

2019

Meet the seven industry pros who the
Minnesota Meetings + Events Editorial Advisory Board
selected to honor in the magazine's Hall of Fame.

HALL

As told to Megan Gosch & Morgan Halaska

OF

Photos by Joel Schnell
At The Exchange & Alibi Lounge

FAME

Lifetime Achievement

Some of my best memories are just collaborating with my ILEA peeps that I've known for 20 years. ... We all work together and pull off some pretty magical stuff."

On his secret weapon: "On-the-fly problem solving, which is what events are all about. As hard as we plan it, something comes up or a truck breaks down, you know, lights go out, whatever, you have to be flexible and really be able to make decisions."

On how he unwinds: "Besides bourbon? ... I'm not one to dwell and just sit there for hours and hours because you're onto the next event. You just gotta move forward."

On his future: "Just keep teaching and training and learning. I've got a few years left in me before I retire to the golf course in the sky, wherever that is."

"I moved here in '85, so when I was 28 years old. Since then I've had three jobs basically. You see a lot of technology changes, industry changes, and you have to grow and learn and then you teach. It's just been an evolution, there's always something new in the events business. You look at even a tent, what it was 20 years ago, compared to today. There's no comparison."

On getting the job done: "In the end it just has to go and the doors have to open, right? I'll do pretty much anything."

His best advice: "Get involved. Volunteer. It's a great way to learn different disciplines. Go volunteer at an event and maybe you'll work with the lighting guy ... and become well-rounded. I can't do everything, but I can do everything a little bit."

**DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS;
APRÈS EVENT DÉCOR AND
TENT RENTAL**

CRAIG OLIVER

ASHLEIGH

ENERGY PROGRAMS DIRECTOR; MEA ENERGY ASSOCIATION

Best Meeting Professional

On her work at MEA: "I work with about 15 different committees, about 150-plus individuals, [planning in-person learning events]. ... It's a lot of opinions and a lot of perspectives and trying to steer that in a direction where everyone is focused on the same mission and vision is a challenge, but also a good opportunity to get a lot of people involved. ... We're touching on things like safety and regulations and it makes a difference, it impacts their day to day and their successes and their careers and they look to us for that and I think that's a pretty rewarding role."

On being overprepared: "I try really hard as I get ready for an event to take into consideration all the possible ups and downs and variables that could come my way so that hopefully by the time the ones that you didn't think of show up, everything else is managed as well as it can be so those don't become as rattling and I can take them on with a good sense of composure."

On how she unwinds: "I do take a couple of days off to be home with my family. I have two little girls at home and the third one [was born in January] and two dogs. My husband is home with them by himself when I'm travelling ... it's always good to settle back into that chaos."

On her future: "I am pretty happy where I am right now in a lot of ways. I'm a lifelong learner so I'm always looking for a new challenge or a chance to grow professionally. ... I'm just enjoying the balance of work and life and the people that I get to see every day and the great industry that I work in right now. A lot of it feels very settled in a good way."

A portrait of Ashleigh Esselman, a woman with blonde hair, smiling and resting her chin on her hand. She is wearing a dark blue button-down shirt and a ring on her finger. The background is dark with some purple lighting.

ESSELMAN

Up-and-Coming Meeting Professional

On CWT: "CWT has been on my radar since 2008. I was working for a nonprofit at the time and one of my board of directors was this amazing woman and she worked for CWT and I was like, 'Oh my gosh, if they hired this wonderful, smart person, I want to be around more of those people.'"

"My biggest challenge is just that there's not enough hours in the day to connect with everyone I want to connect with, do everything that I want to do. ... The account that I'm on, we're working on between 75-100 meetings a year and just to keep up with all of those connections and those people is time consuming."

On work-life balance: "You need to learn your capacity. You need to find a manager that supports you and recognizes the amount of work that goes into meetings and events, and once you find them don't let them go. My supervisors, my bosses, are fantastic women, they've been in the meetings and events industry for years so they totally understand the challenges and how to support me as an individual and as an employee."

On how she unwinds: "I like to get outside and go for a big hike to either ramp myself up or wind myself down. It's just peaceful and meditative and gets me in a clearer headspace."

On her ability to improvise: "You can plan down to the last detail, but when you're working with weather conditions or a hundred different humans or just the unpredictability of life, you need to have the skills to figure out a resolution to anything that pops up. I love going with the flow. Once you're on-site and you just need to make things happen."

MEGHAN LIKES

SENIOR MEETING PLANNER;
CWT MEETINGS & EVENTS

CMP

HMCC



Up-and-Coming Supplier

On getting into the industry: "I majored in public relations in college and I did competitive public speaking—I loved that adrenaline rush and I knew I wanted to be in front of and working with people in some way. ... When I interned with Meet Minneapolis I got to spend a lot of time at the Minneapolis Convention Center and that's where I got to see the events world up close. Seeing that energy and people rushing from room to room or coming out for general session sparked that first idea that this could be a world I want to get into."

"My biggest challenge has been getting through the busy season. It can mean a lot of long days, a lot of six-day weeks, which is exhausting but remembering my job is such an incredible opportunity gives me the stamina to push through."

Memorable career moment: "When I joined ILEA, I decided to help with the Star Awards. At the event, Christie Altendorf began describing the Volunteer of the Year Award. She was describing what this person had done and it turns out she was describing me! It was such an unexpected honor that's really stuck with me."

On preparing to meet with clients: "I'm always gathering as much information as I can. I want to understand [my client's] voice, how they promote themselves. Information is power and when I can come in with that information, I bring more confidence, making it easier to make those personal connections. Being in a people-driven business, that's crucial."

On her future: "I love that there are so many possibilities and directions to go in this industry. In my current role I can already see so much growth for myself and I'm not sure where it will take me, but just knowing that excites me for what's to come."

SALES COORDINATOR;
U.S. BANK STADIUM - SMG

LATAYA WILLIAMS



Best Supplier

On her role in shaping Machine Shop: "During the renovation of the space, I managed the second half of construction which was great because it gave me influence over a lot of small details and how the space functioned so that it could be set up for events."

On saying no: "I don't want to be known as a person who always says 'yes' to everything, but I do want to be known as someone who always says, 'no, but here's something else that we could do.'"

"I know that it sounds corny when I say it, but I still believe truly that my job is making people's dream come true and I do take that very seriously."

"I think one of my biggest [assets] is empathy. I can see all sides of a situation and I might not always agree, but I can usually understand the perspective. Doing that helps me create alternatives for people. ... I do have a little bit of know-it-all perspective. I like to know the answers to things. I like to be a resource."

On her secret weapon: "I have a like worst-case scenario brain but also an inner sense of optimism so I always believe that we can overcome or fix anything ... it keeps me grounded."

On her travels: "I didn't get on an airplane until I was 19 years old and actually never left the country until I was almost 30 and since then I've travelled to 14 countries and I've touched every continent now except Antarctica. My goal is to touch every continent before I turn 40, so I'm planning on going on a cruise to Antarctica in 2021."

JESSICA

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR; MACHINE SHOP

BARRETT

SARAH

EVENTS COORDINATOR; CHILDREN'S CANCER RESEARCH FUND

OBER

Up-and-Coming Special Events Planner

“The ability to plan intentionally is critical. I need to plan in a way that sets our supporters up for generous giving, so every aspect of the event needs to contribute to their experience of our mission. From registration to the way their meal is plated, it all needs to be seamless in a way that won't distract from the programming and storytelling that highlights our mission.”

Memorable career moment: “I was at CCRF's annual radiothon at the Mall of America. ... After a day of fundraising we gathered in the rotunda to sing 'Clouds' by Zach Sobiech. I remember looking up at the 5,000-plus people singing and I get chills. It was such a beautiful moment to see all the people that came together to support our mission. It was a big moment for me in just realizing how important the work is that we do.”

“My secret weapon is my team. Really, it's trusting my team that allows me to be successful. I'm lucky to work with people who are not only experts in their field, but are passionate about our mission and knowing I can trust them to fulfill their pieces means I can focus on my role. This honor is as much a reflection of their hard work as it is mine.”

On how she unwinds: “I love coming home and curling up with my dog to watch a show like 'The Office' or 'Friends.' ... I'm also a judge for the Minnesota State High School League Dance Team and I dance on an adult team. ... It's such a good stress reliever and I've become close to the people I dance with, so it's a great way to see friends and a fun way to unwind.”




Best Special Events Planner

On getting into the industry:
“I completely fell into events. There was no degree in event planning at the time so it wasn’t on my radar. I was in corporate marketing for UnitedHealthcare Medicare & Retirement [a division of UnitedHealth Group] when someone said there was a trade show coming up and they needed someone to take it on. I thought ‘I’ve never done an event in my life, but I’ll figure it out.’ ... They ended up creating a position for me.”

“My biggest challenge has been helping management understand the value of a professional planner. A lot of people think anyone can do what we do. ... I’m actually working with another planner to draft a research proposal for Oxford University to gather those concrete metrics and data.”

“My secret weapons are my experience and my network. With my experience I’m able to ask those big questions to find what the client is trying to achieve and translate that to the tactics needed to make it happen. ... And with my network, if there’s something I don’t know how to do I have someone I can call who does.”

On starting her own company:
“I was actually working on a United event when I was in an elevator with an AARP exec. ... She said, ‘I’d never miss one of your events. You should start a company and call it Wendy Porter Events.’ That totally surprised me. I’d thought of starting a business, but it didn’t feel real until she gave it a name.” 

WENDY

OWNER/CHIEF EVENTS OFFICER;
WENDY PORTER EVENTS LLC

PORTER