an apartment developer in Greenville, S.C., for a few years, Robinette joined his grandfather's Richmond County-based company in 2014, shortly before Smith died of cancer. Working with other family members has proven rewarding, Robinette says, noting the business retains holdings in 13 states, though its main focus is on central and eastern North Carolina. Married with a 1-year-old and 4-year-old daughter, he and his wife, Catherine, live in Moore County, where CF Smith has helped upgrade downtown Southern Pines by renovating an old bank building, among other projects. The COVID-19-racked retail-leasing market isn't easy, of course; J.C. Penney recently closed its Rockingham store in what was Claude Smith's first shopping center, still owned by CF Smith. "We're dealing with a fair share of challenges, but we also have Lowe's and drugstores and grocery stores that have been beneficiaries, so we feel fortunate for our business."



Jake **ROBINSON**, 32

Champion Credit Union, Canton

The credit union formed in 1932 for workers at the adjacent Champion Paper mill looks a lot different today, with change accelerating since Jake Robinson became CEO in 2015. Its assets have increased to \$330 million from \$180 million, while its office count will soon have doubled to six with a new branch pending in Hendersonville. The credit union initially focused on Haywood County and Robinson's hometown of Canton, where the 1,000-employee mill is now called Evergreen Packaging. But it now has offices in Buncombe and Henderson counties with a goal to be the "financial institution of choice in western North Carolina." The region is now home to only one locally owned commercial bank (Asheville-based HomeTrust Bancshares) and a smaller credit union, Robinson says. He credits much of the growth to its mortgage business, which has led to new customers forming deposit accounts and taking out auto loans. He started working at Champion as a college junior, then joined full time after graduating in 2010. He's active in affairs at his alma mater, Western Carolina University, where he played basketball as a 6'8" forward and held the school career record for 3-pointers when he graduated. He received the Young Alum Award for immediate career success earlier this year. He also chairs a county task force to retain local teachers and serves as a director for the Haywood County Chamber of Commerce.



Courtney **SILVER**, 39

Ketchie, Concord



Courtney Silver started working at custom-machined parts manufacturer Ketchie in 2008, running the human resources, purchasing and financial departments. After her late husband, Bobby Ketchie, died at 35 after a 7 1/2-year battle with brain cancer in 2014, the then-pregnant mother of a 2-year-old stepped up to lead the company as president, persevering through heartbreak with the support of her employees, friends, family and faith. Ketchie, a *BUSINESS NORTH CAROLINA*'s 2018 Small Business of the Year finalist, now has 20 employees and more than \$6 million in 2019 revenue with another \$5 million in projected 2020 revenue, shipping parts to all 50 states and across five continents. The 2019 Manufacturing Institute S.T.E.P. Ahead Award winner is active in promoting the advancement of the manufacturing industry on a national and local level. Silver is on the board of the National Association of Manufacturers and partners with local community colleges and high school and elementary schools at the North Carolina Manufacturing Institute. Outside work, the Michigan State University grad enjoys spending time gardening, hiking, camping, and fly-fishing with her husband, Andy Silver; 8-year-old son, Sam; 6-year-old daughter, Lilly; and dog, Sonny.



Lindsay **WAGSTAFF**, 39

Wagstaff Farms, Roxboro



The Wagstaff family has been farming in Person County for generations, a tradition that Lindsay Wagstaff has helped carry on since completing an East Carolina University MBA when he was 26. The MBA helps, he says, given the needs of the constantly evolving farming industry. Raising cattle is Wagstaff's main effort, but his work also involves soybeans, hay, timber, and leasing land for solar power, hunting and cell towers. There's also some real estate development with old warehouses leased for commercial purposes. "We're trying to keep the farm intact," he says. Wagstaff also leads the Roxboro Jaycees, which holds community events to raise funds for worthy causes. The coronavirus has blocked some projects this year, but the group conducted a blood drive and golf tournament in recent months. While getting younger people interested in community service is challenging, Wagstaff likes Person County's prospects, given its strong rural heritage and proximity to the Triangle area.



Weyling **WHITE**, 34

Roanoke Chowan Community Health Center, Ahoskie



After earning a bachelor's degree at Winston-Salem State University, Weyling White returned to his rural hometown with a desire to run a behavioral health business and to give back. "I wasn't sure what was drawing me here, but it was in a direction to help people," he says. He joined Roanoke Chowan Community Health Center in 2013 and is now practice administrator for the government-funded organization that helps underserved people receive primary care. Seeing an opportunity to use his health care experience for the greater good, he won the election for mayor of Ahoskie last year; he's the first Black person to hold the office in the Hertford County town with a population of about 4,800. It involves work on many issues, he says, including focusing on crime prevention after some mid-September shootings in nearby towns. He's participated in statewide leadership programs through the N.C. Rural Center and Leadership North Carolina and was appointed to the N.C. Institute of Medicine this year.

Jeremy SMITH, 39

JSmith Civil, Goldsboro



How do you start a business with four employees and two pickup trucks in March 2016 and build it into an operation with about 140 staffers, an equal number of pieces of equipment and annual revenue topping \$19 million last year? Besides winning a lot of construction-services contracts, Jeremy Smith says JSmith Civil's growth "starts with our work ethic and building the right culture with the people."



“Part of running a business is that it’s not just about the bottom line but also about helping the community.”

It also reflects a couple of decades of a learning curve for Smith, a Goldsboro native who says he didn't gain his entrepreneurial streak from his dad, who worked in construction, or his mother, a teacher. But their work ethic was motivating as he started in the tobacco fields at age 13, then started a mowing and landscaping business as a high school junior, eventually employing more than 20. He is a semester short of earning an associate degree in turfgrass management at Wayne Community College.

At age 21, he bought a clearing and grading business in Johnston County that had projects as large as \$750,000 but sold it two years later. He then spent 12 years working at a Goldsboro site-work company, overseeing contracts of \$750,000 before becoming an owner again.

"I've done things backwards in my life because I didn't know what I was doing," Smith says.

That appears to have changed. He started BridgePoint Civil after borrowing \$40,000 from a partner, Shelley McPhatter, who runs the BridgePoint construction company in Durham. Smith says he paid the loan back within a year and now owns 100% of the renamed company.

JSmith operates four divisions that provide a diverse client mix. Its projects include highway-construction paving, laying pipe for utilities, building concrete ramps and sidewalks, and clearing sites to prepare for schools and commercial developments. "We're pretty evenly split between our four divisions, and we're not overly leveraged," he says.

Not being too reliant on N.C. Department of Transportation jobs has been a smart strategy given the agency's financial pressures. But Smith is thankful that his company won its biggest state contract for a road-widening project just before the coronavirus pandemic hit.

JSmith operates mostly in eastern and central North Carolina, having earned jobs as far west as Winston-Salem. Hiring experienced people who share a vision for growth is critical to success, he says. "You need to surround yourself with smart people and build a company where people want to work and want to be part of something."

Smith says Goldsboro is an excellent site for the business because it has a solid supply of hard workers, plus his office is about five minutes from his house. The company supports various local charities including Habitat for Humanity and the Wayne Pregnancy Center.

"Part of running a business is that it's not just about the bottom line but also about helping the community. I feel strongly about that because I'm a Christian, and that's how I was raised."