



Meet Minneapolis hosted “The Power of Place: Minneapolis Shapes the Story” on July 14 at the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago. Shown here (left to right) are the evening’s speakers: Diane Moua, Chef/Owner, Diane’s Place; Jamie Martin, Director of Conference and Event Services for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics; Melvin Tennant, CAE, President & CEO, Meet Minneapolis; Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey; Reuben Kitto Statel, Dakhóta from the Santee Sioux Nation and a tribal member of Red Lake Nation, recording artist; Rosalind Dixon, Associate Director of Business Development, Meet Minneapolis; and Andrea Mokros, Secretary/Treasurer, Meet Minneapolis Board of Directors, former special assistant to President Barack Obama and former director of strategic planning for Michelle Obama. Photo by Nikolas Liepins/Ethography for Meet Minneapolis

The Power of Place and the Journey Ahead

By Don Welsh, President & CEO,
Destinations International

The Destinations International Annual Convention in Portland arrives at a pivotal moment for our industry. Whether through the conversations that take place there or the work destination professionals continue in their own communities long afterward, one thing is increasingly clear: amid geopolitical uncertainty, economic pressures, and evolving traveler expectations, the role of destination organizations has never been more important.

Travel has always been about more than moving people from one place to another. It creates understanding, builds relationships, broadens perspectives, and reminds us of what we have in common. Whether someone is attending a meeting, reconnecting with family, or exploring a destination for the first time, travel fosters curiosity, encourages cultural exchange

and creates experiences that stay with us long after the journey ends. Its value extends well beyond economic impact. Travel strengthens communities, inspires innovation, and brings people together in ways few other industries can.

This year’s FIFA World Cup provided a vivid reminder of that power. Across North America, supporters transformed city streets, restaurants, and public spaces into celebrations of culture and community. Scottish fans filled (and drained!) Boston’s pubs, Norwegian supporters did the “Viking row” on New York City’s Times Square, Lionel Messi’s memorable performances energized Kansas City, and passionate Mexican and Canadian supporters brought unmistakable excitement to host destinations. These moments were more than sporting highlights—they demonstrated how travel creates authentic human connections while allowing destinations to share their unique

identities with the world.

The momentum continues. America250, the Route 66 Centennial, the LA28 Olympic and Paralympic Games, and the 2034 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Utah present extraordinary opportunities to showcase travel’s ability to connect people, strengthen communities, and create lasting economic and social value. Their legacy should not simply be measured in visitation or headlines, but in stronger communities and deeper global understanding.

None of this happens by accident.

Today’s destination organizations have evolved well beyond traditional destination marketing. They are strategic conveners, trusted community partners, and advocates for long-term prosperity, bringing together government, business, residents, and the hospitality industry around a shared vision for the future. They attract meetings, conventions, sporting

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HOTS

HOTS The GOAT... Firefighters battling a small wildfire in Colorado have received support from an expected source. According to the Associated Press, a 4-year-old Nigerian dwarf goat named Goldie – short for “Golden Ore” – followed crew members of the Colorado Springs Fire Department around as they battled the flames of the Rock Creek Fire on July 9. Fire Department Lt. Trevor Leland told the outlet she followed the crew for hours, munching on some leaves along the way, and even tried to follow behind their vehicles when they packed up for the day. “I don’t know that she necessarily helped with the firefighting

effort, but it’s always cool to see and animal like that who doesn’t mind us being there,” Leland said. According to Goldie’s owner, the goat is very social—a trait that a U.S. Forest Service crew member discovered earlier in the day when Goldie tried to steal a bite of his lunch. Even if Goldie didn’t lift a firehose herself, HOTS would bet she definitely lifted morale.

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HOTS Puzzled No More... A building in downtown San Jose, California,

will no longer be stumping passersby with its rhythm visual puzzle because someone finally solved it, UPI reports. The Adobe headquarters building has been host to a semaphore puzzle—a type of visual cipher that uses rotating discs, lights or flags to send a secret message—since May 2023, according to the outlet. Recently, Brian Vincent, an area software engineer, solved it. After analyzing the patterns designed by artist Ben Rubin, Vincent determined that the patterns represented a code for col-

ors in pixels of a digital image of a rose in the famous painting *Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli. “I want to say that the difficulty level on this puzzle is probably perfect,” Vincent said in a video released by Adobe about the endeavor. “In some ways, it seems a little bit simple, but at the same time it takes a lot of work and a lot of effort, and it stands for years before anyone solves it.” HOTS admires the patience and determination of both the puzzle-maker and the puzzle-solver.

TravelAbility to Launch Grant Lab, Accessibility Catalog at 2026 Summit

By Jordan Bradley

TravelAbility, the leading industry advocate for accessible travel and travelers with disabilities, will connect attendees of this year’s summit to two new offerings: a grant lab designed to help destination management professionals navigate grant applications for accessibility upgrades, and a catalog of affordable accessibility tech and solutions.

The annual three-day conference heads to the Hilton Tampa Downtown in Florida from November 9–11. This year, the conference’s theme is “Make Accessibility Your 2030 Differentiator.”

The theme highlights a benchmark that sits just around the corner for all destinations: by 2030, every member of the Baby Boomer generation will be at least 65 years old.

“We’re creating a grant lab at TravelAbility in Tampa, so we’re focusing on educating DMOs on how they can get grants and what they need to do to get grants around accessibility, which departments that goes through,” TravelAbility founder and CEO Jake Steinman told *USAEXtra*.

The lab will be made possible through a partnership between TravelAbility and Grant Logic AI, a statistical analysis system (SAS) artificial intelligence model that helps cut down the amount of time it takes to find aligned grants. During the lab, DMO attendees at the summit will be able to speak with grant writers, consultants and funders, and attend workshops centered on successful grant applications.

Destinations with relevant experience with grants will also offer insights through a workshop into their successes and processes in the

pursuit of grant funding to support accessibility improvements, Steinman said.

Steinman said the inspiration for this year’s summit theme, the grant lab and the accessibility tech catalog stem from observations he and the TravelAbility team made over the eight years of the summit’s lifetime.

After a summit ended, Steinman said he noticed a pattern with destination management attendees.

“They leave the conference—they’re motivated; they’re like spring-loaded to do something,” Steinman told *USAEXtra*. “Then they get back to the office and they don’t have a plan, and budgets are being cut back because of hotel tax revenues and other things.”

So Steinman started digging. He looked at some of the strongest examples of accessible cities, regions and states, including North Alabama; Oregon; Tampa and Fort Lauderdale; and Mesa, Arizona.

“These are destinations that have invested in accessibility infrastructure around information, and in some cases, subsidizing improvements,” Steinman said, adding that DMOs have been telling TravelAbility over the years that “they’ve been involved

in sustainability and climate change and all these other feel-good initiatives, but nothing comes close to accessibility because it affects their local population more than anything else.”

But DMOs are designed to market a destination, not handle the infrastructure for its local community, Steinman said.

“We do not ask the tourism bureau to pave municipal roads or run the city buses. Yet, accessibility has quietly be-



Jake Steinman

come the exception,” Steinman wrote in a July 13 op-ed. “Destinations are being asked to build accessible communities out of shrinking marketing budgets, covering much of the cost of innovations in physical infrastructure whose heaviest users are the people who live there.”

So the ideas for the TravelAbility Grant Lab and tech catalog were born to assist destinations in gaining and stretching funds as far as possible to support accessibility updates to a destination.

In addition, keeping individuals mobile and independent has a significant return on any investment made in accessibility infrastructure, and it’s important for destinations to steward the wave of change, Steinman said.

“It’s turning the whole thing around as a taxpayer savings is contributing to the ROI,” Steinman told *USAEXtra*. “If we can keep 100 people independent for one more year, [destinations] are saving \$7.5 billion in taxpayer savings.”

Outside of the financial implications of updating destination infrastructure with increased accessibility in mind, Steinman said, “You’re investing in somebody’s dignity. That’s really what it is. You lose your dignity when you move into assisted living. No question about that.”

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NEWS

ASAE Announces Power of Associations Summit Awards

By Todd McElwee

Six organizations are being highlighted by ASAE with Power of Associations Summit Awards, the organization's highest honor recognizing associations whose work is creating meaningful impact across the nation and around the world.

The American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP), American Geophysical Union (AGU), Association for Financial Counseling and Planning Education (AFCPE), International Society for the Study of Xenobiotics (ISSX), National Cancer Registrars Association (NCRA), and Urban Land Institute (ULI) will be honored at the 2026 Summit Awards Dinner on September 22 at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C.

The Summit Awards celebrate innovation, strategic partnerships, and

bold initiatives that demonstrate the unique ability of associations to solve complex challenges, strengthen professions and industries, and improve lives, ASAE said.

"Associations are uniquely positioned to convene expertise, build trust, and unite diverse stakeholders around a common purpose," said Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, AAiP, President & CEO. "At a time when many of society's greatest challenges require collaboration and collective action, associations are leading industries and professions toward stronger, more resilient futures. This year's Summit Award recipients exemplify the extraordinary impact our community makes every day. Their work reminds us that when associations lead, communities thrive and progress accelerates."

- ACEP is being recognized for the

Geriatric Emergency Department Accreditation (GEDA), which is designed to improve the care of older adults within the emergency department.

- "Standing Up for Science: AGU's Year of Action for Scientists and Society" champions the scientific field and the critical work in which it engages through a variety of advocacy and other outreach.

- AFCPE's FINRA Investor Education Foundation Military Spouse Fellowship provides military spouses with a fully funded opportunity to earn the Accredited Financial Counselor (AFC) certification for free.

- The ISSX Africa Workshop, themed "Transforming Science, Connecting Worlds," is a key program aimed at building Drug Metabolism and Pharmacokinetics (DMPK) networks and advancing pharmacogenomics research across Africa, the organization said.

- NCRA led a nationwide advocacy campaign to safeguard federal

cancer surveillance after the Administration's FY 2026 budget proposal threatened to eliminate the CDC's National Program of Cancer Registries (NPCR) and drastically cut the National Cancer Institute (NCI), the association reported.

- The "Roadmap to Recovery" by ULI refers to strategic, actionable blueprints designed by real estate and urban planning experts to aid communities and commercial districts in their recovery from major disasters or economic downturns, the group noted.

In addition to the Summit Award honorees, 22 organizations have been recognized with Power of Associations Gold Awards, and 31 associations earned Silver Awards for their outstanding contributions. The Power of Associations Awards are selected by the Power of Associations Awards Committee, chaired this year by Jim Potter, Executive Director, 4As Health.

Find more information [here](#).

Association Forum Opens Forty Under 40 Applications Window

By Todd McElwee

Association Forum is seeking the best of the best industry professionals under 40.

The application period for the organization's Forty Under 40 program has begun and will run until August 31. Honorees will be recognized during Association Forum's Holiday Showcase, December 2–3 at McCormick Place, and in a special edition of *USAE*, which will be available at the event.

"Are you a trailblazer, an innovator, a change-maker?" Association Forum said. "Have you achieved remarkable success for yourself and your organization before the age of 40? If so, it's time to step into the spotlight, let your achievements shine, and inspire future generations of association management leaders! The Forty Under 40 Program is calling upon exceptional individuals like you to apply and be part of an exclusive community that celebrates brilliance, leadership, and impact."

- Candidate Requirements:

- 3+ years of employment at a 501(c)(3), 501(c)(4) or 501(c)(6), or association management company.

- Current employment at a 501(c)(3), 501(c)(4) or 501(c)(6), or association management company.

- Plan to continue in roles that aid the future of the association and

nonprofit community.

- Exhibit characteristics that demonstrate continued success and leadership skills.

- Previous applicants are encouraged to re-apply. Previous recipients of a Forty Under 40 are not eligible.

- Under the age of 40 as of December 1, 2026.

Application Requirements:

- A current resume

- Two letters of recommendation on organization/company letterhead. Letters should include individuals who can support your application for the award. Recommendations can come from anyone; they don't need to be from the same organization/company.

- A copy of a valid ID (for age verification).

- A high-resolution headshot (at least 300 dpi and at least 1MB in file size).

- Application fee of \$49 for non-members is due at the time of submission. The application is free for members.

"Ultimately, participating in the Forty Under 40 program offers a chance to elevate your profile, connect with peers, celebrate your achievements, and inspire future generations," organizers said. "Don't wait, seize your chance to gain industry recognition and propel your career!"

Find more information [here](#).

Hyatt to Pay \$15.5M in Wrongful Death Suit

By Jordan Bradley

In a July 9 decision, a San Diego County jury awarded \$15.5 million to the family of a woman who died at a La Jolla, California, Hyatt hotel in 2022.

The family of Cindy Gonzalez claimed staff at the Hyatt Regency La Jolla failed to follow Hyatt Hotels Corp. corporate policy when regarding guest check outs, leading to Gonzalez's death.

According to the law firm representing Gonzalez's family, Greene Broillet & Wheeler, when she failed to check out of her hotel room because she had fallen into a diabetic coma in May 2022, staff at the hotel "extended her reservation without authorization instead of following established protocols that called for additional guest contact and a security wellness check."

The firm continued: "Hotel staff did not discover Gonzalez until the following day after concerned family members filed a missing persons report with law enforcement."

Gonzales—who was 43 at the time of her death—was rushed to the hospital when she was discovered, but later died. Her family argued that "had Hyatt employees followed their own policies and conducted a timely welfare check, Gonzalez would have received life-saving medical attention," the law firm said.

The suit was brought against Hyatt

Hotels Corp. by Gonzalez's son, Jose Ramirez; her mother, Sanjuana Gonzalez; and the co-administrators of her estate, Angela Gonzalez and Harold Dean Britt Jr.

According to reporting from the Courtroom View Network (CVN), attorneys for Gonzalez's family argued Hyatt Hotels Corp. policy requires hotel staff to make immediate contact with a hotel guest who misses check out.

Representatives for the hotel company argued that although Gonzalez had missed her check out time, she had ordered room service the night before, and the delivery of her food constituted a wellness check within the mandatory wellness check-in window outlined in Hyatt policy.

Hyatt representatives also argued Gonzalez had placed the "do not disturb" placard on her door, and the hotel's staff did not know she was a diabetic.

Hyatt representatives did not return *USAE* request for comment by press deadline.

The trial began on June 23 and concluded on July 9, according to CVN. Bruce Broillet, the lead trial attorney for the Gonzalez family, successfully argued to the jury that despite the delivered room service, hotel staff did not follow its own policy and was therefore liable in Gonzalez's death.

"If the person is supposed to be

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NEWS

Get to Know Destinations International's 30 Under 30 Honorees

USAE spoke with members of Destination International's 30 Under 30 Class of 2026 prior to the Annual Convention. Honorees shared their thoughts about being recognized, getting started in the industry, proudest accomplishments, and valuable lessons learned along the way. Congratulations to all of these young industry leaders!

Maggie Duffy, Manager, Marketing Content, Discover Halifax



Maggie, age 28, started working at Discover Halifax as a co-op student in 2019 and has had a permanent position since 2021. She attended Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and graduated with a bachelor's in marketing management. Outside of work, she enjoys cooking, baking, cafe/restaurant hopping, and hiking along the coast with her camera.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Duffy: It feels incredibly exciting to be a 30 Under 30 honoree, but more importantly, I feel a new sense of belonging. In my experience, work in my role can feel quiet and a little solitary. You pour yourself into how a place is experienced, then step back and let it speak for itself. Being welcomed into a group of people who do the same thing, and care about it the same way, feels like finding a table I didn't know had been saved for me. Being counted among people this thoughtful makes me want to be better at what I do.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Duffy: Places change the people who move through them. I've been reshaped by every place I've chosen to live, by its geography, its food, the people who make it feel like somewhere. Halifax did that to me more than anywhere. This is one of the few industries where the work is helping visitors have that same experience, the kind of visit that rearranges how they see things. I wanted to help build that for other people, for Halifax to leave its mark on visitors the way it has on me.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Duffy: The work I'm proudest of gave Halifax's chefs their own voice.

Most restaurants here are independent, run by genuinely visionary people, and I saw a chance to amplify what they were already doing brilliantly. So I built the program to do it: a talented photographer capturing them at no cost, and storytelling that centered the people behind the food. I've helped shape this city's culinary identity, visually and narratively. Now people connect with the maker, not just the meal, and that connection is exactly what I set out to build.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Duffy: Say yes to the things that scare you a little, especially early on. When someone hands you the speaking opportunity or the intimidating campaign, it's because they already see something in you. I think much of those first years starting out in the field is just catching up to how other people read you. It won't always feel comfortable, and that's fine. Discomfort usually means you're right at the edge of getting better. Trust the people betting on you, and then go prove them right.

Paula Cintron, CTA, Destination & Convention Services Specialist, Visit Seattle



Paula, who holds a bachelor's in communications from the University of Washington, has worked for Visit Seattle for four years. The 28-year-old enjoys reading, (binge) watching television shows, and trying out new restaurants with friends and family.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Cintron: I'm humbled and thrilled to have been recognized as a part of the 30 Under 30 Class of 2026. It

feels especially meaningful because it celebrates an industry that I am passionate about and a city that I am proud to represent. I hope to use this experience to keep learning about the destination industry and continuing to grow within this incredible space.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Cintron: My passion for Seattle and wanting to share its unique experiences with others led me to pursue a career in the destination industry. I love the opportunity to connect people with the city's vibrant culture, natural beauty, diverse attractions and helping to create unforgettable experiences for visitors, as well as locals.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Cintron: I'm proud to have helped shape and grow my current role alongside my team, creating new opportunities to support in-house hotel meetings and events. Enhancing the attendee experience while connecting planners with valuable local resources has been especially rewarding. Being able to simplify the planning process, foster meaningful partnerships, and contribute to successful events has been an exciting adventure.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Cintron: To someone just starting out in the industry, I would tell them to stay curious, ask questions, and take

every opportunity to learn from the people around you. So much of what we do is built on collaboration, creativity, connection, and a willingness to learn. Building strong relationships and seeking out new experiences will be essential for your personal and professional development.

Patrick Laske, CDME, Marketing Manager, New York City Tourism + Conventions



Patrick Laske has been with New York City Tourism + Conventions for four years. Patrick, age 30, graduated from Providence College with a bachelor's degree in marketing. Outside of work, he can be found at

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CONGRATULATIONS, HAYDEN PIGOTT!

Hayden Pigott is Manager, Social Content for Brand USA. In this role, she is the creative force behind the voice, look, and feel of Brand USA on social—leading content strategy and inspiring audiences around the world to visit the USA.

The entire Brand USA team thanks Hayden for her dedication to marketing the USA and extends heartfelt congratulations on this achievement.

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★ 2026 30 UNDER 30 HONOREE ★

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a concert (probably a Grateful Dead tribute band), trying a local craft brewery, or going for a run along the Hudson River.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Laske: Being named a 30 Under 30 honoree is incredibly rewarding. It feels like validation that the hard work I've put in over the years has made an impact. I'm also grateful for the colleagues and mentors who have supported me along the way. I hope this recognition encourages others to put themselves out there, take on new opportunities, and not be afraid to advocate for themselves and celebrate their accomplishments.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Laske: When I graduated from college, I applied to hundreds of marketing positions with one goal: to build my career in New York City. I landed a role promoting a neighborhood business improvement district on the Lower East Side, where I was running around marketing local bars,

restaurants, galleries and shops. That experience introduced me to destination marketing and showed me how rewarding it is to connect people with places. Today, I have the opportunity to promote New York City on a global scale, representing the city I love.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Laske: I'm most proud of how much I've grown over the last four years. When I first joined NYC Tourism + Conventions, then known as NYC & Company, I was still learning the industry and figuring things out. Since then, I've launched more than 70 global tourism partnerships that have helped drive hundreds of thousands of visitors to New York City from key international markets. Seeing that growth, both professionally and personally, has been incredibly rewarding.

USAE: What advice would you give someone just starting out in the field?

Laske: Stay curious and never stop learning. Ask questions, seek feedback, and look for every opportunity to expand your knowledge. One of the best ways to understand destination marketing is to experience a place through the eyes of a visitor. Play tourist in your own city, explore neighborhoods

you've never been to, and think about what makes those experiences memorable. That perspective will help you create more authentic and impactful marketing.

Daniel Cabrera, Digital & Multicultural Marketing Manager, Visit Oxnard



A fitness, baking, theatre and arts enthusiast, Daniel's favorite pastimes include traveling, trying new foods and visiting coffee shops. The California State University, Northridge graduate

has been with the CVB for more than four years and has a pet tortoise.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Cabrera: Being named a Destination International 30 Under 30 honoree is truly an honor, and I'm incredibly grateful for the recognition. It's exciting to be recognized alongside such talented and passionate professionals who are shaping the future of the travel and tourism industry.

This recognition is especially meaningful because it reflects not only the work I've been fortunate to contribute at Visit Oxnard, but also the mentors, colleagues, and community who have supported me throughout my career. It motivates me to continue learning, growing, and finding creative ways to tell meaningful stories that inspire people to experience destinations and the communities that make them unique.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Cabrera: I was first introduced to destination marketing while attending California State University, Northridge, where tourism courses and inspiring professors opened my

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CONGRATULATIONS,
ABBY TINGLE!

30 UNDER 30

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WEST outside the lines
MONROE



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eyes to a career I never knew existed. I was drawn to the industry because it combines creativity, marketing, community engagement, and economic impact. What continues to inspire me is the opportunity to tell the story of my destination, connect with the local community, and help elevate the people, businesses, and cultural experiences that make Oxnard a unique place to visit.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Cabrera: One accomplishment I'm especially proud of is helping strengthen the connection between Visit Oxnard and our local businesses and community members. Building meaningful relationships has been rewarding.

A project that stands out is working alongside Downtown Oxnard and the Oxnard Performing Arts Center Non-profit to support the effort to have Downtown Oxnard officially designated as a California Cultural District by the California Arts Council. Being able to contribute to that initiative and help showcase the incredible arts, culture, and history that make Downtown Oxnard unique was a meaningful experience because it's about celebrating the people, culture, and organizations that make it special.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Cabrera: Be curious and don't be afraid to say yes to new opportunities. Destination marketing is a collaborative industry, so building relationships and learning from those around you is just as important as developing your technical skills. Get involved in your community, ask questions, and stay open to experiences that challenge you. You never know which project, connection, or mentor will shape your career and open doors you never expected.

Julie Madsen, Communications & PR Manager, Visit Ventura



Julie, age 26, has been with California's Visit Ventura for almost four years. She achieved an honors bachelor's in media studies with minors in international studies and digital journalism from University of California, Berkeley. Julie has a "rescue dog" and "mega mutt" named Hazel, age 4½. An avid reader, Julie is constantly updating her Goodreads profile, and she enjoys listening to music, taking her dog out for a walk, and catching up on her favorite shows.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree

Madsen: I am incredibly grateful to be named a 30 Under 30 honoree. It still doesn't feel real. I am so thankful to my entire team at Visit Ventura, who have lifted me up and opened the doors to so many opportunities along the way. I'm really excited to get involved in the Destinations International community, grow alongside my fellow 30 Under 30 peers, and continue doing what I love.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Madsen: My background is in journalism, so storytelling has always been a part of my life, and I grew up in

Ventura, so my love for my hometown and community runs deep. Getting into the destination industry allowed me to combine my two passions. Being able to share the stories of my hometown and the community members who make it so special has been such a rewarding experience that I could never have imagined. Travel, tourism, and hospitality are integral in my life, and I love that I get to do this every single day.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Madsen: During my nearly four

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The Future of Our Industry Is Bright

Congratulations to the
Destinations International 30 Under 30 Class of 2026
for helping to shape the future of our industry.



We are especially proud to celebrate Visit Seattle's own Paula Cintrón T. on this well-deserved recognition. Paula, the work you do elevates every interaction, making attendees and your colleagues alike feel welcome, supported, and connected at every touchpoint. We are so grateful for your enthusiasm and commitment to excellence.

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years at Visit Ventura, I've been lucky enough to earn the trust of my team to take on some awesome projects. One of them was in 2023 and 2024 when Ventura hosted the X Games—I learned so much during that process. A highlight was developing a close working relationship with California Governor Gavin Newsom's office and actually securing a quote from Governor Newsom in a press release. It was the first time our organization secured such a high-profile quote from a government official. I still look at that press release today and pinch myself that through a lot of hard work, relationship building, and collaboration efforts, I was able to help get that quote.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Madsen: My biggest advice would be to be confident in your skills, your experiences, and your voice. When I first started in my career, I was often the youngest person in the room and was nervous to contribute. Fast forward a few years, and while sometimes I'm still the youngest in the room, I've learned to embrace it. It makes me

different—I see things differently, and I have a fresh perspective. I take every opportunity to learn from people from all different kinds of backgrounds. And with some experience under my belt, I've gathered some bits of wisdom myself.

Kaelynn Ball, Marketing and Communications Manager, Visit Howard County



Kaelynn has been with Visit Howard County in Maryland since April 2024. Kaelynn, who just turned 30, will have been married to her husband, David

Hogsten for 5 years in September. The couple has a 5-month-old daughter, Haven Hogsten. They also have one "chubby and grumpy" tuxedo cat named Tobias. Kaelynn loves going on dates with her husband, spending time with their daughter, going on walks and hikes, travelling, and playing video games.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Ball: Like many other young professionals, I find myself teetering between a belief in my capabilities and a nagging self-doubt. So when I found out I was part of the 2026 class of 30 Under 30 for Destinations International, I was genuinely stopped in my tracks. Even now, I still feel stunned and incredibly honored that I am being recognized alongside such an inspiring group of honorees. This opportunity has lit a spark of confidence in my heart, and I know that feeling will continue to grow, fuel my work, and shape the future chapters of my career.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Ball: What attracted me to the destination industry was the opportunity to do work that connects creativity with community. After working in a highly technical role and moving across the

country, I realized I was craving an opportunity to be more involved locally and to use more of my creativity in a productive way. Destination marketing gave me the opportunity to build local connections, experience the best of my region, and tell stories that inspire others to experience it too. Knowing that the work I do helps strengthen the community is a big motivation for me.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Ball: I'm proud that even without a perfectly mapped-out career path, I've continued to find my way through hard work, curiosity, and a willingness to grow. I've often taken on challenges before I felt fully ready, but I've learned that growth often comes from saying yes, working hard, asking questions, and trusting yourself to grow into new opportunities. Being promoted to Marketing & Communications Manager within my first year in the tourism industry is one of my proudest accomplishments because it reflects the trust I've earned and the impact I've worked hard to create in our community.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Ball: Learn, grow, repeat. My advice to someone starting out in the field

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Congratulations
CHRISTEN MILLER



30 UNDER 30



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would be to stay curious and keep investing in your growth. I believe that continual learning is essential for both personal and professional development. Keep in mind that growth can take many forms, and isn't always something you can measure externally. If I were to offer three direct suggestions based on what has helped me the most, they would be: reach out and connect with those who inspire you, read as much as you can, and create a support system that genuinely wants you to succeed.

**Kate Hertz, Content Specialist,
Visit Colorado Springs**



Kate, who has worked for Visit Colorado Springs for more than two years, studied communications at Pikes Peak State College. The 25-year-old is getting married in September to her partner of almost six years, Bryse, and the couple has a 5-year-old Maine Coon cat named Ruthie. Outside of work, Kate enjoys performance, playwriting, dance, visual art, reading, and more.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Hertz: Being selected for this cohort is such a privilege. The more I learn about my fellow honorees, the more flattered I am. What an accomplished group of young professionals, and what a compliment that I get to be recognized alongside them. I never expected to get into this industry, so being selected for such an honor makes me feel like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Hertz: I stumbled into this industry through my passion for community involvement: I started volunteering on the marketing team of a local nonprofit theater company. This work, combined with my passion for our city's arts scene, got me hired at our region's arts advocacy nonprofit.

Through that job, I met the incredible people at Visit Colorado Springs, and I admired the work they accomplished (and they seemed have a lot of fun while doing it). When a position opened on the team, I didn't hesitate to apply. Now, I get to do something I love every day: help others enjoy the things I love about my hometown.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Hertz: I'm proud that the work I've done, both on large marketing campaigns and day-to-day social media content, has increased our DMOs involvement with our community. Resident sentiment is one of my passions in this field. It's been deeply rewarding helping locals understand why the work we do benefits them, not just our visitors. I've gotten recognized by tons of other residents who enjoy the content I make and feel more connected to the place they live through the work I do. I couldn't ask for a better response than that.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Hertz: This industry is such an exciting blend of fun and meaningful work. You get to help connect people to beautiful experiences they'll remember for a lifetime, while also making a difference in your community. It's not always easy, but the people you meet and the impact you have all make the harder parts worth it.

**Oakley Swint, Travel Trade
Coordinator, Visit Salt Lake**



Oakley has been with Visit Salt Lake for two years. The 30-year-old graduated from Salt Lake Community College with an associate's degree in general studies. She loves weekend getaways, camping, hiking, and finding new places to explore.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Swint: Honestly, I still feel a little

shocked, but more than anything I feel incredibly honored and grateful. To be selected as a 30 Under 30 honoree after only a couple of years in the destination industry is something I am really proud of. I am excited for the opportunity to grow, make new connections, and meet others who are doing amazing work in this industry. I also feel very grateful to work for an organization like Visit Salt Lake that has supported me and helped me grow in my career.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Swint: I have always been passionate about travel, hospitality, and human connection. What I love about the destination industry is that it brings all of those things together. This industry connects people from all over the world and helps create meaningful experiences in places they may have never been before. I love being able to represent a destination I care so much about and help visitors have the best experience possible when they come to Salt Lake.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Swint: Being named a 30 Under 30 honoree is definitely one of the accomplishments I am most proud of so far. I have only been in the destination industry for two years, so receiving this recognition feels incredibly exciting and meaningful. It has reminded me that hard work, passion, and being willing to jump in and learn can really make an impact. It has also motivated me to keep growing, keep pushing myself, and continue building a career in an industry I truly love.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Swint: My advice would be to stay curious and be open to learning as much as you can. There are so many different roles within tourism and the destination industry, and each one plays an important part. Try different things, ask questions, meet people, and find the area that really excites you. There is truly something for everyone in this industry, and once you find the part you are passionate about, it becomes such a fun and rewarding career path.

**Breanna Martinez, Sports & Events
Sales Manager, Visit Phoenix**



Before joining Visit Phoenix, Breanna spent four years with Visit Corpus Christi, most recently serving as Sports Development Manager. She earned a bachelor's in kinesiology and health education from the University of Texas at Austin, double majoring

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Visit Franklin
TENNESSEE

Congratulations, Mykenzie!



**CONGRATULATIONS TO MYKENZIE JOHNSON
ON BEING NAMED A DESTINATIONS
INTERNATIONAL 30 UNDER 30 HONOREE**

This recognition highlights her passion, leadership, and dedication to creating exceptional experiences for our visitors, partners, and community. From all of us at Visit Franklin, thank you for the energy and creativity you bring each day—we're proud to celebrate this achievement and excited for what's ahead.

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TAMPA BAY



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in sport management and applied movement science. Outside of work, Bre enjoys traveling the world, watching and playing sports, and spending time with her Pembroke Welsh Corgi, Jordan.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Martinez: I feel incredibly honored and humbled to be recognized as a 30 Under 30 honoree. I've had the privilege of working alongside and learning from several past recipients, so being included among such talented and respected professionals is especially meaningful. This recognition reflects not only my own efforts, but also the support and encouragement I've received from mentors, colleagues, and the communities that have shaped my career.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Martinez: My passion for sports and travel naturally led me to the destination industry. During college, I landed a senior internship with Visit Austin without fully knowing what to

expect, but it quickly became clear that it was the perfect fit. I was drawn to the opportunity to connect people from around the world through sports and help create memorable experiences that leave a lasting impact on both visitors and the communities that host them. That's what continues to make this work so rewarding.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Martinez: One of my proudest accomplishments was helping build the sports commission in Corpus Christi from the ground up. As one of its first hires, I helped lay the foundation for an organization that grew into an award-winning destination for national and international sporting events. That experience taught me invaluable lessons in leadership, sales, and collaboration. Now, I'm excited to contribute to the continued growth of Phoenix's Sports & Events Commission to help elevate it on an even larger stage.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Martinez: My biggest piece of advice is to network intentionally and build genuine relationships. This

industry thrives on connections, and you never know where a conversation might lead. Stay curious, ask questions, and be open to learning from those around you. Take advantage of every opportunity to grow, whether through travel, events, or mentorship. Most importantly, have fun. This industry offers a unique opportunity to combine passion with purpose, so embrace every experience along the way.

Mykenzie Johnson, CMP, SEPC, Sr. Manager, Destination Experience, Visit Franklin



Mykenzie achieved a bachelor's degree in tourism, events, and recreation management as well as a master's degree in sport management from the University of Florida. The 28-year-old has been with Visit Franklin in Tennessee for three years. When she's not working, Mykenzie enjoys "experiences that bring people together" such as traveling, attending concerts, volunteering, and spending time with friends, family, and church community. Her favorite activities also include cooking, pickleball, and country line dancing.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Johnson: It's a tremendous honor to be recognized alongside so many talented professionals who are passionate about strengthening their destinations. This recognition feels especially meaningful because it reflects years of intentional investment in both my community and my professional growth. I made it a priority to understand every corner of Williamson County by building relationships with local partners, experiencing our destination firsthand, and continuously learning how to better serve meeting

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VISIT LAKE CHARLES
LOUISIANA'S PLAYGROUND

Congratulations!

EMILY TREME

Director of Association Sales

30 UNDER 30
CLASS OF 2026

 **DESTINATIONS**
INTERNATIONAL

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planners and visitors. It's rewarding to know that the time, energy, and passion I've invested have made an impact, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to continue learning from, collaborating with, and championing an industry that has given me so much.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Johnson: I've always had a heart for hospitality and helping people feel genuinely welcomed. Whether it's supporting local businesses, connecting visitors with memorable experiences, or helping planners bring successful events to life, I love creating meaningful connections. When I travel, I want to experience the authentic character of a place, not just see the highlights. That's exactly what I hope to provide for visitors to Williamson County by helping them experience our community through the people, places, and stories that make it special.

USAE: What is something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Johnson: I'm especially proud of reimagining how Visit Franklin serves

meeting and event planners. I developed a planner resource hub after recognizing recurring needs and created tools that simplify the planning process while showcasing our county's strongest assets. Through Destinations International's Intellectual Capital Certificate, I gained valuable insight into identifying and communicating what makes a destination distinctive, which helped shape these resources. Earning my Certified Meeting Professional (CMP) designation strengthened my industry knowledge and reinforced my commitment to providing planners with credible recommendations and exceptional service. The positive response from planners, along with continued growth in our group services, has been validating and motivating.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Johnson: Say yes to new opportunities, especially early in your career. When I first moved to Tennessee, I made it a priority to visit as many partners as possible, attend industry events, schedule site visits, and ask lots of questions. Every experience helped me better understand our

destination and build meaningful relationships. Stay curious, be willing to step outside your job description, and never underestimate the value of learning from others. Some of my best conversations and biggest insights happened outside of formal meetings, whether waiting in line at a concert or striking up a conversation over coffee downtown. The knowledge and connections you build will become your greatest professional assets.

Christen Miller, Sr. Partnerships Manager, Destination DC



Christen joined Destination DC in October 2021. She earned a bachelor's in communication studies at Kent State University and a master's in travel and tourism at Temple University. Her hobbies include hiking, jigsaw puzzles, participating in rec leagues and visiting D.C.'s world-class theater productions.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Miller: I'm so proud of the accomplishment, and I'm grateful to the leaders at Destination DC and in our industry who have inspired me along the way. It's an honor to represent Washington, D.C., as a part of this year's cohort and to be recognized for doing what I love. I enjoy supporting the marketing of our community festivals, helping raise awareness and funds for D.C. students' college and career journeys and showcasing D.C.'s unique neighborhoods. I'm excited to learn alongside such a talented group of professionals, grow as a leader and build new connections at Destinations International's Annual Convention.

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Join us in congratulating Belen on this well-deserved honor.

Belen Alvarado-Roman, Sustainable Tourism Specialist at the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau (GMCVB), has been named to the Destinations International Foundation 30 Under 30 Class of 2026.

This recognition highlights emerging leaders shaping the future of destination marketing organizations and reflects the GMCVB's commitment to advancing sustainable tourism and industry leadership.

MIAMI
GREATER MIAMI + MIAMI BEACH

GREATER MIAMI
CONVENTION &
VISITORS BUREAU



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USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Miller: In my first hospitality class at Kent State University, a speaker from our local Main Street introduced me to destination organizations and chambers of commerce and their role in revitalizing communities, supporting businesses and placemaking. It showed me how impactful this work can be and inspired my passion for connecting students with industry professionals early. Coming from a family of small business owners, I've always wanted to support entrepreneurs by providing resources and marketing that allow them to focus on their businesses. I'm proud to be in an industry that promotes our community while serving as an extension of the businesses and neighborhoods that make D.C. special.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Miller: I'm especially proud of leading the fundraising, grant writing and development efforts for our partner nonprofit, NEXTDC: Network, Educate, Experience & Travel, over the past five

years. We've experienced tremendous growth, expanding to support more than 1,500 student work-based learning experiences, internships and field trips annually across nine Washington, D.C., high schools. In 2025, we worked with our stakeholders to redefine our brand to better reflect our mission, strengthening our recognition among students, alumni, nonprofit partners and the broader community. It's rewarding to expand opportunities for D.C. students studying hospitality and inspire them to explore both our industry and their own city.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Miller: Don't be afraid to ask questions, show curiosity and learn new things. Take advantage of every opportunity to get involved, whether it's attending meetings, volunteering at special events or building relationships with colleagues and partners. Working at a DMO gives you a unique chance to connect with the people, places and experiences that define your community. Stay focused on the people you're serving, give back whenever you can and remember that your work helps support the local businesses, cultural institutions

and experiences that make a destination thrive for both residents and visitors.

Clara Rooks, TMP, Sr. Marketing Communications Manager, Explore Gwinnett | Tourism & Film



Clara has been with Georgia's Explore Gwinnett for seven years. She attended Georgia College & State University and enjoys running, reading, and needlepointing. Married for almost seven years, Clara has two kids (Charlotte, who is 3, and Campbell, who turns 1 in August) and two dogs

(Sadie and Tally, both Goldendoodles).

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Rooks: I feel incredibly honored to be a 30 under 30 honoree. It is something I have wanted for a long time, and I am so excited for all that is to come this next year. Destinations International is an important organization for DMOs, and I am looking forward to growing my knowledge of the industry. Getting to represent Explore Gwinnett as a 30 Under 30 honoree has been the highlight of my career so far.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Rooks: Honestly, I had never even heard of a CVB or DMO when I graduated from college. I always knew I wanted to work somewhere that directly impacted the community I lived in. I started out looking at the Gwinnett Chamber and found Explore Gwinnett because they rent offices in their building. I am so thankful I found the tourism industry—I have never looked back after my first day. Now I am seven years in, and it is the best job ever. Working with all our local businesses and cities is more fulfilling than I could

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Congratulations, Abi Waldron

VISITORS CENTER MANAGER



30 UNDER 30

2026 HONOREE

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have ever imagined.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Rooks: Getting the chance to grow Gwinnett Burger Week is an opportunity I look forward to each year. It is a sought-after promotion from restaurants all over our county. The stories and testimonies we hear each year from restaurants raving about all their new customers or patrons coming up to us at a festival telling us they have the whole week planned out brings me so much joy. To me, Gwinnett Burger Week is what being a DMO is all about. We are providing a unique experience to our local restaurants and patrons that benefits everyone, and they can't find it anywhere else. Each year we take it up a notch, and we now use Bandwango to give all people a chance to check in and earn prizes. We even have a Burger Wall of Fame, and every year we have 15+ people who eat at 10 or more restaurants in one week. We love our "bun-heads."

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Rooks: Learn. Come into your position with a desire to learn all you possibly can, especially from those who have come before you—their knowledge is super important to you being successful. I grew up in my destination, but I still learn something new about Gwinnett County every day. I would also encourage anyone to get involved with local and regional community groups that offer personal and professional development. That includes state tourism conferences, STS and even international groups like Destinations International. It is beneficial to meet with like-minded people from other destinations. We all learn from each other, and that's another reason I am thrilled to connect with the other honorees throughout this year.

**Marijah Pruitt, Assistant Manager,
Member Services, LA Tourism &
Convention Board**



Marijah has been with the LA Tourism & Convention Board for nearly four years. The 25-year-old graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) with a bachelor's in communications, completing her degree in just three years. Marijah, who has a Miniature Schnauzer named Luna B, enjoys spending time with her family—especially her nieces and nephews—reading, and "taking time to recharge with the people who matter most."

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Pruitt: I am incredibly honored and grateful to be selected as a Destinations International 30 Under 30 honoree. To be recognized alongside so many talented young professionals from across the industry is both exciting and humbling. This opportunity is not only a personal milestone but also a chance to learn from industry leaders, build lasting relationships, and bring new ideas back to Los Angeles Tourism. I'm looking forward to growing as a leader and continuing to make a meaningful impact in my community through tourism.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Pruitt: To be honest, I didn't know much about the tourism industry before joining Los Angeles Tourism. I actually came across the opportunity by chance, but once I learned about the organization's mission, everything clicked. I was inspired by the way tourism could create economic opportunity while supporting local communities. I had always hoped to build a career in which I could make a difference, particularly for underserved communities, and I realized the destination industry offered a unique way to do that. Looking back, applying for that position was one of the best decisions I've made.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Pruitt: One of my proudest accomplishments has been creating Los Angeles Tourism's Small, Diverse Membership Program. The program was designed to reduce barriers to participation in the tourism industry by providing complimentary membership, education, networking opportunities, and industry connections to small and diverse-owned businesses. Watching businesses build relationships, gain exposure, and access opportunities they may not have otherwise had has been incredibly rewarding. Seeing members support one another and grow together has reinforced why I am so passionate about creating pathways that make the tourism industry more inclusive and accessible.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Pruitt: Be curious and don't be afraid to raise your hand. As you gain experience, find an area you're passionate about and look for opportunities to make it better. Some of the most rewarding work comes from seeing a need and taking the initiative to create a solution. You don't have to wait years to make an impact—great ideas can come from anyone.

**Dylan Hammon, Convention
Services Manager, Destination
Cleveland**



Dylan and his wife, Casey, recently welcomed a baby girl, Bernadette. He has been with the bureau for three years and is a graduate of Miami University.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Hammon: Being named a 30 Under 30 honoree is both humbling and energizing. It feels incredibly rewarding to have the opportunity to showcase the work we're doing in Cleveland and the impact our industry has on communities. I'm grateful to be part of the Destination Cleveland team, where collaboration and innovation make it possible to create meaningful experiences for visitors while contributing to the continued growth and success of our region. This recognition inspires me to keep learning, leading and finding new ways to make a positive impact.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Hammon: My career has always centered around creating exceptional event experiences, whether through sports, partnerships or large-scale events across the country. No matter the role, there was always a strong connection to hospitality and leveraging the unique character of each destination to enhance the attendee experience. When I relocated back to Cleveland, the destination industry

felt like the perfect opportunity to combine my professional experience with my passion for the community. It allows me to play a role in shaping how both visitors and residents experience our region while contributing firsthand to the success of my city.

USAE: What is something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Hammon: One accomplishment I'm especially proud of is the level of involvement I've had in the Cleveland community during my time with Destination Cleveland. While I've had the opportunity to contribute to many projects and events, one moment stands out. In my first month, I welcomed attendees on stage at the AME Conference with a "Welcome to Cleveland" introduction. Afterward, the AME CEO sent a heartfelt thank-you note that I still keep on my desk. It serves as a daily reminder that even small moments of hospitality can create lasting impressions and meaningful experiences for visitors and our community.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Hammon: My advice would be to immerse yourself in your destination beyond the highlights. Take the time to learn its history, understand what makes it unique and experience it the way locals do. Visit the neighborhoods, attend community events, support local businesses and seek out the stories that aren't always in the visitor guide. The more deeply you understand your community, the more authentically you can share it with others. That perspective not only makes you more effective in the destination industry, but it also helps create more meaningful and memorable experiences for every visitor.

**Erin Hofener, Marketing &
Communications Coordinator,
City of Broken Arrow/
Visit Broken Arrow**



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Erin joined the City of Broken Arrow/ Visit Broken Arrow in Oklahoma on July 7, 2020. A proud Oklahoma State University alumna, she teaches dance—primarily tap and jazz but a few other genres get thrown in every now and then—at two local studios. She has two pets: a collie named Louise and a cat named Harriett

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Hofener: Being selected as a 30 Under 30 honoree is incredibly humbling. It's inspiring to see Destinations International investing in the next generation of destination leaders and creating opportunities for young professionals to learn and grow. Coming from a background outside of tourism, this recognition is especially meaningful. I'm also impressed by how engaged the program's alumni remain, which gives me confidence that this experience will have a lasting impact. I'm excited to learn from this incredible network and continue growing throughout the program.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Hofener: My path into the destination industry wasn't planned. After being laid off during the COVID-19 pandemic, I accepted an administrative position with Broken Arrow's Tourism & Economic Development Department. What started as my next job quickly became a career I love. I discovered a passion for telling my community's story, supporting local businesses, and creating experiences that make a real impact. That passion eventually led me into a marketing role, where I now have the opportunity to help shape how people experience Broken Arrow.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Hofener: I'm especially proud of helping grow Christmas in Broken Arrow into an experience that brings our community together while welcoming visitors from across the region. Each year, it takes months of planning, collaboration, and creativity to transform our downtown into a holiday destination. Seeing families make memories, local businesses benefit from increased visitation, and the community embrace the event reminds me why I love working in destination marketing. It's incredibly rewarding to be part of something that has become a cherished tradition.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Hofener: Be a sponge. Say yes to opportunities, ask questions, and

never think a task is beneath you. In this industry, one day you might be helping develop a marketing campaign, and the next you might be setting up tables or picking up trash after an event. Both are important. Through the internship program I help lead, I encourage students to embrace every experience because the people who grow the fastest are the ones who stay curious, work hard, and are always willing to jump in.

Genevieve Andrea, Marketing Manager, Destination Cape Breton



A major sports fan, Genevieve follows Formula 1, golf, hockey, tennis and curling. She often can be found on the golf course, including Cabot Cliffs and Cabot Links, or on the curling ice. Away from sports, she loves live music and has attended plenty of concerts, including Taylor Swift, Ed Sheeran, Jonas Brothers, Harry Styles and Shania Twain. Genevieve has been with the Nova Scotian CVB for two years, and she attended St. Francis Xavier University and George Brown Polytechnic.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Andrea: It's a real honor, and honestly a bit humbling. There are so many talented people working in this industry, so to be recognized among them means a lot. I see it less as a personal achievement and more as a reflection of the team and mentors around me who have supported and pushed me along the way. It's also encouraging as someone early in their career, a sign that the work we're doing to grow tourism on Cape Breton Island is being noticed. Mostly, it makes me excited for what's still ahead in this industry.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Andrea: With my background in sport and event marketing, I was always drawn to the human-connection side of the work. I connected far

more with storytelling and creating experiences than with the sales side of marketing. Destination marketing lives in exactly that space, which I found really attractive. Being born and raised on Cape Breton Island, I also couldn't imagine a better destination to represent. Getting to share the place that shaped me, its people, culture and landscapes with the rest of the world turns the job into something that feels personal rather than just professional.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Andrea: I led the development of Destination Cape Breton's new Visit Cape Breton website and app, and I'm really proud of where they've landed. We're always refining and improving them, but seeing the difference between our previous platforms and what we have now is genuinely rewarding. These are the tools visitors use to discover and plan their trip to the Island, so getting them right matters. It was a big undertaking, and being trusted to lead it early in my career, then delivering something the whole team is proud of, is an accomplishment that stands out for me.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Andrea: Your network is your net worth. Don't be afraid to reach out to people for advice or just to chat. When I was in school at George Brown, I connected with people working in roles I was interested in, and so many of them were happy to grab a coffee or hop on a call to share their experience. Those conversations were invaluable. Most people genuinely want to help, so put yourself out there, ask questions and build relationships early. The connections you make now will shape your career in ways you can't predict yet.

Jenna Theriot, Events & Sponsorship Sales Manager, New Orleans & Company



Jenna and her husband, Hunter, have a 10-month-old daughter, Mar-

ley, and a German Shorthaired Pointer named Jaeger. She has been at New Orleans & Company for four years. Jenna attended Ursuline Academy in New Orleans for high school and graduated from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Theriot: Being named a 30 Under 30 honoree is incredibly rewarding. It feels amazing to be recognized as a hardworking young professional, especially in an industry and city that I care so deeply about. It's truly a "pinch me" moment that reminds me how far I've come while also motivating me to keep growing. This recognition inspires me to continue building meaningful relationships, creating impactful experiences, and making a positive difference in New Orleans throughout my career.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Theriot: My love for New Orleans is what drew me to the destination industry. I was born and raised here, and now I'm building my own family and career in the city I love. I genuinely believe New Orleans is a place everyone should experience at least once, and I want every resident to feel proud to call it home. Being part of an organization that promotes our culture, supports local businesses, and strengthens our community makes this work incredibly meaningful.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Theriot: One of my proudest accomplishments has been building strong relationships throughout our community and helping connect people who share a passion for making New Orleans better. Over the past four years, I've had the opportunity to bring businesses, organizations, and community leaders together through meaningful partnerships and events. Seeing those connections lead to collaboration, growth, and a stronger city is incredibly rewarding and reminds me why I love the work I do.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Theriot: Lead with passion and find work that genuinely excites and fulfills you. When you believe in what you're doing, your enthusiasm becomes contagious and helps you build authentic relationships. Don't be afraid to ask questions, make connections, and say yes to new opportunities. This industry is built on people, so invest in those relationships early. Stay curious, work hard, and remember that every experience is an opportunity to learn and grow.

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Hayden Pigott, Manager, Social Content, Brand USA



A graduate of the University of Texas at Austin, Hayden joined Brand USA two years ago. She runs a social club in Charlotte, which has 2,500-plus members, to help adults make friends through monthly events. A huge college football fan, Hayden said that any given Saturday in the fall you will find her in a stadium yelling her heart out.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Pigott: Incredibly honored. As I was applying, I looked through the 30 Under 30 alumni at Brand USA and wasn't sure I could measure up to their caliber. And the group I'm part of now is incredible. Everyone is so talented, aware, and driven.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Pigott: From a young age, my parents instilled in me a sense of curiosity about the world around me. I would race to the mailbox to crack open the latest edition of *Southern Living* to see which destinations were featured, and my dream job, which does not exist, was to be the travel editor of *Vogue Italia*. Of course, a lot of my childhood love of travel was influenced by my mother, who began working for my hometown DMO when I was four. Her passion for community building through tourism led me to where I am today.

USAE: What is something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Pigott: Last summer, my boss approached me about bringing our social media content entirely in-house, meaning I would be responsible for the creation of the bulk of our Instagram and TikTok content. I jumped at the opportunity, and it has been a wild ride ever since. But to see how our content has changed from last summer to now is remarkable. Today, when you look at Brand USA's social, it feels cohesive,

beautiful, and enticing. I'm so proud of what we've created and excited to continue expanding the brand.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Pigott: Travel around the area you represent. You will meet incredible people, and that will help you bring stories to life, whether that's through social media or branding or sports marketing or any other part of the travel industry. Seeing the places we talk about and the people we help should be of the utmost importance to you.

Aaron Roddy, Content Manager, Discover Albany



Aaron has been with Discover Albany for a little more than 3 years. He attended college at SUNY Geneseo and double majored in Communication and Philosophy. Outside of work, Aaron enjoys birding and spending time with his ragdoll cat, Pippa.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Roddy: I feel honored, humbled, and a little bit of imposter syndrome. This is an incredible group of people who do such great work across the industry. I'm looking forward to meeting them in person at Destinations International's Annual Convention, and I'm even more excited to learn and grow alongside them throughout the year.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Roddy: I was not actively looking for this industry. I graduated during COVID and took whatever remote work I could get at the time, which landed me a job outside my field for a while. Then, a social media position came along at Discover Albany and I ended up falling in love with it. This work let me see the area I grew up in through a completely new lens. It gave me a deep appreciation for Albany, and getting to promote it and convince people to visit is very rewarding.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Roddy: Besides the 30 Under 30 recognition, I'm proud of the work we've done behind the scenes within the past year to set Discover Albany up for the future. We've been working on a rebrand that's still yet to be released and are building a new website with Tempest. I'm also very proud of the work we do bringing local partners together around shared events. It's nice to see the community come together with one common goal.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Roddy: I would tell someone starting out in the industry to ask questions and stay curious. It will be both professionally and personally rewarding if you fully embrace it.

Abby Tingle, Social Media and Website Manager, Discover Monroe-West Monroe



Abby has been with Discover Monroe-West Monroe since September 2022. A 2020 graduate of the University of Louisiana Monroe, she's also a Certified Travel Marketing Professional (TMP), a Professional in Destination Management (PDM), and a graduate of the Louisiana Tourism Leadership Academy. Outside of her role with Discover Monroe-West Monroe, Abby serves on the board of Friends of Monroe Main Street and contributes to industry leadership through Destinations International's Marketing and Community Alignment Committees and the Southeast Tourism Society's Education and Networking Pillar Committees.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Tingle: It is an incredible honor to be recognized as a Destinations International 30 Under 30 honoree. The tourism industry has changed my life in more ways than I can count and has become a true passion. To

be recognized alongside so many talented emerging leaders is both humbling and inspiring. This honor not only celebrates where I am today, but it also motivates me to continue growing, learning, and serving the communities and destinations that make this industry so meaningful.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Tingle: I actually stumbled into the destination marketing industry. While I was in college, Discover Monroe-West Monroe was hiring a communications assistant, and because I needed an internship, I figured, "Why not apply?" It didn't take long for me to realize I had found the right career. After graduating, I was fortunate to be offered a full-time position, allowing me to continue growing in an industry that had quickly become my passion. I fell in love with telling the stories of destinations, celebrating the people and businesses that make a community special, and inspiring others to experience them. And if I'm being honest, it's one of the most fun industries to work in—you get to make a positive impact while sharing places you genuinely love.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Tingle: One accomplishment I'm especially proud of is helping create and sustain our "Outside the Lines Originals" series. For the past two years, we've consistently featured local businesses, leaders, and community members through long-form videos, short-form content, and written stories. It's been incredibly rewarding to give people a platform to share their stories while highlighting the positive impact they're making in our community. Seeing both residents and visitors connect with these stories has reinforced my belief that authentic storytelling is one of the most powerful tools destination marketing has to inspire pride and encourage exploration.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Tingle: Be open-minded and soak up every opportunity to learn. This industry is incredibly collaborative, and one of its greatest strengths is that people genuinely want to see one another succeed. Ask questions, volunteer for projects, attend conferences, and don't be afraid to introduce yourself to others in the industry. Some of the best opportunities in my career have come from simply being curious, building relationships, and saying "yes" to experiences that helped me grow.

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Abigail Waldron, Visitor Center Manager, Visit Lexington



Abigail has been with VisitLEX since September 2023. She earned her business administration degree with a focus in finance and a minor in communications from Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. In her free time, Abigail is a youth sports lacrosse coach and referee. At the end of the day, she returns home to her little black cat, Osborne, “or Oz-Boz for short.”

USAE: How do you feel being a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Waldron: Proud, honored, and humbled. I put in the work every day to make our visitor services great, so it is an honor to be the only one representing this part of our industry in this class. This accomplishment makes me feel that my future is what I make it, so why not make it meaningful and impactful.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Waldron: I grew up traveling and it is still my reset time, so why not work in the industry I support and love so much? Lexington, Kentucky, is a city I am proud to call home, so I jumped at the chance to share my love with visitors and locals coming through.

USAE: What is something you’re proud to have accomplished so far?

Waldron: One huge part of my job is making sure our Blue Horse is a symbol for Lexington. I managed the creation of our online store to amplify the Blue Horse brand. This was and still is a large commitment of time, but sales and buzz have only increased since opening this. So check out ShopVisitLEX.com.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Waldron: Know what makes your place special, not the one attraction

or thing to do, but what is essential to making your location stand out. Here, we have horses, bourbon, history, and more, but the people behind them are the piece that make visitors want to come back. Every connection you make is important—you just do not know when it will be.

Alex Corlett, Partners in Tourism Manager, Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority



Alex graduated from Appalachian State University with a degree in hospitality & tourism management. She joined the Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority (CRVA) shortly thereafter. Seven years later, she is proud to have grown her career with the organization, now serving in her second role. Outside of work, Alex enjoys traveling to both new and familiar places—“especially in the mountains”—playing music, snowboarding “whenever I get the chance,” and spending time with her husband, family, and friends.

USAE: How do you feel being a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Corlett: I am so grateful to be selected as a member of Destinations International’s 2026 30 Under 30 class. This is an incredible opportunity to grow alongside and connect with talented young professionals who share the same goal of strengthening destinations and the communities they serve. It is a privilege to be included among this group of emerging leaders, and I look forward to exchanging ideas, building lasting relationships, and gaining new perspectives throughout the program.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Corlett: The idea of contributing, in some small way, to people’s favorite moments is what first sparked my interest in this profession. As I learned more about destination organizations, I became increasingly inspired by the broader impact they have on their

communities. Tourism has a unique ability to connect people, places, and experiences while enhancing the quality of life for residents. That lasting impact continues to reaffirm that the destination industry is where I want to build my career.

USAE: What is something you’re proud to have accomplished so far?

Corlett: After earning my promotion to manager in 2023, I took over as department lead for our Minority & Women-Owned Business Enterprise partnership level which offers accessible pricing to reduce investment barriers while helping ensure the CRVA Partners in Tourism program better reflects the Charlotte community. Under my leadership of the program, 40% of the new partners we’ve welcomed represent Asian-, Black-, Hispanic-, Native American-, and Women-owned businesses, resulting in a 172% increase in our MWBE partnerships.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Corlett: Relationships are key. Invest in them early and often by taking the time to ask questions and seeking out opportunities to connect with colleagues, partners, and mentors. In an industry built on people and experiences, genuine relationships are invaluable.

Allyson Ennis, Digital Media Manager, Delaware Tourism Office



After graduating from Susquehanna University with a bachelor’s in luxury brand marketing and management, Allyson moved to Delaware and was hired by the Delaware Tourism Office (DTO) in 2023. She has since been promoted to Digital Media Manager and manages the social media pages, newsletters, and websites of the Delaware Tourism Office and Delaware Division of Small Business, where DTO is housed. Outside of work, Allyson

teaches ballet to young dancers, mentors students from her alma mater, is a member of a walking club, and enjoys life by the Delaware beaches.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Ennis: I’m so excited about this opportunity. It’s such an honor to have been accepted into the class of 2026. This has been a goal of mine for quite some time. I’m looking forward to building meaningful connections, sharing my passion for tourism, and learning from such an accomplished group of industry professionals.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Ennis: As someone who has always loved creativity, hospitality, and building community, starting my career with the Delaware Tourism Office felt like a dream come true. It allows me to combine my passion for communications and marketing with meaningful work that supports local businesses and communities. Growing up in Pennsylvania, Delaware was a place I visited throughout my childhood. Having the opportunity to help tell its story and showcase everything it has to offer has been incredibly rewarding. Along the way, I’ve built lasting relationships with people across the state who share that same passion.

USAE: What is something you’re proud to have accomplished so far?

Ennis: One thing I’m especially proud of is how much I’ve grown by stepping outside of my comfort zone. When I first started working in tourism, the idea of traveling on my own felt intimidating. Today, travel is something I can’t imagine my life without. It’s broadened my perspective and introduced me to incredible people and places. Professionally, I’ve continued challenging myself by collaborating with tourism partners, earning my Part 107 Drone Certification, and applying for Destinations International’s 30 Under 30 program. These experiences have helped me grow both personally and professionally. I’m excited to keep building on them.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Ennis: Tourism is filled with passionate people who genuinely want to share their knowledge and help others grow. Let your enthusiasm show, ask questions, and be willing to learn from every experience. Whether you’re exploring another country, another state, or simply your own backyard, there’s always something new to discover—and those experiences will make you a better storyteller.

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Amie Diehl, Social Media & Content Manager, Visit Haywood



Amie has spent the past four years sharing the stories that make Haywood County in North Carolina an unforgettable destination. A graduate of Furman University, she has the privilege of combining her passion for storytelling, marketing, travel, and the outdoors in her work every day. Outside the office, Amie can be found running her photography business, exploring the mountains with her husband and “our goofy English Lab,” or serving on the Haywood Arts Council, Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation, and Destinations International’s PR & Communications Committee.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Diehl: When I found out I was selected, I immediately let out a loud scream. I was completely shocked and honestly didn’t expect to see my name on the list. Coming from what is probably one of the smallest destinations represented in this year’s class, being recognized alongside so many talented professionals was incredibly humbling. More than anything, I felt proud. Proud to represent Haywood County on an international stage and to show that meaningful, innovative work can come from a small destination. It’s an honor I certainly don’t take for granted.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Diehl: Like many 2020 graduates, I was applying anywhere and everywhere as the job market became uncertain during COVID-19. I was fortunate to eventually land a marketing role at Lake Junaluska (one of the five mountain towns in Haywood County), where I unexpectedly discovered my passion for destination marketing. Two years later, I joined the Visit Haywood team, and I like to say I upgraded

from marketing one mountain town to five. I love helping tell the stories of the people and places that make Haywood County special, and I can’t imagine working in any other industry now. Tourism is truly a community of passionate people who love where they live and love what they do.

USAE: What’s something you’re proud to have accomplished so far?

Diehl: I’m especially proud of helping shape several major initiatives at Visit Haywood over the past four years. I’ve had the opportunity to contribute to Haywood County’s 10-year Destination Master Plan; launch our quarterly networking series, Mountain Mornings; and lead some of our first hosted group press trips. I’ve also contributed to signature initiatives such as Visit Haywood Ice Fest, Gift of Haywood, and Fat Burger Month, which have grown into highly anticipated campaigns/events that celebrate our communities while driving visitation and supporting local businesses. Seeing these ideas grow from concepts into successful, impactful programs has been incredibly rewarding.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Diehl: Always say yes to new opportunities, even if they’re outside your comfort zone. Working on a small team means I’ve had the chance to wear a lot of hats, take on projects I never expected, and learn something new almost every day. Those experiences have been some of the biggest drivers of my growth. Stay curious, keep learning, and don’t be afraid to raise your hand. Every new challenge helps build your skills, expand your perspective, and prepare you for opportunities you never saw coming.

Belen Alvarado-Roman, Sustainable Tourism Specialist, Greater Miami CVB



Belen has been with the Greater Miami CVB for nearly three years, where she serves as a Sustainable

Tourism Specialist. Originally from the Midwest, she earned a bachelor’s in tourism, event & sport management from Indiana University Indianapolis. During her undergraduate studies, Belen completed an ecotourism study abroad program in Costa Rica and an academic exchange at Florida International University, which ultimately brought her to Miami. Outside of work, Belen enjoys running, Pilates, spending time at the beach, participating in beach cleanups, and exploring Miami’s wellness community.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Alvarado-Roman: Being named a 30 Under 30 honoree is incredibly meaningful because there are relatively few professionals dedicated exclusively to sustainable tourism within destination organizations. This recognition is an opportunity to share the work we’re doing in Greater Miami and Miami Beach while helping elevate sustainability as a core part of destination management. I’m especially excited to connect with other emerging leaders, learn from their experiences, exchange ideas, and build relationships that will help us collectively shape a more responsible and resilient future for the travel industry.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Alvarado-Roman: I’ve always been passionate about travel and the connections it creates between people, cultures, and communities. Through internships with destination organizations and my experiences studying ecotourism in Costa Rica and at Florida International University, I discovered how destinations can be a force for positive impact. That inspired me to pursue a career where I could help shape a destination’s future while balancing visitor experiences with community well-being and environmental stewardship.

USAE: What’s something you’re proud to have accomplished so far?

Alvarado-Roman: One accomplishment I’m especially proud of is helping broaden the conversation around sustainability in our destination. I’ve worked to show that sustainability is about more than environmental initiatives. It’s also about creating a destination where everyone feels welcome, included, and able to experience all that Greater Miami and Miami Beach have to offer. Seeing our partners embrace a more holistic approach to sustainability and collaborate toward a shared vision has been incredibly rewarding and reinforces why I’m passionate about this work.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Alvarado-Roman: My advice is to take it one day at a time. Meaningful change doesn’t happen overnight, especially in our industry. Celebrate the small wins because they often lead to the biggest impact over time. It’s easy to focus on what’s next, but don’t forget to appreciate where you are and how far you’ve come. Stay curious, keep learning, and trust that every experience, challenge, and connection is helping shape the leader you’re becoming.

Anna-Grace Agnini, Environmental Resource and Ecotourism Program Manager, Martin County Office of Tourism and Marketing



Anna-Grace has been with the Martin County Office of Tourism and Marketing since January 2023. Before moving to Florida, she graduated from North Carolina State University with a degree in parks, recreation, and tourism management in 2022—“go Pack!” Outside of work, Anna-Grace enjoys many hobbies, including hiking, photography, waterskiing, and yoga.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Agnini: Receiving this recognition is incredibly meaningful to me because I have seen firsthand the impact that Destinations International has on the global tourism industry through my work at Discover Martin County. To be recognized by such a respected organization at this stage in my career is both an honor and a source of motivation as I continue pursuing my passion for the intersection of tourism and sustainability. I am especially excited for the opportunity to learn from industry leaders and connect with other young professionals who are helping shape the future of the tourism industry.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Agnini: I was most attracted to a career in the destination industry

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because of my love for travel. I have always loved exploring new destinations, especially their unique natural areas, so I wanted to combine these passions and pursue a career in sustainable tourism. I hope to help people explore new places while still protecting them for future generations to discover.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Agnini: In my role, I cofounded the Explore Natural Martin program for Discover Martin, an in-house ecotourism program that brings both visitors and residents into Martin County's parks and preserves. I am proud to have developed Explore Natural Martin over the past 3 years and watch it grow into a successful program, helping people explore new trails, learn about Florida's plants and animals, and become stewards of the environment.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Agnini: Stay curious and don't be afraid to step outside your comfort zone. Some of the most rewarding opportunities in my career have come from taking on projects I had never done before. Ask questions, work to build relationships with others in the industry, and continue learning. Most importantly, find the part of the destination industry that truly excites you. Your passion will help guide your career and make the work incredibly rewarding.

Carla Bonilla, Web Content Manager, Discover Puerto Rico



A certified florist, Carla owns a small floral business where she creates custom arrangements and hosts interactive bloom bar experiences. She has been with Discover Puerto Rico for three years and earned her

bachelor's in communications from the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus. She later completed a Master of Business Administration at Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico, Metropolitan Campus. Carla has an "amazing boyfriend" and a lucky bamboo plant her mom gifted her that keeps her on her toes.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Bonilla: I'm still pinching myself. Being recognized alongside so many talented young professionals is incredibly exciting, and I'm truly honored. It's a reminder of how much I've learned already and how much more there is to explore in this industry. I'm excited to keep growing, learning, and contributing to an industry that means so much to me.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Bonilla: I began my career as a journalist before moving into content and digital marketing in the fashion industry. While working for a magazine, I had the opportunity to write about travel and Puerto Rico, and something clicked. I realized that travel and the destination industry has the power to connect people with culture, history, and communities while inspiring them to experience a place in a more meaningful way.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Bonilla: One project that means a great deal to me is The Green Path, a sustainability microsite designed to inspire more intentional travel across Puerto Rico. Instead of simply showcasing places to visit, we focused on telling the stories of local businesses, communities, and the unique conservation efforts helping preserve the Island. It reminded me that destination marketing can do much more than attract visitors to my beautiful Island. It can educate, encourage thoughtful choices, help travelers build a deeper connection with the places they explore, and make learning about sustainability both fun and engaging.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Bonilla: Never lose sight of the people behind the destination. Every campaign, itinerary, or piece of content represents someone's community, culture, and story. Trends and technology will continue to change, but authenticity never goes out of style. When you create work that genuinely reflects a place and the people who call it home, you're not just inspiring travel, you're helping visitors build a meaningful connection that lasts long after their trip.

Emily Treme, Director of Association Sales, Visit Lake Charles



A Lake Charles native, Emily has been with the Louisiana CVB for two years. Outside of work, she loves reading, spending time with friends on the weekends, and attending festivals and live music events. She also loves getting out and experiencing all the new and exciting restaurants, businesses, and attractions popping up around Lake Charles. Emily attended McNeese State University and has two mini dachshunds, Coco and Spud.

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Treme: I feel incredibly honored to be named a 30 Under 30 honoree. I know what a true accomplishment this is, not only for me personally but also for someone in the travel industry. I am one of only four people at Visit Lake Charles to receive this award, and it is truly an honor to follow in their footsteps.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

Treme: I got my start at a destination management company in Colorado, and honestly, I had no idea what a DMC or even a DMO was when I first started. I'm originally from Lake Charles, so when an opportunity opened up at Visit Lake Charles, I couldn't pass it up. Being able to come home and help showcase the place where I grew up has been incredibly rewarding. I truly believe this is what I was meant to do.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Treme: One accomplishment I am most proud of is helping bring some of Louisiana's largest conferences to Lake Charles. Since joining Visit Lake Charles, I have secured more than 14,000 room nights and had the opportunity to help bring in events like the Louisiana Municipal Association Convention. Seeing thousands of attendees experience my hometown

while creating a positive economic impact for our community is something I am incredibly proud of. It reminds me why I love what I do every day.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Treme: My biggest piece of advice is to say yes to every opportunity you can. Attend networking events, volunteer for committees, ask questions, and don't be afraid to step outside of your comfort zone. This industry is built on relationships, and the connections you make can open doors you never expected. Most importantly, stay curious and never stop learning because there is always something new to discover in this industry.

Julie Bicknell, Social Media Specialist, Discover The Palm Beaches



Julie, age 28, has been with Discover The Palm Beaches for three years. She earned a bachelor's at the University of Florida in business administration-marketing. Julie has a black lab mix named Oakley and loves spending time at the beach, paddleboarding, planning and hosting social events for young adults, and "bringing the community together and creating memorable experiences."

USAE: How do you feel about being named a 30 Under 30 honoree?

Bicknell: I'm incredibly honored to be named a 30 Under 30 honoree and particularly proud to be the first from our marketing team. This recognition is both exciting and meaningful, as it reflects the passion I've poured into promoting our destination. I'm also looking forward to connecting with and learning from other talented professionals across the industry who share this honor and growing alongside such an inspiring group of peers.

USAE: What attracted you to a career in the destination industry?

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NEWS

Sarah Hughes Tapped to Lead VisitNorfolk

By Jonathan Trager

VisitNorfolk has named Sarah Hughes as its next President and CEO, making her the first-ever female leader of the southeast Virginia organization.

Hughes, who has spent the past seven years with VisitNorfolk and most recently served as Vice President of Marketing and Communications, officially assumed the role on July 14. She succeeds Frank Reynolds, who had served as interim CEO since January and will remain with the organization as CFO.

Hughes said she's honored to lead

Hughes said she's honored to lead the organization and credited VisitNorfolk's staff, board, and community partners for helping shape the organization's work.

the organization and credited VisitNorfolk's staff, board, and community partners for helping shape the organization's work.

"I am incredibly honored to serve as VisitNorfolk's next President and CEO," Hughes said. "Over the past seven years, I've had the privilege of working alongside an exceptional team, dedicated board members, and passionate community partners who care deeply about Norfolk's success."

Hughes said she looks forward to building on the organization's momentum while promoting Norfolk's waterfront,

neighborhoods, arts, culture, and culinary offerings to visitors. She also said she plans to strengthen partnerships across the hospitality industry and community as VisitNorfolk works to expand tourism's economic impact.

VisitNorfolk Board Chair Anne Thuma said Hughes' experience and leadership made her the board's choice to lead the organization.

"We are thrilled to welcome Sarah as VisitNorfolk's next President and CEO," Thuma said. "It is clear that Sarah possesses the vision, leadership, and collaborative approach needed to lead VisitNorfolk into its next chapter."

Thuma said Hughes has helped strengthen the organization, build partnerships throughout the community, and elevate Norfolk's reputation



Sarah Hughes

as a visitor destination. She said the board believes Hughes will continue growing the city's visitor economy while advancing VisitNorfolk's strategic plan.

Hyatt Suit

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checked out, housekeeping is supposed to notify the front desk and the front desk is supposed to reach that person," Broillet said during court proceedings, according to CVN.

Hyatt representatives in court proceedings said after Gonzalez missed her check out, a housekeeper briefly entered her room, but quickly withdrew when met with Gonzalez's small dog, which had not been registered with the hotel, according to CVN. At the time the housekeeper entered the room, Gonzalez was not visible, but the dog and her suitcase were, the outlet reported.

Broillet in a statement said he hoped hotels would take the situation as a cautionary tale to ensure staff are

trained and follow protocols.

"This verdict is an important measure of justice for Cindy's family, who have endured an unimaginable loss," said Broillet. "It is the family's hope and ours that all hotels will take notice and follow industry standards regarding guest wellness to avoid this ever happening to anybody else again."

After closing arguments, the San Diego County jury awarded Gonzalez's family and estate a total of \$15,525,000. Of that, her estate received \$500,000 for pain and suffering, her son was awarded \$1.1 million for past pain and suffering and more than \$8.5 million for future pain and suffering, and her mother was awarded \$1.2 million for past pain and suffering and \$4.2 million for future pain and suffering.

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Bicknell: I was drawn to a career in the destination industry through my love for travel and the experiences that come with it. From discovering new restaurants to exploring nature and creating lasting memories, travel has always inspired me. I wanted to help others feel that same sense of excitement and connection. Being able to share the place I call home with visitors and showcase everything that makes it special is gratifying, and it's what continues to motivate me in this industry every day.

USAE: What's something you're proud to have accomplished so far?

Bicknell: I'm especially proud of supporting our #LOVEThePalmBeaches campaign, a resident-focused summer social media initiative that encourages locals to share what they

love about The Palm Beaches. By posting their favorite photos and videos using our hashtag, participants help inspire visitation while also having the chance to win monthly giveaways. Seeing the campaign grow to more than 30,000 entries over the past three years has been fulfilling, and it's been amazing to watch our community come together to celebrate and promote our destination.

USAE: What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the field?

Bicknell: My advice to someone just starting out in the destination industry is to stay curious and learn as much as possible about every aspect of the field, from marketing and sales to public relations and partnerships. This industry is incredibly dynamic and interconnected, so having a well-rounded understanding is key. Don't be afraid to ask questions, take on new opportunities, and build relationships along the way.

Journey Ahead

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events, and leisure visitors while advancing workforce development, accessibility, community engagement, and responsible destination stewardship.

Just as importantly, destination organizations have become powerful advocates for their communities and our industry. They help policymakers, business leaders, and residents understand that travel is not simply an economic driver, but also an essential contributor to community vitality, cultural exchange, and quality of life. At a time when public support can no longer be assumed, advocacy has become as important as marketing. Telling our story, demonstrating our value, and earning trust are now fundamental responsibilities of destination leadership.

Success today is measured by far more than visitation. It is reflected in stronger local economies, thriving small businesses, vibrant downtowns, and communities where residents are proud to live. The best destinations recognize that exceptional visitor experiences and a high quality of life for residents are complementary goals.

The years ahead will bring remarkable opportunities, but they also will



Don Welsh

require bold leadership and a unified voice. As destination professionals, we must continue championing the value of travel and tourism, advocating for the essential role of destination organizations, and demonstrating our impact not only through economic results, but also through the connections we foster, the understanding we inspire, and the stronger communities we help create.

That is our opportunity. It is also our responsibility.

Stay Connected



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THE FINAL WORD

The Story of Meet Minneapolis' Event at the Obama Presidential Center

By Todd McElwee

This is not a political piece.

My appetite for politics is running out. No candidate or ideology is being endorsed in this column, nobody approved this message and no PAC is paying for this content—though I would take their calls.

Once again, this is not a political piece!

This is about an evening of stories.

Admission to the Obama Presidential Center is booked for months. One could argue it's the hardest ticket to get in Chicago. Yet, thanks to Meet Minneapolis, my wife, Angela, and I were there on July 14, touring the facility from top to bottom with only a few dozen of the bureau's guests, members and staffers onsite. I can't imagine anybody, save for the Obamas themselves, has had better access.

Meet Minneapolis' "The Power of Place. Minneapolis Shapes the Story" started with a reception on the lower level. Complete access to the museum's exhibits followed. They're highly curated and interactive and too numerous to properly describe in a few paragraphs. The most popular was the full-sized replica of Obama's Oval Office. Angela and I both took a seat behind the replica Resolute Desk. Half kidding, I asked her if I should put my feet up for the photo (I didn't).

The Obama Presidential Center is global in scope documenting well beyond his eight years in the White House. Of course, it highlights his accomplishments and politics, but the facility is also an exploration of America's grand experiment in democracy. I believe it was intended to serve not solely as a historical resource and fundraising tool for the Obama Foundation, but also as a conduit to help attendees connect with its namesake. It's telling his, and Michelle's, story.

Architecturally, it's stunning—par-

ticularly at night.

"The Power of Place. Minneapolis Shapes the Story" was a sales event. Meet Minneapolis was selling its city, but it didn't unleash the hard sell. Talk of meetings space square footage and upcoming hospitality projects was noticeably absent, and no highlight reel showcase video was shown. They didn't fit the occasion.

This was a story-telling event designed to familiarize new and old clients alike to Minneapolis through individuals with deep, personal connections to the town.

Andrea Mokros, Secretary / Treasurer, Meet Minneapolis Board of Directors, former special assistant to President Barack Obama and former director of strategic planning for Michelle Obama, moderated the session. She said it was a bit surreal to be in the building. Much of what was inside was her story as well.

Diane Moua, Chef/Owner, Diane's Place, shared her story of bringing the Hmong culture and cuisine on which she was raised to Minneapolis. In 2025, Food & Wine named Diane's Place its Restaurant of the Year.

Jamie Martin, Director of Conference and Event Services for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, discussed the pleasantness and efficiency of working on events with Meet Minneapolis, relating it to working with family.

Reuben Kitto Stately, Dakhóta from the Santee Sioux Nation and a tribal member of Red Lake Nation, is a recording artist working to preserve his ancestral language and culture. He performed for the group.

Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, who fell in love with the city after running a long-distance race, lit up when talking about his town. He touched on everything from the city's parks to citizens rushing to the aid of those affected by ICE.



Angela and Todd McElwee at the Obama Presidential Center

Melvin Tennant, CAE, President & CEO, Meet Minneapolis; and Rosalind Dixon, Associate Director of Business Development, Meet Minneapolis, concluded the programing with personalized messages and reflections on their destination.

Meet Minneapolis' session occurred in the Sky Room. Occupying the top floor, the room features wall-to-wall windows on three sides. We were there at sunset, able to fully enjoy the panoramic views of the Chicago skyline, Lake Michigan and the surrounding environs.

Angela and I celebrated our 13th anniversary on July 14, and we now have a story to tell about it. (Full disclosure, it was actually the day before, but we opted to celebrate while in Chicago.) Before the event, we had lunch at Ema and rode bikes along Lake Michigan, which I plunged into off the sea wall.

From here on out, whenever someone mentions the Obama Presidential Center, we can politely share—not brag—about the access we were afforded and the time we had with Meet Minneapolis.

Angela's a multilingual teacher at Walkersville High School in Maryland. It's fun to see the teacher in her come out a place like the Obama Presidential Center, a venue tailor-made for her curiosities. Whenever we visit a museum,

she's drawn to the personalized pieces and stories. In Chicago, it was a torn sneaker worn by an immigrant who'd come to the United States as well as other items of a similar ilk.

Events such as this aren't every day occurrences. Perhaps I'll attend another at the Obama Presidential Center, but odds are it won't be with my wife while we're celebrating our anniversary on a beautiful Chicago day. It's likely that was a one-off.

We'll always remember our 13th anniversary. We'll always have that story.

Thank you to Melvin and everyone at Meet Minneapolis for the hospitality and for setting Angela and I up at the utterly and perfectly funky and edgy ACME Hotel Chicago, Outset Collection by Hilton. Any hotel with vinyl copies of Weezer, Led Zeppelin and Clash albums hanging in its elevators is okay by me. Cake pops, with a happy anniversary card, from its West Town Bakery were waiting for us in our room. Angela said the French toast variety was the best cake pop she ever had.

Finally, Kathy McCarthy, Sr. Director of Public Relations and Communications, Meet Minneapolis, what a pleasure it's been working with and meeting you. Thank you.



Todd McElwee behind a replica of the Resolute Desk at the Obama Presidential Center

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NEWS

Las Vegas Sands Hosting Summit to Address Youth Homelessness

By Jordan Bradley

Las Vegas Sands and the Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth (NPHY) will co-host the 10th annual Nevada Youth Homelessness Summit on November 13, the pair announced on July 13.

The 2026 summit will be held at the Historic Fifth Street School in downtown Las Vegas and celebrates “10 years of dreaming big.” Registration for the summit opened on July 14.

As part of the day-long summit, youth with lived experiences of homelessness will put on a creative showcase. This year, the event features a StorySLAM, with youth sharing their dreams for the future, and community leaders with experiences living without a home or residence share stories of how they came to escape their situations.

The summit will also highlight the progress made between the partners through the event. A cornerstone of

the collaboration has been the Movement Youth Action Board, which works with youth with lived experiences of homelessness to inform local policies and initiatives to address youth homelessness.

According to a 2025 statewide study, youth homelessness has widespread impacts, not just on the youth experiencing it, but on the community around them. During the two-year study, officials sought to understand the scope of the problem and found that “estimating the

number of youth experiencing homelessness is difficult due to factors such as the transient nature of their living situations, lack of consistent reporting, stigma, and the hidden nature of youth homelessness, with many not accessing formal services or shelter systems.”

Still, taking several approaches to identifying the scope of the population impacted by homelessness in youth, the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services’ Division of Welfare and Supportive Services estimates that anywhere “between 2,868 and 33,433 young people aged 12–24 are experiencing unaccompanied homelessness in Nevada every year.”

In an effort to address the situation, Sands—through its Sands Cares giving arm—and NPHY established the Movement board in 2017, at the first Nevada Youth Homelessness Summit.

Alongside statewide stakeholders, the board is helping to inform the development of a statewide plan to address youth homelessness expected to be completed by the end of 2027.

The board has also helped to advance legislation that supports the construction of pathways for youth out of homelessness, inform improvements to “systems-level processes to strengthen access to services,” establish more youth action boards statewide, and bring in funds to support youth homelessness programs.

“From NPHY’s long-ago vision to this tremendous statewide coalition, the Movement has delivered incredible progress and tremendous collaboration, but we still have a long way to go with statewide youth homelessness numbers in the tens of thousands annually,” said Ron Reese, SVP of Global Communications and Corporate Affairs at Sands. “We call on private sector members, community organizations and citizens not yet involved in the Movement to join the effort by attending Summit 2026. Expanding the coalition is more critical than ever to ensure all resources are tapped for Nevada’s plan to end youth homelessness.”

Find more information about the summit [here](#).

A cornerstone of the collaboration has been the Movement Youth Action Board, which works with youth with lived experiences of homelessness to inform local policies and initiatives to address youth homelessness.

Salt Lake Launches ‘Mountain City’ Campaign

By Jonathan Trager

Visit Salt Lake has launched a new tourism marketing campaign positioning the Utah capital as “America’s Mountain City,” a branding effort aimed at highlighting the connection between the city’s urban attractions and nearby outdoor recreation.

The destination organization announced the campaign earlier this month, describing it as a way to showcase Salt Lake as a year-round destination where visitors can experience a major city and mountain activities in the same trip.

The campaign emphasizes Salt Lake’s access to the Wasatch Mountains, with Visit Salt Lake highlighting the short travel times between downtown attractions and outdoor destinations. The organization said visitors can reach mountain areas from downtown in about 40 minutes, allowing travelers to combine outdoor recreation with dining, entertainment and cultural experiences.

“Salt Lake is proudly claiming our title as America’s Mountain City because no other destination offers a world-class urban experience and a mountainous playground that is so effortlessly combined,” Visit Salt Lake

President & CEO Kaitlin Eskelson said.

The campaign comes as the destination prepares for increased global attention ahead of the 2034 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games. Visit Salt Lake said the effort is designed to reinforce the city’s identity as a destination for visitors interested in outdoor adventure, food, culture and major sporting events.

Visit Salt Lake said the campaign also highlights recent growth in the city’s hospitality offerings, including new restaurants and experiences for visitors. The organization is promoting Salt Lake as a place where travelers can move between mountain activities and city attractions without having to choose one over the other.

The “America’s Mountain City” campaign will be used to market Salt Lake to visitors while the region continues preparing for the return of the Winter Games. Salt Lake previously hosted the 2002 Winter Olympics and is scheduled to host the event again in 2034.

Visit Salt Lake said the campaign is intended to capture the city’s combination of accessibility, outdoor recreation, and urban experiences as it seeks to attract future visitors and convention business.

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NEWS

The Future of Event Design Starts with Human Connection



As audience expectations continue to evolve, event professionals are challenged to create experiences that foster meaningful connection, build trust and deliver measurable value. To better understand these shifts, Encore and Boldpush partnered to develop the [Experience Design Report](#), a research study exploring the current state of event design across programming, connection, technology and trust.

Encore, a global leader in event production, supports more than 2,220 venues across 23 countries and is dedicated to connecting and inspiring audiences through impactful experiences. Boldpush, a media, research and consulting firm serving the events industry, contributed its expertise and industry intelligence to the report.

Drawing insights from event professionals, the research provides a data-grounded understanding of how planners are adapting to changing audience expectations. Respondents represented a diverse mix of corporate planners, event marketers, consultants, independent planners and agencies, with most managing events

of fewer than 2,000 participants. Four key themes emerged from the findings: programming must evolve to support connection, participatory formats outperform passive experiences, the keynote isn't dying, it's evolving, and trust remains rooted in authentic connections.

One of the clearest takeaways from the [Experience Design Report](#) is that event participants continue to prioritize meaningful human connection above all else. While event professionals often focus on content, logistics and sponsorship goals, the research suggests that the moments audiences value most are opportunities to engage with their peers. Nearly half of respondents identified peer-to-peer networking as the most important measure of event success, signaling a shift in how value is created at events. For destination planners and event partners, this presents an opportunity to move beyond viewing networking as a supplementary activity and instead design experiences where connection is intentionally built into the participant experience. Personalization, curated networking

opportunities, and participant matchmaking can help transform events from information-sharing platforms into communities that foster long-term engagement.

The findings also challenge event professionals to rethink how programming is delivered. While there has been speculation that traditional keynote sessions are losing relevance, the research tells a different story. Event audiences still value keynote content, but they increasingly expect formats that feel dynamic, participatory and authentic. Rather than focusing solely on delivering information, successful programming creates opportunities for dialogue, interaction and shared learning. This shift is also reflected in the growing popularity of microevents and smaller curated experiences, which allow participants to engage more deeply with content and one another. The takeaway is clear: audiences are not looking for more content, but rather they are looking for more meaningful ways to engage with it.

Technology remains an important part of the events' experience, but the reports suggest its greatest val-

ue comes from enhancing human connection rather than replacing it. Mobile applications continue to provide measurable benefits for networking and engagement, yet the rise of artificial intelligence is creating new expectations for live events. As information becomes increasingly accessible through digital channels, event participants are seeking experiences that cannot be replicated online. Authentic conversations, spontaneous interactions and relationship building opportunities have become more valuable in an AI-driven world. For event professionals, this means technology should be viewed as a tool that supports connection, helping audiences navigate experiences, discover relevant content and engage with one another more effectively.

Ultimately, the Experience Design Report reinforces that human connection remains at the center of successful experiences. To dive deeper into the findings highlighted in this article, explore the full [Experience Design Report](#) for the statistics, trends and strategies shaping the future of live events.

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