

Heavy Hitters

Andrew Saunders (Readers' Choice) Page 23

Mike Melisi (Social Winner) Page 24

Meghan Blood Page 31

Joe Dolan Page 34

Keller Taylor Page 30

Michael Owens Page 32

Corey Margolis Page 28

David Garcia Page 26

Lisa Niess Page 35

Brittanie Delava Page 33

It's baseball season, so we'll take a cue from the diamond as we pose this question: Who's on deck?

Every industry has its stars, and the venues space is no different. You see them every month in our pages, pushing new ideas, leading the way and changing the way everyone does business. But who will join them and become that next generation of leaders?

Once again, our readers have stepped up to the plate (there's baseball again) and voted: In this section, you'll find their picks for the 2019 Generation Next Awards, 10 women and men 35 or younger who are making a name for themselves. The top vote-getter among subscribers is designated Readers' Choice, and the candidate who received the most votes online is tabbed as Social Winner.

They innovate, they hustle, they come in early and stay late, and some of them spend an awful lot of time on their phones (see feature, Page 27). And, in a common theme to their stories so far, they're willing to take a chance and try something different in their careers when offered the chance.

They're in the game. They're on deck. They're Generation Next.

Andrew Saunders

READERS'
CHOICE

SENIOR
TALENT
BUYER,
STAPLES
CENTER AND
MICROSOFT
THEATER, LOS
ANGELES

AEG
FACILITIES

BY BRAD WEISSBERG

ANDREW SAUNDERS UNDERSTANDS the art of the deal.

It's in his blood. His dad, Dave Saunders, is the vice president of sales and marketing at iHeart-Media and has been on the business side of the music industry for decades.

It's in every move he's made in his career, starting with a prized internship at Goldenvoice through his latest role as senior talent buyer for Los Angeles' Staples Center and Microsoft Theater.

It's in the way he nurtures relationships with promoters and agents until he gets the show — at the price he wants.

At age 28, Saunders is quickly emerging as a major player. After a relatively short stint as the senior buyer for only the Microsoft Theater, his AEG bosses realized he excelled at picking out shows, often in genres that the venue didn't have much of a history in, such as hip-hop and podcasts, and they added on the much larger Staples Center to Saunders' workload.

Saunders was born in Orange County, Calif. His mom, Laurie Saunders, was a stay-at-home mom and is now a preschool teacher. He went to USC and studied music industry and business entrepreneurship. His first internship was with Goldenvoice at the El Rey Theatre.

His first paid job was as a booking assistant at Venue Coalition. He stayed there two years. His next post was at Gelfand, Rennert & Feldman, a business management corporation. Saunders was an on-the-road tour accountant, and his main client was James Taylor.

After a year and a half, Saunders went back to Venue Coalition as booking manager. He was promoted to director of booking in 2017 and left when AEG came calling in November 2017.

Hallie Yavitch is the vice president of booking at Staples Center and Microsoft Theater and has known Saunders for almost four years.

"Andrew is a tenacious guy," Yavitch said. "When he was with Venue Coalition, he was a client of Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse, my former employer. Whenever I did a project with him, I was happy about working on it. I have a lot of trust in him."

Yavitch knew Saunders would be amazing at the job as soon as she heard that he was moving to AEG.

"I sent him a note that said, 'You are going to rock this,'" Yavitch recalled. "Andrew will keep working until he gets what he wants. He'll keep working till he makes it happen. If he believes an act belongs in our theater he will keep attacking it until he makes it happen."

Yavitch pointed to "We Will Rock You," the musical based on the songs of Queen that's coming to the Microsoft Theater in October, as a perfect example of Saunders' determination to secure a show. "Andrew spent months working on the deal," she said. "It was his show. And a huge success for us."

Saunders' ability to listen to the clients sets him apart, she said. "He will point out that we have a curtaining system, or a deeper pit, something that will make our venue stand out and fit their needs. With Andrew it's all about trying to get us the right content for our buildings. He's

playing the long game and he does it with a lot of integrity."

Saunders likes to think out of the box, and he's especially pleased when he gets to introduce a new event to the roster, such as the "My Favorite Murder" podcast live show.

"It was perfect," Saunders recalled. "I booked it for Halloween night 2018. All of the stars aligned — we had a murder show on Halloween in Los Angeles — and we went the extra mile by creating a photo op experience in the lower lobby where we re-created the podcast studio. We also had a custom rug designed for the stage. It was massively successful event and one of those moments when booking and marketing came together perfectly."

A bad day is "when we are losing money," Saunders knows his ticket sales so well that just a few days after the on-sale he can tell if the show is a hit or a loser. "If sales are slow, we'll get the marketing team and the artists manage-



ment together and then it becomes a team conversation. The key is getting the artist to cooperate," he said. "We always love it when an artist is willing to do some interviews or sign some guitars. Some artists will even offer to give back some of their guarantee to be used as extra ad money."

Saunders is unclear what his next move will be, but he assures that it will be in the music industry; he'll pursue it with persistence, and make a great deal.

"AEG is a company that has a ton of opportunity," Saunders said. "Right now, I am halfway in between the venue route and the promoter route. I'm not entirely sure where I am headed at this moment, and I'm in no rush."

"Now that I've paid my dues, I'm starting to really enjoy being part of this business," Saunders said. "My relationships are getting really strong and have moved way beyond just business relationships. This is the really fun part." ▣

2019
generation
next
awards

Mike Melisi

ARAMARK'S
GENERAL
MANAGER
FOR FENWAY
PARK,
BOSTON

**SOCIAL
WINNER**

BY DON MURET

ARAMARK EXECUTIVE MIKE Melisi has been a fixture at Fenway Park for 13 years, ever since he was hired on the spot as an intern in the company's finance department.

Melisi, 33, now serves as the concessionaire's general manager at the historic ballpark, home of the Boston Red Sox. It's a position he has held since midway through the 2017 season after being promoted from senior controller.

It all started in the spring of 2006. Marco DePalma, a friend and Suffolk University student (now a police officer), had just landed an operations internship with Aramark. DePalma contacted Melisi and gave him a tip that the food vendor had a finance internship to fill over the summer.

"On his first day, he called me and said if I could make it down to Fenway within an hour I'd have the job," Melisi said. "I was going to school at Boston University and living on Commonwealth Avenue (a few miles from the ballpark). I put on a shirt and tie, hailed a taxi and headed to Fenway. I talked with the regional finance director and the controller on site, and within 30 minutes I had the job."

Two years later, one day after college graduation, Aramark offered Melisi a full-time job as a junior accountant. He worked his way through the finance department and became controller in 2013 and then senior controller. Melisi took over as GM four years later, a position which had been vacant for a few years, he said.

For Melisi, there's never a dull day working the food operation at Fenway, which has always attracted him to the business as one of the most celebrated stadiums in sports. At 107 years old, managing its food service offers challenges but also opportunities, he said.

"Over the past few years, we've done some significant renovations," Melisi said. "We built a group suite next to the (Red Sox) dugout with full in-seat service, and developed a few grandstand bars which accommodates those fans sitting in the upper grandstand that don't necessarily have direct access to food and drink."

Melisi has a unique perspective on all the upgrades Fenway has gone through over the past decade. As controller, he crunched the numbers to ensure a return on investment for both Aramark and the Red Sox while keeping in mind the need to improve the fan experience.

"It helps knowing the concrete numbers on the back and now seeing them on the front end and what it means monetarily," he said.

In addition to the 81 Red Sox home games, Aramark stays busy servicing about 10 concerts and 500 catered events annually. On May 14, for example, the ballpark held a job fair for military veterans on the Big Concourse, the 38,000-square-foot space beyond the outfield bleachers.

Keeping up with new technology and just the churn of daily operations is another challenge Aramark faces at a ballpark that opened in 1912, the same year Thomas Edison designed an electric battery for Henry Ford's



Model T automobile.

"Power is always an issue," Melisi said. "We don't have readily accessible electricity, so we always need to run power (through generators). We have tight warehouses and we're getting five to six deliveries for inventory every game, and with all the catered events we do, storage becomes an issue."

About 10 years ago Aramark started taking credit cards at all food and drink locations, and the vendor has in-seat service for roughly 6,000 seats.

"Boston used to be a largely cash market, but it's slowly changing," Melisi said. "Credit cards are taking over the lion's share of transactions."

Over the past decade, Fenway Park has extended its season over the winter months to include the Harvard-Yale college football game, the Bridgestone NHL Winter Classic and Shaun White's Big Air extreme action sports event.

"We know that for events in December and January, we could have temperatures below zero where pipes could freeze and water is already shut off at the ballpark," Melisi said. "It also depends on if the Red Sox extend their season, whether their last game is in September and we close down the ballpark for a month or two, or the last game is Game 6 of the World Series and it stays open through October. That makes life a little easier."

Apart from his job, Melisi has competed in seven Boston Marathons and raised more than \$100,000 for both Boston Children's Hospital and the Red Sox Foundation. He started running the marathon to help raise money for the hospital after his sister's son Kyle was treated there for complications shortly after he was born.

Melisi doesn't bother to track his personal best time.

"Working at a ballpark and having chicken tender and pizza tastings over the winter, it's a good way to keep the weight off," he said. ▣

"It helps knowing the concrete numbers on the back and now seeing them on the front end." — MIKE MELISI

COURTESY ARAMARK

NEXT QUESTION CUSTOMER SERVICE

CUSTOMER SERVICE touches nearly everyone's job. On the other side, we all get the chance to be customers ourselves. Here's who our Generation Next honorees thought of when we asked them to name a company in any sector that does it right (outside of their own, of course!).

ANDREW SAUNDERS: Article.com, a furniture company.

BRITTANIE DELAVA: Nordstrom loyalist over here ... you can return anything!

COREY MARGOLIS: Starbucks.

DAVID GARCIA: Disney Cruise Line — there is no experience like it. They make everyone feel like a VIP and you build real relationships with the staff.



Disney Cruise Line is known for its exceptional customer service.

JOE DOLAN: Chick-fil-A.

KELLER TAYLOR: Disney's emphasis on and commitment to great customer service is unmatched and should be the barometer for our and other industries.

LISA NIESS: The Parasole Group owns several of our favorite restaurants in the Twin Cities. They do an excellent job with service across each of the different brands and locations.

MEGHAN BLOOD: It's tough to narrow it down to just one — I would say the top three in my opinion are Chick-fil-A, Trader Joe's and Happiest Baby (clearly from these answers you can't tell that I like food and I'm a new mom).

MICHAEL OWENS: I've taken the time to leave two Google reviews in my life. One, for Green and Spiegel LLP, the immigration attorneys that took care of getting us into Canada and helped us through the long, arduous process of getting permanent residency status. The second was for McVay Livery, a small mom-and-pop restaurant outside of Canon Beach, Ore.

MIKE MELISI: American Express.

A portrait of Mike Melisi, a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored checkered shirt. He is smiling and looking directly at the camera.

CONGRATULATIONS MIKE MELISI

From your Aramark family, we congratulate you on your well-deserved 2019 VenuesNow 'Generation Next' Award.

The Aramark logo, featuring the word "aramark" in a lowercase, sans-serif font, followed by a stylized human figure icon with arms raised, all in white on a red background.

aramark

David Garcia

VICE PRESIDENT
OF GUEST
EXPERIENCE,
ATLANTA HAWKS
AND STATE FARM
ARENA

BY DON MURET

DAVID GARCIA LEANED on his personal Disney experience to help transform the culture for three big league teams in his hometown of Atlanta.

In his role as vice president of guest experience for the Atlanta Hawks and State Farm Arena, Garcia touches all aspects of event operations after the NBA team combined its premium and guest services departments into one group under Hawks owner Tony Ressler.

The Hawks hired Garcia after he spent about three years as director of fan experience for AMB Sports & Entertainment, parent company of the NFL's Atlanta Falcons and Atlanta United FC of MLS, and operator of Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

For Garcia, 33, the common thread for both positions was The Walt Disney Co., where he took a job out of college as a financial analyst in Orlando. Over the past 20 years, multiple teams have consulted with the Disney Institute to improve the customer service at their facilities. Garcia saw it firsthand during his interview process.

"It's a strong connection," he said. "It all comes down to the way I was recruited at Disney. I thought I wanted to be an investment banker, but that didn't work out, thankfully, because I would have hated it. I applied at Disney as somewhat of a joke. I didn't think I would work there."

It was no joke. From the time Garcia got picked up at the airport by a chauffeur holding up a sign with his name on it, to the steak and salmon dinners at Disney restaurants and his Epcot Boardwalk hotel room, to getting a backstage peek at the Chronicles of Narnia wardrobe and viewing the nightly theme park fireworks displays, his multiday interview was one continuous "wow" moment.

"The moral of that story and what I realized later is that it all went back to that experience," he said. "It got me hooked and then what they did in the culture on a daily basis is what gets you to believe and buy into. That's what's driving what we're trying to do here, put the guests at the forefront of everything we do."

It's a philosophy that initially spread to Mercedes-Benz Stadium. Garcia was on the ground floor of facility development and helped form a new value concessions model for AMB Sports, featuring \$2 hot dogs, soft drinks and popcorn and \$5 beers. It's proved to be successful for the organization, resulting in a greater number of transactions and higher revenue compared with Falcons games at the old Georgia Dome. More teams across sports have adopted a similar model at their facilities, including the Hawks.

"In general, the home viewing experience is strong, but there are some things that our buildings can offer that you can't get at home — that social connection, energy and atmosphere at a live event," Garcia said. "But over time, what's happened is there have been too many barriers that got in the way of an enjoyable experience."



The high cost tied to buying food and drink at a live event was one thing AMB Sports officials thought they could change to create a better experience, he said. Two years after the stadium opened, NFL and MLS fans enter the building earlier and spend more money, Garcia said.

"They found that it had an impact ... because you had that goodwill, everything else felt a little bit better as well," he said. "One of the things I did when I came to the Hawks was to bring that same model. It's a different building from an operational perspective with higher volume. If the lines are long, it's not a great experience."

State Farm Arena became the first NBA venue to adopt the fan-friendly concessions pricing strategy and it's paid off for the Hawks. In the NBA's most recent season-ticket holder survey, the team ranked No. 1 in food and drink.

The Hawks hired Garcia in April 2018, and one of his duties was to hire a crew of event supervisors and game-day workers. The team's offices in downtown Atlanta overlook Centennial Park, and Garcia found himself staring at the park's Ferris wheel. His Disney instincts kicked in. Riding the wheel would be a cool place to interview people, he thought, which is what the Hawks did in hiring 50 people as supervisors.

The quirky interview process extended to the nearby Georgia Aquarium, where the Hawks interviewed folks for 100 part-time positions in a space where whale sharks and manta rays passed by overhead.

"It actually made it a lot easier for us to hire people, because if you don't have a smile on your face in that situation, you probably were not going to be a good fit for what we were looking for," Garcia said.

This summer, Garcia will be evaluating 5,000 fan surveys to see how the Hawks can improve their operation after State Farm Arena completed a \$183 million renovation last fall. He also initiated an innovation lab where team leaders meet off-site to discuss new ideas and concepts.

"It's about how we continue to grow as an organization in a way that still fits our overall purpose," Garcia said. ▣

Garcia was on the ground floor of developing Mercedes-Benz Stadium's value pricing model.

NEXT QUESTION SCREEN TIME

IS IT A CONVENIENCE or an addiction, or maybe a bit of both? Smartphones can now tell us how much we're using them, and some of us use them a lot, so we asked our Generation Next honorees how much screen time they rack up each week.

ANDREW SAUNDERS: The thought of calculating an answer to this question gives me anxiety.

BRITTANIE DELAVA: Oh God. I just looked it up — I'm at 21 hours, 7 minutes over the last seven days. I hope that's normal.

COREY MARGOLIS: 22 hours.

DAVID GARCIA: Don't know, would guess probably 21-30 hours.



JOE DOLAN: I hope no more than an hour a day. I do my best to try and be present, especially when I'm with family and friends.

KELLER TAYLOR: Way too much to even keep track of.

LISA NIESS: My iPhone says 4 hours and 3 minutes is my average screen time per day this week. Is that a lot, or a little?

MEGHAN BLOOD: I average around 4 to 5 hours each week.

MICHAEL OWENS: Not a ton, really, but probably still too much. Mostly for checking email, and I try to limit checking social media to every other day, or longer if I can. Definitely could use more Headspace app and less social media.

MIKE MELISI: Too much.



CONGRATULATIONS TO
**DAVID
GARCIA**
FOR
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FROM YOUR ATLANTA HAWKS
AND STATE FARM ARENA FAMILY



Corey Margolis

BY TIM NEWCOMB

GENERAL
MANAGER
FOR ANGEL OF
THE WINDS
ARENA,
EVERETT,
WASH.
SPECTRA

COREY MARGOLIS LOVES getting a sense of the market before he kicks in with creativity. He's done just that in Everett, Wash., as general manager of Angel of the Winds Arena, not only getting to know his market north of Seattle but also having some big victories along the way.

Margolis, 30, an eight-year veteran of Spectra, has served in the 10,000-capacity arena for about a year, his first stint as a general manager. Along the way he's landed the WNBA's Seattle Storm for home dates, drawn the Live Nation Backstreet Boys show for July and worked with the arena's naming-rights partner — a casino about 20 miles from the arena — to promote Toby Keith for an August show.

Getting there, though, was about “figuring out what works.”

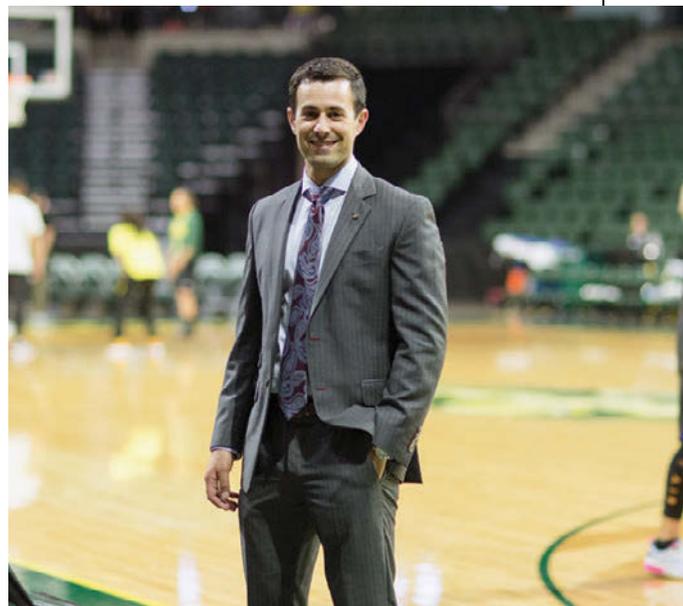
“It always takes time to get a sense of the market, get the vibe,” Margolis said. “Yeah, there is data, but you need to feel it.”

Margolis hopes to reestablish business by not taking on unnecessary risk yet getting creative with different producers and promoters to have them realize the potential for the market. “We once did a ton of shows and the market got quite competitive and concerts decreased,” he said. “My goal is to reestablish that history in different genres and prove we are a good place to play.”

Along with the new additions to the calendar for 2019, Margolis said, Everett has some reliable draws. “We seem to win on a lot of the family entertainment and the producers are really happy,” he said. Along with family-focused events, rock shows draw well, as do contemporary Christian concerts, of which the arena hosts two or three a year. Angel of the Winds Arena also has a strong presence in motorsports, with the venue's EnduroCross motorcycle event growing every year.

Angel of the Winds Arena also serves as the home for junior hockey's Everett Silvertips of the Western Hockey League. “It has been great,” Margolis said. “Their sales team has done a really good job of increasing attendance. In all sports, attendance has generally decreased, and they have seen increases, especially this last year.” The league dropped the number of home games from 36 to 34, but the Silvertips still saw a paid increase of over 9,000 tickets and the team's gross revenue was also up.

Landing the WNBA's Storm comes on the heels of Seattle Center Arena — long known as KeyArena — closing for two years as part of a complete rebuild to bring the NHL to the city. While Margolis said the Seattle situation hasn't changed much for Angel of the Winds Arena because of the size discrepancy in the two venues — he noted most shows head to the larger Tacoma Dome — his arena is “potentially getting a few other looks on stuff.” That includes the Storm.



The WNBA team will use the University of Washington's Alaska Airlines Arena at Hec Edmundson Pavilion as its primary home site and Angel of the Winds Arena as a secondary site. Everett gets a preseason game and five regular-season games, including the nationally televised home opener May 25 that was to serve as the ring ceremony and banner raising saluting the team's league championship last season. If the Storm makes another playoff run, Margolis expects to host “most of those depending on our availability.”

Housing around 9,000 for hockey and 10,000 for concerts, the Everett arena draws from Seattle north, advertising heavily in its home county of Snohomish all the way north to the Canadian border and into Canada. Those are the people Margolis knows well. A native of Vancouver, British Columbia, Margolis started his Spectra experience in the same province, as event manager at Encana Events Centre in Dawson Creek. He was recently the assistant general manager for Spectra at Budweiser Gardens in London, Ontario, spending two years increasing bookings there, along with other small venues in the area. In July 2018, at 29 years old, Margolis was promoted to his post at Angel of the Winds Arena.

“It made sense all across the board,” he said. “I'm from Vancouver, so it was quite close and a nice promotion. I think it is a very exciting time for this region, and markets like Everett stand to have their moment even more than they already have.”

Starting as a stagehand at Rogers Arena in Vancouver, loading in shows as a high school student and then having the opportunity to try a bevy of things in Spectra, everything from building an event filling in for a box office manager to putting together a marketing plan, “having those different experiences helped when trying to oversee the operation and knowing what needs to be done,” he said. “I am fortunate to have a varied background.”

“It always takes time to get a sense of the market, get the vibe.”

— COREY MARGOLIS

COURTESY OF ANGEL OF THE WINDS ARENA

NEXT QUESTION BEST PROFESSIONAL DECISION

MAYBE IT WAS A career choice, to go instead of staying. Perhaps it was taking a risk, not knowing how it might pay off. And maybe it was incorporating a concept that made a whole operation run better. That's what we wanted to know when we asked Generation Next honorees about a decision that made a difference for them.

ANDREW SAUNDERS: To get back into booking after being on the road as a tour accountant.

BRITTANIE DELAVA: Saying yes to every opportunity at the beginning of my career. Without going out of my comfort zone a few times on tour or working for free just to gain experience, there is no way I'd be where I am now.

finance team or the product development team. My background was in finance and it was what I had been doing for the first two years of my career. I decided to bet on myself and take the role on the product development team despite not really knowing how to do the job. I had trouble following along in my first meeting, but taking that role taught me the benefits of risk taking, building new skills, and believing in yourself.

JOE DOLAN: Making the decision to join the team in Greenville. We've accomplished a lot over the last four years and it's been a very rewarding experience.

KELLER TAYLOR: Taking the opportunity to move to Enid, Okla., for Spectra and overseeing the \$8 million renovation of a 53,000-square-foot convention center and a new \$18 million 3,800-seat arena.

COREY MARGOLIS: Accepting an event manager position in Dawson Creek, British Columbia.

DAVID GARCIA: When I was at Disney, I had the opportunity to work on the MyMagic+ project on the

LISA NIESS: Opening U.S. Bank Stadium has to be my best professional decision to date. I learned so many invaluable lessons and built so many relationships through the project.

MEGHAN BLOOD: Attending IAVM's year one of Venue Management School last year. I feel like we get so stuck in the same day to day of our own departments, and VMS really helped me open my eyes to challenges that people from other departments/arenas/etc. face day to day.

MICHAEL OWENS: The decision to accept a job as the booking manager in Tulsa laid the foundation for other successes I've had in my career. I actually started there at the convention center, not BOK Center, but I knew that surrounding myself with people like John Bolton and Jeff Nickler would be the best investment in my career I could've made at the time. They do a really amazing job of cultivating talent in the industry and opened many of the doors that led to the relationships I have today.

MIKE MELISI: Holding monthly engagement meetings with the entire management team.

SPECTRA

Congratulations
2019 Generation Next
Award Winners

KELLER TAYLOR & COREY MARGOLIS

WE ARE PROUD TO HAVE YOU AS PART OF THE SPECTRA TEAM!

Keller Taylor
District General Manager,
Budweiser Events Center

Corey Margolis
General Manager,
Angel of the Winds Arena

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Keller Taylor

BY BRAD WEISSBERG

DISTRICT GENERAL
MANAGER,
SPECTRA VENUE
MANAGEMENT

GENERAL
MANAGER,
BUDWEISER
EVENTS CENTER,
LOVELAND, COLO.

KELLER TAYLOR HAS two passions: large live entertainment facilities and the people who work in them.

At age 34, Taylor is the general manager of the Budweiser Events Center in Loveland, Colo., for Spectra as well as a district general manager, assigned to three of Spectra's Texas venues — in Beaumont, Kerrville and Robstown — plus five other buildings in Kansas, Nebraska and New Mexico.

"I think the thing that most interested me in taking on the DGM role was learning more about people management, as well as working with clients on how to drive value through resources on the Spectra side," Taylor said. "Interpersonal communication and talking to people are what I do. I value my ability to get our GMs to get connected internally or get them booking contacts. Anything I can do to help improve the bottom line for our clients, I will do."

Taylor was born in Easton, Pa. He did his undergraduate studies at the University of South Carolina and went to graduate school at Ohio University.

"My love for arena management started when I was a marketing intern at Colonial Life Arena in South Carolina, which was called the Colonial Center back then," Taylor said. "I opened the H-E-B Center in Austin, Texas, as events services manager, and was eventually director of event production."

Taylor joined Spectra in 2012 when he took control of Enid, Okla.'s Central National Bank Center, a 53,000-square-foot convention center with a 2,500-seat arena.

In Loveland, Taylor's building keeps a busy schedule. "Disney on Ice, monster trucks, hockey, high school graduations, state high school basketball, the 2020 and 2021 NCAA men's (Division I) ice hockey regionals. We're booking a lot of great entertainment."

All the travel is Taylor's biggest challenge. "I try to visit each venue three to four times a year," he said. "I've got a family. Travel can add up and I think it's the one part of the job that's always difficult to navigate."

His good fortune? "A good wife (Sarah, they've been married 12 years) and a great team at the Budweiser Events Center that I can rely on, especially my assistant general manager, Dave Namesnik."

"For me, I've always been taught, and exercise, the golden rule — I would never ask you to do anything I would not do. Inversely, I have high expectations for our teams, so I operate on the standard of being timely and a good communicator and being available."

Taylor's dream job is as a GM of a large-market arena. "I would give up district manager to be in great city," Taylor said

Taylor is also cognizant of his corporate team in Philadelphia. "It all starts with John Page, our president," he said.

Rick Hontz, Spectra regional vice president, has been with Spectra for 24 years and has known Taylor for seven years.

"We met at Enid, and I hired him to replace me at Budweiser Center," Hontz said. "Keller is like a student of our industry. He is a very knowledgeable beyond his years. There is no one better than Keller to come into a facility and see what is needed to generate revenue."

"He's one of the best GMs in our company," Hontz said. "He's always learning, and taking classes, and he's good at training and he mentors people, and helps get them to their goals. For such a young guy, it's amazing to see what he's done in his career already. Before he showed up, no one had heard of Enid, Okla. He put the venue on the map and got a lot of promoters to test out the building."

"Keller's presence was felt so much by the Enid City Council, they declared a Keller Taylor Day in Enid," Hontz said. "When he showed up, we joked around that he's going to get one here." 



Meghan Blood

DIRECTOR OF
MARKETING,
BOK CENTER,
TULSA, OKLA.

SMG

BY NOELLE RILEY

WHEN MEGHAN BLOOD was the interim director of marketing at the BOK Center in Tulsa, Okla., the arena was in the middle of managing seven shows with Garth Brooks.

She desperately wanted the permanent position as director of marketing, and she believes her leadership during that moment helped her land the job.

“One of the things I love about BOK and (arena operator) SMG as a whole is they’re very good about promoting within. I had a good feeling I’d get the job, but I think it played a big part in me getting that promotion,” she said.

She’s been the director of marketing for almost five years now and continues to impress her peers, bosses and those who work with her industrywide.

“She’s probably one of the calmest senior leaders I have. She’s so calm in the middle of chaos. She never exhibits stress. It’s very comforting,” said BOK Center General Manager Casey Sparks. “She does things with such grace and perfection that it makes her extremely valuable to me.”

The 19,000-capacity arena, which is owned by the city of Tulsa, celebrated its 10-year anniversary in 2018, and Blood and her marketing team impressed Sparks and others with their 10 for 10 Concert Series. Blood also helped create a commemorative bottle of wine for the celebration.

“It was a collective effort between her and my HR manager, but she spearheaded the project,” Sparks said. “We did a commemorative bottle of white and red.”

Blood considers herself a wine connoisseur and went on a family trip to Napa Valley, Calif., last year. She loves to travel with her husband, Allen, and the couple went to New York City late last year, and more recently to Scottsdale, Ariz., before their first child, Riley, was born. They hope to take a trip to Hawaii next year.

“I enjoy cooking when I’m not at work. I’m always staying busy,” she said. “I enjoy working out and hanging out with friends. We have a bunch of friends that are about to have kids, so that will be fun. I also became an aunt not too long ago.”

Being with family while she’s not at work is her top priority now, although someday she’d like to see herself become an assistant general manager of a venue, she said.



“I love the industry, so I see myself moving up to an assistant general manager position,” Blood said. “You have to love the people you work with, or it’s not going to work out. We have such great people that work for us. Every day is different. There are definitely days that are overwhelming ... overwhelming in a ‘holy crap, this is what I get to do every day’ way.”

Before working for the BOK Center, Blood was a media buyer for a marketing and advertising agency in Tulsa. “I was there for two years and then the BOK job just kind of fell in my lap. I didn’t know much about the entertainment industry,” she said.

She started at the BOK Center as a marketing manager. “I just fell in love with the industry. In 2015, I got promoted to the director of marketing.”

Sparks knows she can always rely on Blood for her honest and hard work.

“Her ability to manage our hot projects on a daily basis is what makes her so valuable to our team,” Sparks said, speaking of big tasks that need to be done immediately and perfectly. “We’re known in the industry for hospitality and artists gifts. She’s a huge part of that.”

For example, when Travis Scott played at the BOK Center, Blood and her team handled a “hot project” and helped paint graffiti art backstage for his Astroworld tour. “It would be something as intricate as that or decorating a person’s hotel room,” Sparks said.

Additionally, Blood has helped doubled the amount of social media followers for the BOK Center, Sparks said.

“So that’s a testament to Meghan’s team,” she said. ▣

“She’s so calm in the middle of chaos. She never exhibits stress. It’s very comforting.” — CASEY SPARKS

Michael Owens

ASSISTANT
GENERAL
MANAGER,
CHESAPEAKE
ENERGY ARENA

SMG

BY NOELLE RILEY

MICHAEL OWENS LEARNED early on how to pamper touring acts, a skill that helps him stay on the competitive edge as the assistant general manager of Chesapeake Energy Arena.

The Oklahoma City arena is in direct competition with the BOK Center in Tulsa, so taking care of artists and their management teams is a high priority for Owens in trying to lure them to his venue.

"You'd be shocked at the amount of capital you can buy with some of these touring acts by taking a little extra effort to show them hospitality and take care of them," Owens said. "You have to roll out the red carpet and take care of these people."

His strategy has worked, and he's one of *VenuesNow's* GenerationNext winners in part because he and his team helped the 18,200-capacity arena achieve record concert ticket sales in the first quarter of 2019.

Owens started at Chesapeake Energy Arena 10 months ago, leaving a high-profile position in Vancouver, British Columbia, as director of live entertainment of Canucks Sports & Entertainment, which owns and operates Rogers Arena and the NHL's Vancouver Canucks. He spent a little over 2 1/2 years in Vancouver before returning to Oklahoma.

The move away from Canada was a family decision. He's been married to his wife, Jennifer, for six years and the couple have two daughters, Charlotte, 3 and Grace, 10 months old.

They were living in Canada when his wife became

pregnant with their second child. "We were very, very far from home. We got a call from SMG. They were looking for a new booking guy, an assistant general manager to breathe new life back into the arena," Owens said.

Owens took the job as assistant general manager and moved his family back to the United States. Before working in Canada, Owens was the director of booking for the BOK Center, so he was familiar with the city and its booking territory.

"There was never a dull day working with Michael. We had the opportunity to spend a lot of time together and became great friends in addition to being work colleagues," Jeff Nickler, former general manager of the BOK Center, said in an email. Nickler now works as senior vice president of the Arena Alliance at Oak View Group, a position he's held since January. (OVG also owns *VenuesNow*.)

Nickler appreciates and applauds Owens' booking strategies. "We had an aggressive booking strategy in Tulsa and recognized how important industry relationships were to our success, so we spent a great deal of hours together on airplanes and traveling to New York, Nashville, and Los Angeles to prospect new business," Nickler said.

Owens found it ironic that he was offered a position at Chesapeake Energy Arena, considering he'd be in competition with Nickler, his former manager at the BOK Center.

"Michael and I talked a lot during his transition from Vancouver to his new role in Oklahoma City," Nickler said. "While it was admittedly a bit awkward at first working for competing venues, above all I was proud of Michael for his

promotion and have been thrilled to see the success he has already achieved at Chesapeake Energy Arena. Both markets have challenges and advantages, and thankfully there is plenty of content that exists for both Tulsa and Oklahoma City to be successful."

The number of artists on tour has helped Owens find great content for Chesapeake Energy Arena, he said.

"There's a lot of artists on tour. We're trying to show them that Oklahoma City is a viable option as well, which I think we're doing a good job of," Owens said.

Owens got his start in the venue industry working at a 1,000-seat historic theater in Springfield, Mo., starting as the booking manager and later becoming the general manager. He graduated from Missouri State University with a Bachelor of Science in entertainment management.

"I was fortunate enough to go work in a small theater. They were having trouble programming. They gave me an opportunity to book the theater. I was completely green, and I learned a lot. I literally just started putting offers out to artists."

In his spare time he likes to exercise, but his young daughters take up most of his time when he's not working. "I'm father and husband. I'm a family man," he said. 

Michael Owens welcomes Justin Timberlake to Chesapeake Energy Arena.



Brittanie Delava

DIRECTOR
OF CLUB AND
THEATER
TOURING
AEG PRESENTS

BY ERIC RENNER BROWN

AS DIRECTOR OF club and theater touring at AEG Presents, Brittanie Delava plays a critical role in optimizing the programming and strategy of the promoter's ever-growing portfolio of venues. "I wear many hats," said Delava, 32, who joined AEG in early 2016 and assumed her current role a year later. "I am the go-between between agents and our local talent buyers — so, figuring out how to take an artist's vision for what they want to do and use AEG's resources to execute it."

Given that AEG's list of partnerships with regional promoters and venues — not to mention AEG-backed rooms themselves — seems to grow with every passing week, Delava's role is a substantial one.

"I'm talking to the buyers for all these venues every single day," she said. "A lot of what I'm doing is figuring out how to adapt what an artist wants to do to the venues that we have available." For instance, an artist's team might come to Delava with the concept for an outdoor show, which Delava would then posit to applicable local buyers to find an appropriate match. "It's very much an integrated conversation," she said. "It's a real conversation with each buyer at each venue about what works where."

Those types of thoughtful conversations are key because, as Delava outlined, despite AEG's rapid growth in the club and theater space, the promoter strives to both maintain "an artist-first mentality" and stay true to the character of regional promoters, from L.A.'s Goldenvoice to New York's The Bowery Presents to Atlanta's Zero Mile, which the company partnered with earlier this year.

"Our clubs and theaters are not as homogenous as they could be, and I think that's our strength," she said. "We have these really unique rooms and a lot of unique perspectives in our local offices that are able to bring some creativity to what we're doing." That means that while technically AEG's club and theater affiliates are "all under one umbrella ... there's a unique voice for each region."

Delava's relationship with the live business "started as a hobby" while attending Boston's Northeastern University. "I had a lot of friends in bands," she said. "I went to shows pretty much every night of the week and figured out if I carried gear into shows I could get in for free. Let's just say it kind of snowballed from there!"

After graduating, Delava spent two years at indie label Sargent House and four at The Agency Group before eventually landing at AEG in January 2016, months after the company's Cody Lauzier and Rick Mueller launched its club and theater touring division. When Delava joined the team as coordinator, she became its fourth member; now it comprises six. "It's cool that it just started and we've already grown it this far," she said.

One professional accomplishment Delava points to is the ascent of Illenium, a DJ whom she has worked with since early in his touring career. Though she "didn't know anything about the (electronic dance music) world," Delava got along with Illenium's team and helped to plot his earliest hard-ticket shows at 200- to 500-capacity venues. Come September, he'll headline Madison Square Garden. "We've just really grown with him throughout his career, and I think done something unique by helping an electronic artist grow via hard tickets, not just soft-ticket plays and festivals," Delava said.

The experience also helped her find useful similarities between EDM and rock concerts. "You want the most GA



possible, you want all-ages shows, there's a lot of production, a lot of gear," she said. "It's all the same requirements, it's just a different world." Delava cites her current role's lack of boundaries — "I can work on hip-hop, I can work on a drag show, I can work on rock, I can work on country," she said — as "the fun part."

And with venues in various stages of development in Boston, Atlanta, Denver and more — and new partnerships arising on a weekly basis — Delava's division shows little sign of slowing down. "To me, the goal is to fill that map more and more, but strategically," she said. "There's a lot of markets that we need to have a presence in that we currently don't."

Count on Delava, who credits "not being afraid to just get in there and do it" to her rapid success, to play an integral role. **■**

"It's a real conversation with each buyer at each venue about what works where." — BRITTANIE DELAVA

2019 generation next awards Joe Dolan

ASSISTANT
GENERAL
MANAGER

BON SECOURS
WELLNESS ARENA,
GREENVILLE, S.C.

BY TOM GRESHAM

WHEN JOE DOLAN was in high school in Chester County, Pa., he dreamed of becoming the general manager of an NHL team, preferably the nearby Philadelphia Flyers. His brother played youth hockey with the son of Peter Luukko, a longtime executive with the Flyers and Comcast Spectacor, and Dolan had the opportunity to ask Luukko for career advice.

Luukko, now executive chairman of the Florida Panthers, advised him to start on the venues side of the business, because he “would get to work with a lot of different people and learn about a lot of different things,” Dolan said. (Luukko also now holds a position with Oak View Group, owner of *VenuesNow*.)

Between his love of sports and his love of live music, Dolan didn’t need much more encouragement than that. Years later, he is not yet calling the shots for the Flyers, but he has excelled in the venues industry and enjoyed a career that has seen him work in four facilities and help host countless major events. In his current position,

Dolan serves as assistant general manager of the Bon Secours Wellness Arena in Greenville, S.C., where he oversees the marketing, box office and event services departments and is instrumental in the overall management of the arena, including helping to develop a master plan for interior and exterior renovations and identifying nontraditional revenue sources.

The venue has been a perfect fit, Dolan said.

“We’ve had a lot of really great experiences here, a lot of

great shows, a lot of great tours, and I’ve really enjoyed my time here,” Dolan said.

Dolan launched his career by studying entertainment management at the University of South Carolina and serving multiple internships at the Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia. The internships netted him a full-time position as an events manager at the venue following

graduation, and he worked in the position for two years, working on both sporting events (the Flyers, the NBA’s 76ers, Villanova men’s basketball) and major concerts.

Working for the Wells Fargo Center when the Flyers made a run to the Stanley Cup Finals was a daily burst of adrenaline.

“Our building just working together to ride that wave of excitement was amazing,” Dolan said.

Dolan then worked for three years as the assistant general manager at the Roanoke Civic Center in Roanoke, Va. — a venue that includes an arena, a theater and a convention space and allowed Dolan to work on a wide range of events — and for about two years as general manager at the Mullins Center on the campus of the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Dolan loved running his own building at the Mullins Center and also taught a class at the university, but he and his wife missed South Carolina and after two Massachusetts winters moved south for Dolan to become the director of event services at his current workplace in January 2015. He was promoted to assistant general manager in September 2018.

Dolan said highlights from his time in Greenville include three sold-out shows by Garth Brooks and a tour kickoff concert by Bon Jovi. Perhaps most rewarding, the Bon Secours Wellness Arena hosted first- and second-round NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament games in March 2017. The arena had been awarded the games the previous October — after the NCAA moved the games from North Carolina when lawmakers there passed the controversial HB2 bathroom law — leaving little time for preparation.

“Normally, when you get NCAA Tournament games you have years to plan for it,” Dolan said. “So we as a team not only had to put this NCAA event on after not having done it before, but we had to do it in a very short window. To execute it as well as we did was really exciting for us.”

When an event with built-in electricity, such as the NCAA Tournament or a Paul McCartney concert (May 30 at the Bon Secours Wellness Arena this year), comes to a venue, Dolan said he believes it is important for a facility to do more than simply accommodate it — the venue should elevate it. He enjoys seeking ways to create a more immersive experience for audiences, helping an exciting sporting event or powerful musical performance become something transcendent and unforgettable for those lucky enough to be there.

“The focus becomes on how do you make it even more exciting?” Dolan said. “How do you elevate an event beyond the event? That’s been a really interesting challenge I’ve gotten to work on.”

Dolan appreciates that in his young career he has already worked at a mix of venues facing different challenges and opportunities, with different levels of resources available to attack those challenges. His career so far has given him a comprehensive education of the ins and outs of venue management and demonstrates that he ultimately heeded Luukko’s advice.

“I’ve definitely learned a lot about a lot of different things,” Dolan said. ▣



2019
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Lisa Niess

MARKETING AND
COMMUNICATIONS
MANAGER

U.S. BANK STADIUM,
MINNEAPOLIS

BY TOM GRESHAM

WHEN LISA NIESS was a student at Iowa State, she landed an internship at Stephens Auditorium, a 2,700-plus capacity theater on the university's campus. Before the experience, she'd never considered a career working at venues, but her eyes were soon opened to the possibilities.

"It didn't take me long to realize how cool it was to be there on show night and to see the theater fill up with people excited to be there," she said. "They're taking a break from whatever else is going on in their lives to spend time with family and friends and to relax and enjoy themselves. And I realized quickly that that's where I wanted to be."

Today, Niess, marketing and communications manager for U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, helps create those enduring experiences for fans for the largest events in the business, ranging from the Super Bowl and Final Four to the industry's most popular concert performers. Niess has led marketing and communications efforts for the facility's non-Minnesota Vikings events since the runup to its 2016 opening, tackling tasks such as helping the sales team book events, overseeing media relations, guiding brand strategy and managing advertising.

Patrick Talty, general manager of U.S. Bank Stadium, said Niess possesses stellar marketing skills, a savvy sense for messaging and an acute attention to detail. He said she serves as a key adviser to the stadium's leadership team and a "calm voice in the storm" when challenging media situations arise. However, he said her biggest strength is her passion for her job and the venues industry.

"She's got a drive to excel and a real passion for this work," Talty said. "That's what really makes her great at what she does. She cares so much about getting everything right."

Niess first had to leave the venues industry to realize how important it was to her. Following her graduation from Iowa State, Niess worked full time at Stephens Auditorium for four years, eventually rising to the level of marketing manager. When she and her husband moved to the Twin Cities area, however, she took a job at an advertising agency. She immediately recognized how much she missed her previous line of work. Fortunately, an opportunity arose with SMG, which then managed Stephens Auditorium, to join the team that would be opening U.S. Bank Stadium. Five months after leaving the field, she returned.

"I saw how passionate I was about the industry and how much I wanted to be involved in it," Niess said.

Niess came onboard at U.S. Bank Stadium in April 2015 with the stadium about 55 percent completed.

"It was such a cool experience," she said. "I had people telling me then that not a lot of people get an opportunity



to open a building, let alone an NFL stadium, and looking back now I understand what they meant. ... Opening the building was so much work but it was incredibly rewarding to see it come together."

Talty said Niess masterfully handled the weighty responsibility of promoting the stadium's opening, including planning a creative series of media events that drew widespread flattering coverage. In its initial weeks, the stadium hosted a soccer game between international powers AC Milan and Chelsea, staged Luke Bryan and Metallica concerts, and hosted a preseason Vikings game.

"It went so fast — it was just a whirlwind — but seeing the building serve the purpose it was meant to serve with such a variety of dynamic events right away was really fulfilling," Niess said.

In U.S. Bank Stadium's young life, it has already seen a lot — and so has Niess. She helped plan for the stadium's turn in the global spotlight when it hosted the Super Bowl in 2018, and she has played her part in ensuring that visits from such luminaries as Kenny Chesney, Beyoncé and Jay-Z, and Taylor Swift have been successes. Talty points to Niess' work promoting the U.S. Bank Stadium Classic in early December — the stadium's first basketball games and an opportunity to prepare for the NCAA Men's Final Four a few months later — as particularly illustrating her skill generating excitement for events.

"The town was really buzzing about those games and so much of it was because of Lisa's media strategy and the work she did to get it out there," Talty said.

Niess said her job keeps supplying her with new thrills. In recent months, U.S. Bank Stadium hosted the Final Four and back-to-back Garth Brooks concerts — both "bucket list items for me and my career."

"You get to have these moments with these events when you see why everything you've done matters — why every detail of putting on these events matters," Niess said. "That's something I really value, and I love that I get that opportunity." ▣

"You get to (see) ... why every detail of putting on these events matters." — LISA NIESS