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Meet 20under40

young leaders and rising stars in the Southwest
and Central Virginia business community

Photo: David Hungate / Dominion Images

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“20 under 40” selectees enjoy drinks and networking behind the scenes at the photo shoot at 202 Market in Roanoke. Clockwise starting from left/center: Allan Tsang, Chris Johnson, David Sellars, Erik Williams. Bottom right: Brandon and April Farmer (on left) chat with Mark Vosskamp, center, publisher of Laker Media, and Nathan Harper at right. Bottom left photo: Beth Deel. Center: Gretchen Weinnig.



ALICIA ALIFF, 32, Roanoke
Associate relations manager, U.S. Cellular

Whether it's in the office or out in the Valley, making her community a stronger place to live and work is Alicia Aliff's passion.

In 2003, Aliff earned the distinction of No. 1 sales recruiter for U.S. Cellular, quietly beating out 9,000 of her peers across the nation.

Now, as she chips away at a master's degree in human resources from Franklin Pierce college, Aliff still manages to go the extra mile. She has sat on U.S. Cellular's Eastern Region Diversity Council for the past three years. Her commitment to diversity and inclusion extends to the community—after years of volunteering for the organization, she was named to the board of Roanoke's Local Colors last year. Aliff has managed to volunteer more than 200 hours over the past year to child welfare and poverty causes.

And yet, "she's not a self-promoter," says a colleague. "She just does."

MICHAEL R. BEDSAUL, 38, Blacksburg
Attorney, Sands Anderson Marks & Miller

Don't let the boyish good looks fool you. Michael Bedsaul leads a sparkling career as part of the firm's Risk Management and Local Government practice groups. He's doggedly protected several organizations—including a major truck rental company and several Virginia municipalities—against potentially crippling breach of contract lawsuits.

"Judges and opposing attorneys know him to be a determined advocate for the interests of his clients, and the families and communities they serve," says James E. Cornwell, managing shareholder at Sands Anderson.

Bedsaul's passion for family welfare and justice runs as deep as his New River Valley roots. His peers know him as a standout volunteer contributor for events that raise awareness for issues of family stability, family health, foster care and child protection. Bedsaul also donates his time and expertise to the Southwest Virginia Legal Aid Society, representing those who would otherwise have no means to hire a private attorney.



KELVIN "K.C." BRATTON, age 39, Roanoke
Supervising real estate valuation appraiser, City of Roanoke

"I see [Virginia] as a three-legged stool," says K.C. Bratton, who works on a myriad of volunteer (and sometimes thankless) projects to ensure the economic future of his native region. "Norfolk, Richmond, NOVA... We [in Southwest and Central Virginia] need to capitalize on our assets, like education, the outdoors."

Bratton is much more than just talk. He's a founding member of "81 Reasons to Connect," (learn more at www.creativeclass.com/creative_class_communities) and is also active on the boards of Roanoke's Explore Park, Center in the Square and Delegate Onzlee Ware's Juneteenth Freedom Foundation. This year, the foundation sent four students in need to community college—"next year we're aiming for 10," he says.

Bratton is the volunteer football coach who will drive to pick up your kids, a church trustee and doting husband and father of five. Oh yeah, and in his "spare time" he's the full-time supervising appraiser for Roanoke's Real Estate Valuation office.

KRISHA CHACHRA, 33, Blacksburg
Columnist, author, Virginia Tech Ph.D candidate, candidate for Blacksburg Town Council

While Krisha Chachra has traveled all over the world, in her writings and initiatives she remains a tireless advocate for plugging the regional "brain drain," identified as a major hurdle to economic development.

As the lead organizer for the wildly popular "Up on the Roof," she's busy securing food and beverages from local businesses (the networking event is *free* to attendees) and spreading the word. A few hundred young professionals swarm the affair each month; relationships formed there help "solidify the community and give people incentives to stay and work in the area," says Chachra.

Chachra is also author of *Homecoming Journals: Dreaming Big in a Small Town*, a regular columnist for *Bella* and *NRV Magazine* and most recently, a Blacksburg town council candidate who advocates cooperative, regional growth.

Photo: Nimal Lobo



BETH DEEL, 36, Roanoke
"Mini think tank," co-founder/owner of UpUPperiscope, The Water Heater and Myscoper.com

Deel along with 2008 "20 Under 40" alum Wendy Schuyler are the creative minds behind ad firm UpUPperiscope, community hub The Water Heater and Web site Myscoper.com.

Myscoper.com is a lavishly designed guide to a milieu of area events—from wine tastings to festivals to networking. It's a portal that connects the public to businesses and nonprofits; *the* community go-to online.

Deel's not-for-profit Water Heater near downtown has become a go-to place offline, regularly showcasing major "indie" musicians. It's also an inexpensive venue for the community to host fundraisers, art openings—even "arial ballet" classes (think Cirque du Soleil).

Sometimes with official blessing (and sometimes not), "the Myscoper girls"—as they're affectionately known—are behind a number of fun, all-ages events, attracting national media attention (*Penthouse* covered the annual Big Wheel race; see also World Pillow Fight Day and SuperSoaker Sunday.) Deel and Schuyler are putting Roanoke on the map for the creative class and young at heart.



BRANDON FARMER, 31, Lynchburg
Senior vice president, senior operations officer, Bank of the James

"I have a simple business philosophy," says Brandon Farmer. "Surround yourself with good people.... Also, hard work always pays off."

It certainly does. At only 31 years old, Farmer has swiftly climbed the bank's ranks from the mail room—where he started as an intern during his undergraduate days at Virginia Tech—to the executive suite.

As if the demands of his career are not enough, Farmer also serves as president for the Mental Health America of Central VA board, "a great 'working' board" which he joined just two years ago.

Farmer, who graduated from the Stonier Graduate Banking School last year and will soon celebrate his fifth anniversary with wife April, hopes to be an example to colleagues and peers. "Everyone has the ability to give time and that needs to be encouraged more by businesses."

MICHAEL FLEMING, 30, Blacksburg
CEO and founder, TORC Technologies

Handsome, athletic and smart as a whip, TORC Technologies CEO Michael Fleming is "frankly the kind of guy you hate if you're the jealous type," admits a peer. "But he's so nice and cool you can't even do that."

TORC builds unmanned ground vehicles for the military (and is currently working to commercialize its technologies into multiple markets, Fleming says). You might have heard of TORC as one of three teams out of 98 worldwide to successfully complete the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) Urban Challenge in 2007. In it, fully autonomous vehicles had to travel 60 urban and off-road miles in under six hours—while dodging live traffic. TORC, in other words, is not just *on* the cutting edge—it is the edge.

Between 2006-07, Fleming oversaw the growth of his company from two employees to 22. Between crisscrossing the country to keep up with business, Fleming has amassed more than 200 skydives and is a youth basketball coach.

Photo: Courtesy of NCTC



GARY GILMORE, 33, Roanoke
Senior associate and partner, Access

"Gary exhibits amazingly old-school characteristics of a consummate salesperson and dedicated craftsman," says Tony Pearman, CEO/chief creative officer of Access, a national powerhouse firm in public relations and advertising. "I have colleagues twice Gary's age who have accomplished half of what he has."

Gilmore is reaping the professional rewards. At only 33, he has glided seamlessly into senior management. He has served as president of the Advertising Federation of the Roanoke Valley and Ad2 Roanoke; he also served on Ad2's national board of directors. Currently he's chairman of the American Advertising Federation's third district, an organization which recently tapped him as "Advertising Person of the Year."

All this and he finds time to give back. Gilmore is active on Roanoke's Jefferson Center board and does pro-bono work for the YMCA, Children's Advocacy Center and Big Brothers, Big Sisters.

MICHAEL HAMLAR, 27, Roanoke
Founder, Hamlar Enterprises and owner, Hamlar-Curtis Funeral Home

At just 27, Michael Hamlar is a model small businessperson who “runs top-notch businesses,” says Tom Tanner with Roanoke’s Regional Small Business Development Center. “I can’t think of anyone who is more qualified or who more properly represents the under 40 business community.”

Hamlar is co-owner of Hamlar-Curtis Funeral Home, a 50+ year-old respected family business that has established a firm niche following in the region’s African-American community. More recently, Hamlar launched Hamlar Enterprises, a business brokerage consulting firm, and has already helped facilitate the sales of some major area players.

Hamlar also happens to be deeply connected to his roots. He assistant coaches Cave Spring High School’s football team (where he was once a star athlete) and is a member of the Kiwanis Club and Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce Legislative Advocacy Committee, and a board member of CHIP, Family Services-Roanoke Valley and the West End Center.



NATHAN HARPER, 28, Roanoke
Associate architect, designer, Spectrum Design P.C.

“Art and hot dogs” was the title of Nathan Harper’s award-winning design entry in “Roanoke Urban Effect,” a 2008 global architecture competition. “Love it or hate it, these two functions, when juxtaposed, symbolize the diverse cultural offerings that the city offers,” he wrote at the time.

The piece also gives insight into a bright and forward-thinking young mind. When Harper was in college, he worked at a grocery store where he became fascinated by the “elaborate retail machine.” Every aspect, he noticed—orders, deliveries, shelf tags, etc.—was crafted to maximize efficiency and boost sales. He wondered, “If only the building that housed the big box store had this level of care and refinement?” This drive for seamless efficiency is as important to his work today as are beauty and aesthetic.

Talented, driven and an office leader, “He’s extremely accomplished beyond his years, in both architectural talent, but also in his maturity, and people and communication skills,” says a colleague.

JEREMY HOLMES, 32, Roanoke
Program director, R.I.D.E. Solutions

Wayne Strickland, executive director of the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission, notes that Jeremy Holmes took “a program that was essentially treading water and made it into something that is vital and expanding all the time.”

R.I.D.E. Solutions is a nonprofit that advocates alternative transportation for clean air quality. Holmes established partnerships with a myriad of area businesses and, most recently, local luminaries like River Laker, Roanoke’s “Carless Brit,” to further his cause. It’s alliances like these, plus a keen understanding of social media, networking and publicity in general, that make Holmes an outstanding “20 Under 40” choice.

Under his leadership, and in little over a year, R.I.D.E.’s database of commuters grew by nearly 300 percent. Working with groups such as the Cool Cities Coalition and the City’s Clean and Green initiative, Holmes has helped Roanoke meet ozone air quality standards and position itself as an emerging green destination on the U.S. map.



BEN HUBBARD, 32, Blacksburg
Director of internal operations, e-mail & apps, Rackspace Hosting

“He’s one of the biggest unsung heroes of the e-mail & apps division,” says a co-worker. As Pat Matthews’ “right hand man,” Hubbard juggles most operational complexities of this key division, also one of Blacksburg’s biggest, and most famous, employers. Hubbard started as employee No. 6 making \$300 a month at what was formerly the independent company Mailtrust, and has been instrumental in seeing it flourish and guiding it through the 2007 acquisition by Rackspace. Hubbard notes proudly that in 2004, the IT hosting company boasted 13,000 users. Today that’s 1.3 million.

Hubbard’s biggest strength may just be “managing people and working to get the most out of them,” says the co-worker. He’s strong in other ways, too. As a volunteer coach, Hubbard led the Virginia Tech Men’s Club Soccer team to become the first and only VT Sports club to travel on an international tour (to Barcelona in 2007). He was named coach of the year twice and is a recent cancer survivor.



CHRIS E. JOHNSON, 38, Lynchburg
Vice president of enrollment management, Liberty University

Lynchburg, and Christian education in general, have become synonymous with one word: “Liberty.” The university has literally exploded in recent years and that’s no accident—that is the fruit of Chris E. Johnson’s hard work and innovation among other things.

In 2001, the late Jerry Falwell Sr. charged Johnson with the task of dramatically increasing the university’s size, then home to 4,500. At 12,000 this fall, Liberty’s resident program is the nation’s fastest growing this decade has seen. In 2008, Johnson turned his attention toward online enrollment: In one year it ballooned from 27,000 to 38,000 students, and is expected to hit 50,000 next school year.

“...Even more impressive because the board imposed strict requirements on the financial and academic status of the students being recruited,” notes Jerry Falwell Jr., Liberty’s current president.

An avid fisherman, hunter and volunteer athletics coach, Johnson and wife Catherine are also proud parents to four youngsters. “He has always exhibited the highest level of professionalism and ethics,” Falwell adds.

BECCA MCCHAREN, 25, Lynchburg
Designer/co-founder, Chromat and Planner II, City of Lynchburg

“Becca McCharen is a force,” says director of economic development for the City of Lynchburg Marjette Glass of her young colleague.

McCharen is a Lynchburg city planner who works on the city’s comprehensive revitalization plan. A graduate of UVa’s school of architecture, McCharen’s knowledge of the urban landscape also helps her with her small, bi-coastal business—Chromat. It’s a fashion label that “celebrates the richness of vintage materials with deliberate acts of poetic vandalism,” according to the company tagline. Chromat’s seasonal fashion shows have become true economic and community drivers, drawing crowds in the hundreds, and engaging other Lynchburg businesses big and small for exposure to a fresh audience.

McCharen is a blogger and a Big Sister, driven to share her artistic joy and expertise with others. She began her stint with the city in 2007 after returning home from a perilous Peace Corps tour in El Salvador. (Read the full story on McCharen’s path and “poetic vandalism” on page 8.)



ELIZABETH GUILBERT PERROW, 38, Roanoke
Principal, Woods Rogers

A decorated trial lawyer, Elizabeth Guilbert Perrow practices primarily in the area of medical malpractice defense. She has successfully defended physicians and other providers in a number of watershed cases, receiving one of 2007’s largest defense verdicts according to *Virginia Lawyers Weekly*. It’s accomplishments like these that have twice put Perrow on the radar of *SuperLawyers Magazine* and of the Roanoke Bar Association, who in 2008 named her “Young Lawyer of the Year.”

Her selection as a 2009 “20 Under 40” professional adds to a number of distinctions Perrow has earned over her relatively short career. These include “Boss of the Year” by the Roanoke Valley Legal Secretaries Association in 2003 and the president’s annual Volunteer Service Award from 2006 through 2009 for contributing more than 100 hours to various community service and legal organizations. In 2004, the Young Lawyers Conference bestowed upon her the Award for Recognition for Significant Service for organizing Wills for Heroes, a 9/11-inspired program to provide pro bono legal service to emergency aid workers.

CHRISTINE LOCKHART POARCH, 36, Salem
Attorney & counselor at law, The Poarch Law Firm P.C.

Christine Lockhart Poarch’s law firm exclusively handles legal issues pertaining to immigration, an increasingly urgent consideration for business.

Writes a legal peer in Salem, “If truly competent advocacy is the cornerstone of Christine’s practice, tenacity and empathy are the bricks and mortar. [She goes] above and beyond the call: writing an op-ed decrying visa caps on behalf of various green industry clients who needed workers; successfully arguing that a federal law should be amended to permit certain Iraqi translators to gain citizenship without unjust delay; or representing various immigrant victims of violent crime or unaccompanied children for free.”

Poarch’s interest in immigrant issues was sparked early on during a volunteer stint in Ecuador. She’s transformed her passion into a successful—and timely—niche practice. She recently helped launch the nonprofit Tia’s Place to serve immigrant women and children for free.





DAVID E. SELLARS, 33, Roanoke P.E., senior associate, AECOM

On and off the track, David Sellars' teammates describe him as a leader who "leads without leading"—bringing out the best in others by delivering the best himself. Already a senior associate with a leading architectural and engineering firm, Sellars conveys "an 'easy confidence' to those who work with him," says an AECOM manager, consistently delivering what is promised and then some.

Sellars "relaxes" from his day job by training for triathlons and competitive sports-car races at the Virginia International Raceway near Danville. An avid scuba diver, he is also a member of the all-volunteer Scruggs Search and Recovery Dive Team, which means he's often on-call when emergencies arise on Smith Mountain Lake.

Sellars "possesses a solid 'let's get things done' attitude," notes Christopher Bowers, a LEED AP and principal with AECOM. "He demonstrates unselfish concern for the welfare of others and a conviction to do what is right and necessary, rather than what is easy."

ALLAN TSANG, 38, Floyd (and anywhere his RV takes him) Founder, 88owls

Talking with Allan Tsang is much like talking with a business philosopher. Tsang approaches big problems with an inquisitive joy, finding solutions when others are left balking.

The most recent "big problem" this longtime international business consultant approached was: How do consultants find new clients and how do businesses know they're not hiring a hack consultant? In January Tsang and a partner launched 88owls, a Web site Tsang likens to "eHarmony for business." Matching qualified consultants worldwide with clients, consultants with 88owls must have a minimum of 10 years experience (read more in TechWatch, page 7).

88owls already features 300+ searchable consultant profiles representing 27 countries. The service has attracted numerous accolades from the tech community and even a "rising star" nomination from Sen. Mark Warner. Tsang and his wife Pamela home school their six children, "in order to be a truly mobile consultant," he says. Often, he travels to business meetings in his RV with the whole Tsang crew in tow.



GRETCHEN WEINNIG, 34, Roanoke Corporate relationship manager, StellarOne

Tied with fellow "20 Under 40" peer Jeremy Holmes, Gretchen Weinnig stands out as earning the most nominations from readers of the *Business Journal*.

With a cheerful and welcoming demeanor, friends and colleagues know Weinnig as a connector in every sense of the word. "She's constantly seeking out ways to bring people together," says Chris Berry, a self-employed Web designer based in Roanoke. "She is always looking for some way to help another person, business or organization." Weinnig is so enthusiastic about life in the Roanoke and New River valleys, she has been mistaken for a chamber of commerce employee on multiple occasions, says a friend.

Weinnig is a popular leader within the ranks of StellarOne. She is also a tenacious community leader. Weinnig is almost single-handedly responsible for the annual Gallop 4 the Greenways event, which has raised nearly \$100,000 to fund Roanoke's greenway network. She is also active with the United Way, YMCA, a number of groups promoting the outdoors, and is vice president of Friends of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

ERIK W. WILLIAMS, 28 Alumni relations & annual giving coordinator, Virginia Western Community College Education Foundation

Increasingly, community colleges across the nation are recognizing that a fiscal opportunity is passing them by: leveraging alumni relations.

Erik Williams, a product of the Virginia community college system himself, is leading the charge to make sure that Virginia Western Community College, at least, gets on the boat. He's also tackling the issue on a national front, this year traveling to San Francisco to head up *the* networking conference for U.S. community college alumni development professionals.

Williams is intimately involved with Project ACCESS, an innovative project that sends cash-strapped high school graduates with a 2.0 GPA or higher to Virginia Western. Recently, Williams set up a mentoring program to enhance ACCESS and redesigned its marketing materials. You'll often find him at community events informing the public of the vital role that community colleges play in the educational landscape.

