



Rising Stars For 2007

New leadership is the lifeblood of any industry, and retail is no exception. That's one of the reasons *Chain Store Age* enjoys devoting space to its annual "Rising Stars: 40 Under 40" feature. Each of the individuals profiled is making a mark in the retail industry. Together, they represent a new generation of leadership that is transforming retailing in the 21st century.

As in past years, the selection process for Rising Stars began with open nominations from professionals in the retail industry and related fields. From those nominees, our editors culled the list to its current form.

Our 2007 Stars, who range in age from 24 to 40, include two husband-and-wife teams, two Internet whiz kids and a part-time martial-arts instructor. Their individual stories run the gamut. Some have multiple college degrees; others have none. Some started their own companies from the ground up; others have flourished in family businesses or well-established chains. The one common thread that connects them all is a passion for what they do.

Our Rising Stars are as diverse as the industry they represent. Among this year's list are:

- ★ Richard Ybarra, the 37-year-old VP and director of stores for Charlotte Russe and featured on this issue's cover, who enjoys being on the front lines for the 360-plus store chain;

- ★ Veronica Smith Katz, 38, VP of strategic partnerships for David's Bridal, who derives her greatest professional satisfaction in mentoring; and

- ★ Jason Gautereaux, 36, Sport Chalet's VP, merchandise planning and inventory management, who started out as a scuba instructor at 18 and worked his way up through the ranks.

The 2007 Rising Stars compilation is a rich resource of talent. We salute this year's stars, all of whom have demonstrated the innovative spirit, resourcefulness and integrity that are the essence of leadership.

It wasn't easy being a UCLA Bruin in a family of USC Trojans. But Richard Ybarra, 37, has resolutely put college days and football losses behind him, and established a winning record in retail executive management that includes 14 years in district and regional managerial positions with Pacific Sunwear and American Eagle Outfitters. He landed at San Diego-based Charlotte Russe just over a year ago as VP, director of stores.

Heading up field operations for the 360-plus-unit chain of young women's apparel stores has allowed Ybarra to do what he does best: interact with people.

"If I had to pinpoint one specialty, it would be my interaction with the people in the field," Ybarra said. "I also gain much satisfaction from the strategic planning process—planning where we're going and how we are going to get there."

But it is from Charlotte Russe staffers that Ybarra derives the greatest satisfaction.

"The people are why I do what I do," he said. "I look back at my prior supervisors who had the greatest impact on me, the ones who were able to drive me and push me—and that inspires me to do the same. I want to be able to instill that drive, that motivation within this organization at Charlotte Russe."

Ybarra's "people focus" isn't just on the top rung of the organization. He feels every bit as strongly about the store-level sales associate working for minimum wage.

"You have to make sure that they all are feeling important and motivated," he explained. "It is essential to have regular and meaningful interaction with the field personnel, to assure that they always have someone to encourage them, mentor them, show them what direction to go. This is the part of my job that really keeps me going."

Ybarra's regular interaction with the Charlotte Russe field staff means that he is squarely on the front lines with a hefty division of the company that encompasses a huge number of employees.

"I oversee the entire field, which is, of course, all of the stores, their personnel, the district managers and the regional managers," he said. "As well, loss prevention falls within my realm of scope, which means that I oversee the loss-prevention managers and the personnel below them." Another group of Ybarra's direct reports—central operations—consists of a director of communications, a director of financial analysis "and the supporting roles below them as well."

"It's big," Ybarra said, "as it handles the largest portion of personnel for the Charlotte Russe organization. But anytime you have the field, that's going to be the case."

With the enormity of the responsibilities that come with the job, Ybarra struggles to maintain a balance in his life. He spends a good four days out of every week in the field.

"The travel is inescapable, as it is essential that I be out there, paying attention that the sales are being generated where they are supposed to, and watching the interaction at all levels, from the regional level all the way

Richard Ybarra, 37

VP, director of stores,
Charlotte Russe, San Diego

Major accomplishment: Bringing the Charlotte Russe field organization together with one vision, one focus



Richard Ybarra,
VP, director of stores,
Charlotte Russe

COVER PHOTO: BLACK STAR

down to that sales associate,” Ybarra said.

Part of his job is also ensuring that the customer experience is what it is supposed to be, underscoring the executional standards and making sure that the chain not only is meeting the baselines but that it continues to elevate them in the direction needed to compete in the fast-fashion market.

But Ybarra is determined that the frequent travel that comes with retail field operations won't undermine that which he holds most dear.

“I remember when my daughter Isabella was about 7 or 8 months old,” he said, “and I returned home from a prolonged business trip. She didn't recognize her dad!”

Ybarra knew then that he had to make a big change, and “find a better way to balance that work and life piece.”

“I have a picture of my wife Leslie and my little girl Isabella on my BlackBerry and on my laptop that is with me at all times,” he said. “It can be very easy, with all of the stress and pressure, to lose your perspective, to lose that balance between work and life. My 5-year-old daughter amazes me everyday; seeing life through her eyes illuminates the ordinary.”★

As the EDI (electronic data interchange) manager for The adidas Group's sports license division, Dan Ball, 34, is committed to helping people understand that “EDI is not a necessary evil. It can actually help generate revenue.”

In 1993, Ball accepted his first IT position in the banking industry. When he transitioned to a leading automotive supplier in 1995, he was introduced to EDI,



Dan Ball, 34

EDI manager,
Sports license division of
The adidas Group, Indianapolis

Major Accomplishment: Educating his company and business partners about the benefits of EDI, and producing revenue-generating results.

a process that enables companies to electronically exchange business transactions.

After spending eight years overseeing industry enterprise resource planning integration and supply chain management projects, Ball became EDI manager

for a division of Reebok International. In early 2006, Reebok was purchased by The adidas Group, where Ball is currently EDI manager for the sports license division.

Ball has shaped his job efforts on two philosophies: improve processes and customer service to deliver higher quality products at a lower cost; and reduce process variation to streamline operations. By applying these at The adidas Group, overall EDI volume is up by 143%, and error-rates dropped by 97%.

Ball doesn't discount the contribution of his team to these successes. He also hopes some team members will be future Rising Stars.

“Success is a delicate balance of skill sets and personal happiness, and I remind them to work tirelessly at both,” Ball concluded, noting that he looks forward to ending his workday with his wife, and four children.★

As VP of corporate strategy/sustainability for Wal-Mart Stores, Andy Ruben, 34, plays a crucial role in the chain's drive to incorporate social and environmental sustainability into its business strategies. It's a key initiative for the chain, and includes a pledge to cut greenhouse-gas emissions at existing stores by 20% in seven years.



Andy Ruben, 34,

VP, corporate strategy/sustainability,
Wal-Mart Stores
Bentonville, Ark.

Ruben, who has a bachelor's degree in civil engineering and an MBA (both from Washington University in St. Louis), began his career with Wal-Mart in 2002 as director of corporate strategy. In 2003, he was appointed VP of U.S. strategy for the chain. In those positions, he gained familiarity across a wide range of Wal-Mart's businesses and markets.

Prior to joining Wal-Mart, Ruben was a consultant with Cap Gemini Ernst & Young's Strategy Practice, where he helped develop growth and

planning strategies for dozens of Fortune 100 companies.

Despite a demanding job schedule, Ruben is active in the community. He is a founding member of the Arkansas chapter of the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation and sits on the MBA advisory board of the Sam M. Walton School of Business at University of Arkansas.★

Whether it is gravitational pull or simply luck, Tony Ueber, 40, VP of marketing for Office Depot, said he has been “fortunate to work for some inspirational leaders, people who have been passionate about what they do and committed to doing the right thing.” Ueber’s inspirational leadership has come not just from within Office Depot, where he has worked since May 2003, but also from his prior positions with Procter & Gamble and McKinsey & Co.



Tony Ueber, 40

Senior VP, marketing, Office Depot, Delray Beach, Fla. Major accomplishment:

“Having built a really strong marketing organization and measurably improving the effectiveness of our marketing.”

“Because I have been lucky enough to have these people around me during my whole professional career, it occurred to me that maybe it’s not luck,” Ueber said, “but perhaps I gravitate toward the type of people who push me, who challenge me.”

Ueber credits his wife with personal inspi-

ration. “Ronna has an incredible energy and creativity and has provided the support that I’ve needed to help me be successful,” Ueber said.

Success comes in many forms for Ueber. Inside Office Depot, he has global responsibility for the company’s brand identity, broadcast advertising, media planning, sports sponsorships, local marketing, market research, direct marketing and more.

Outside the office, he is training for a marathon.

“That’s my biggest goal on the horizon—26.2 miles,” he said. “Don’t forget the .2, because that will probably be the toughest part!”

Driving Ueber toward his fitness goals is his son, A.J., 5. “My son will ask me, ‘Daddy, why are you going to exercise?’ And I say, ‘Because I have to be able to compete with you!’”★

Albert Stabile, 38, was 12 years old when he made his first entrepreneurial move. Born into a family of independent business people, “I started my own paper route and realized working for myself was the best thing.”



His family was understandably surprised when, after getting his business degree from Rutgers University and MBA from Seattle University, he took a job as an accountant for Eddie Bauer.

“I told my family that my long-term plan was to obtain the knowledge and the networking ability to be the very best at one thing, but I didn’t yet know what that one thing was,” he said.

That one thing turned out to be lease administration and lease abstracting. After a decade of working for other companies, Stabile and his business partner Ann Cho launched

Albert J. Stabile, 38

President and co-founder, Exactus Portfolio Management Advisors, Inc., Port St. Lucie, Fla.

Key challenge: To create a company during tough economic times without a single client. “My partner and I started with literally nothing but a sheer desire to succeed.”

Exactus in 2002. Stabile credits the National Retail Tenants Association (NRTA) with guiding him toward retail.

Without NRTA, “I wouldn’t have

recognized that my initial judgment of retail not being worthy of our time was incredibly mistaken,” he explained.

Beyond the NRTA, mentor Robert Hackett (who is today an executive with Trammell Crow) and wife Susan have most influenced Stabile professionally and personally. And then there are Scruffy and Waffles. “I have two types of days—good and great,” said Stabile. “What separates the great from the good is being greeted at the door by my two dogs.”★

Ray Arabia says his Pet Plus business is built on family values. “Since those values are so important to us, we wanted to create a distinct family-destination spot,” he said. “And that’s exactly what we have done.”

Arabia, 39, says the importance of providing for his family has driven his career from the start. As a young father, he left his Philadelphia homestead and joined the Air Force, specifically to take advantage of its strong benefits package. While based in Myrtle Beach, S.C., he managed to take night classes at the University of South Carolina and received a bachelor’s degree in finance. He later attended nursing school, but felt a push to pursue something else.



Arabia, who was at the time raising two young girls, was asked to develop his brother’s pet store, Pet Plus. He proved himself more than up to the challenge and helped the company expand throughout the region. It recently signed a lease for its 10th store.

“In my free time, I love seeing what other stores are doing with their retail space to spark ideas,” Arabia said.

While visiting a Toys “R” Us store a few years ago, for example, a Barbie Dreamhouse display inspired his decision to have Pet Plus puppies live in an innovative Victorian-house setting.

Arabia said he never saw much of the country until several years ago. But he makes up for it now by flying around the country to check out stores in his quest to keep his business relevant and innovative.

Arabia still makes family his No. 1 priority. He enjoys spending his downtime with his grandson and two daughters.★

Ray Arabia, 39

Co-owner, Pet Plus, Horsham, Pa.

Key challenge: Coming up with unique ideas and creating a family-destination retail environment.

An unlikely career counselor, Julie Dugas' college roommate, steered Dugas, 39, toward interior design.

"I'm not one of those people who, from the time I was 3 years old, knew exactly what I was going to be," she said.

But in her second year at Michigan State, a roommate majoring in interior design described the curriculum to Dugas who "thought about it overnight and the



next day changed my major from 'undecided' to interior design." Yet it was at another university that Dugas honed her career choice to retail design.

"I transferred to Wayne State in Detroit, where I secured internships dur-

Julie Dugas, 39

Associate senior designer, Cubellis Marco, Northville, Mich.

Key challenge: "Remembering that, as retail designers, we are all obligated—no matter how big or how small or high-profile a project—to always design the best possible solution."

ing my junior and senior years and realized that I really liked restaurants and retail," said Dugas, "and it was on those two areas that I decided to focus."

Post-college positions with a couple of design firms helped prepare Dugas for her career at Cubellis Marco where, for the last 11 years, she has worked with her mentor Nick Giammarco, principal. Dugas has thrived at the company.

When she's not working, Dugas is reading a good book.

"I secretly wish I were a writer," she confessed. "I don't have any great strength in writing or story-telling, but I absolutely love to read."

Because she travels both domestically and abroad in her position with Cubellis Marco, airports and planes provide time for reading marathons. "While I don't read multiple books a week as a rule, when I'm traveling, I do!"★

Martin Lakin, 40, is always thinking one step ahead. Lakin, who began his career at FACS Group—a division of Federated Department Stores—in various management roles, joined on-line closeout company and virtual warehouse DollarDays International in 2003 in an effort to help small independent businesses compete against larger enterprises.



After becoming a director of operations for bankcard issuer Metris Cos., and later making the switch to the Internet world as senior director of operations for MyGeek.com, a search-engine marketing company, he knew the Internet world was where he wanted to stay.

Martin Lakin, 40

COO, DollarDays International, Scottsdale, Ariz.

Key challenge: Getting more market share from an on-line perspective

"The Internet is shifting the way people function in society and it's exciting to be a part of something so big like that," he said.

In addition to his COO daily duties at DollarDays, Lakin brainstorms long-term projects. After a series of nationwide natural disasters in 2005, Lakin saw the demand for charity needs and had the idea to extend DollarDays' service to nonprofit organizations.

As Lakin pursues new projects, however, he often struggles to find downtime. "It's harder to find balance in an environment like this because you're fighting a bigger fight by creating something from nothing," he said. "There is a lot more work and less play, but it's all for good reason."

When the company recently expanded its offices, Lakin was among the group to roll up their sleeves on off days to sweep the warehouse and haul boxes to the post office.

"You sometimes have to do a little bit of everything to keep things moving," he said. "You can never be too proud to help everyone else in an organization."★



Paul Lightfoot has a high tolerance for pain and hard work. But the 36-year-old triathlete and CEO of AL Systems Inc., a distribution solution company, says he relies on perseverance and drive to achieve his personal and career goals.

Lightfoot joined the AL Systems team in fall 2001, when the company was rich in operational and sales problems, he said. But the company's strong roster of clients and retailers was a platform he felt he could fix. In 2002, he became president and CEO.

Paul Lightfoot, 36

President and CEO, AL Systems Inc., Rockaway, N.J.

Key challenge: Doing whatever it takes to satisfy customers

"It was a tough time in the industry with Sept. 11, but it was also rewarding to fix ourselves during a time where everything was becoming more difficult."

Previously, Lightfoot was founder and CEO of Foodline, an information-technology company, and was also a transactional attorney at a law firm, after bartending his way through school.

"Along the way, I've learned that no strategy works without the right people executing it, and that listening is the No. 1 skill in leading people."

Lightfoot gives clients his home number because "being available 24/7/365 is an important part of the business model," he said.

Lightfoot balances work and play by spending time with his family. He enjoys reading; he says he doesn't watch TV. Lightfoot does make time to compete in one triathlon at the end of each season. "The things that push me one step further tend to be the things that keep me extra motivated."★

Nine years ago when Anthony Amunategui began Corporate Development Outsourcing (CDO), it was not that common for retailers to outsource their construction projects. However, Amunategui, who had worked as a project manager at several chains, realized the impracticality of building gigantic construction teams within a retail organization only to dismantle them after projects were completed. "It was like buying the cow when all they needed was the milk," he observed.



Anthony Amunategui, 39

President, Corporate Development Outsourcing, Chicago
Major accomplishment: Growing from a basement start-up to a recognized national brand

Amunategui, 39, likens construction rollouts to a strategic game of chess, positioning all the players in the right place at the right time. "When you think about a national construction rollout, opening 1,600 stores in four years is not the biggest challenge. The fundamental problem is getting 1,600 groups of

people to accomplish the store openings," he said.

Similarly, the biggest challenge CDO has faced has been recruiting quality labor. Certainly finding projects has not posed any problem: The company has managed rollouts for a number of national chains including Cold Stone Creamery, Finish Line, Gap, Planet Beach and T.G.I. Friday's. CDO has

four offices around the country with plans to open a fifth location early this year.

"I love the strategy of developing a rollout, whether it's creating a system that will take a 10-store chain to 100 stores or the challenge

of replicating an existing format hundreds of times around the country, on time and on budget," Amunategui declared. "My goal is to make the construction rollout run smarter, quicker and less expensively for my clients."★



Pat Gartland is what one may call a perfectionist.

"I'm sure it drives some people crazy, but being detail-oriented is just a part of being efficient," he said.

The 38-year-old Buckeyes football aficionado and operations/sales director of Rent-A-Center, Inc. graduated from Ohio State University in 1992 with a B.S. in operations management and economics.

"I'm probably one of the few people out there that actually used their college degree for their current career," he joked. "I guess I just always knew what I wanted to do."

Right after college, he joined Renters Choice before the company was acquired and changed its name to Rent-A-Center.

Pat Gartland, 38

Operations/sales director, Rent-A-Center, Inc., Plano, Texas
Key challenge: Making stores more competitive and efficient to further develop business

"I was willing to work constantly because I wanted to move up quickly," he said. "If you're good at what you do, it's going to show." Gartland now creates strategies for Rent-

A-Center to improve and develop customer and community relationships in the neighborhoods in and around the company's 3,500-plus locations.

Despite constant travel and long work weeks, Gartland likes to spend his off-time with his two sons, ages 8 and 8 months. When on the road, he enjoys unwinding with physical activity like playing golf or using the hotel workout facilities.

Offering suggestions for improvement at different store locations is exactly what Gartland loves to do. However, as a perfectionist he often struggles with certain realizations, he said.

"You have to get to a point where you acknowledge that you can't fix every problem all of the time. But I do like to try."★

A self-professed "numbers kid," accounting and finance have always been natural fits for Joe Sheetz, who spent summers, from the time he was 14 through college, working odd jobs in the family convenience store business. This allowed him to dabble in low-level accounting and bookkeeping tasks, and when he graduated from college he joined a financial consulting firm outside Philadelphia.



"After about seven years, I was quasi-recruited by my Uncle Steve because I'd been working on the financial side of HR, focusing on pensions and employee benefits, which was an area where Sheetz, Inc. lacked expertise." explained Sheetz, 40. In 1996, shortly after he returned to the family business, the VP of finance position opened

and Sheetz was the logical replacement, taking responsibility for the company's finance and accounting. Subsequently, he also took over management of all

Joe S. Sheetz, 40

Executive VP, Sheetz, Inc., Altoona, Pa.
Key challenge: Following in his father's footsteps to manage site selection and store plants for the fast-growing family-owned chain

technology initiatives at Sheetz, Inc., including corporate and in-store technologies. In October, following the death of his father, Joseph M. Sheetz, in August, Sheetz was given responsibility for the company's real estate and store-development activity, including construction and design of new stores.

"My father led our real estate and store development for more than 25 years, through the company's heaviest growth, and he did a great job so I have very big shoes to fill both professionally and personally," observed Sheetz. "Real estate is more art than science. But my father left an experienced, loyal staff, which will allow me to be more of a strategic leader."★

Even though a heart problem prevented Joseph LaRocca from pursuing a career in traditional law enforcement, the loss prevention VP at the National Retail Federation (NRF) paid his dues working his way up in a career field that in many ways proved far more dangerous. LaRocca, for example, has been threatened with a gun by an elderly woman stealing jewelry, holed up inside a fake Trojan Horse at FAO Schwarz while spying on thieves and been dragged behind an escaping thief's car. Today, his job is much less risky, yet in many ways, more important.



Joseph LaRocca, 39

VP, loss prevention, National Retail Federation, Washington, D.C.

Major accomplishment: Development of the Retail Loss Prevention Intelligence Network, a national database of retail crime-sharing information

At NRF since 2004, LaRocca works to share information and develop tools for loss prevention practitioners. He is particularly proud of the launch in 2006 of the Retail Loss Prevention Intelligence Network, a software tool that helps retailers report, identify and share information about crime in their areas. (The program is being re-named the Law Enforcement Retail Partnership Network as the FBI becomes a key partner in this retail crime-sharing database.)

An in-demand speaker on retail crime, LaRocca gets the word out to retailers about crime trends and also lobbies for related legislation, such as a federal law that established an organized retail crime task force.

LaRocca's career in loss prevention began in 1986 when he worked as a shoplifting detective while attending college. When a heart problem disqualified him from a job in law enforcement, he put all his efforts into retail. Over the next several years, he held senior loss prevention positions at several retail chains.

"I enjoy working with some of the best people in our entire industry to come up with ways of preventing fraud and protecting our supply chain," LaRocca said. ★



Recently Cara Kinsey, 40, moved from the world's biggest retailer to the big city lights of Fort Worth, where she assumed the role of senior VP of IT at RadioShack. Although she enjoys positive memories of the 23 years spent at Wal-Mart, which included 11 years as VP of store systems, Kinsey already prefers her new life.

"Actually, the corporate cultures of the two companies are very similar," Kinsey noted. "Sure the retail stores have very different footprints and we're typically dealing with four POS registers per store at RadioShack vs. 30 registers in a Wal-Mart, but the IT requirements are very similar and the same efficiencies apply. RadioShack will be just as challenging and just as much fun."

Cara Kinsey, 40

Senior VP, IT RadioShack, Fort Worth, Texas

Major accomplishment: Led critical improvements of store technologies at Wal-Mart including POS systems and replenishment processes

She credits her successful career to good mentoring from other Wal-Mart executives,

fondly recalling her introduction to IT when she was asked whether she wanted to be part of the problem, or part of the solution. Not only did she become part of the solution, she led a number of initiatives including back-room automation, rapid-replenishment processes and POS efficiencies.

What she likes best about her new career at RadioShack is starting with a clean IT slate, having opportunities to effect business change and hoping to mentor as many people as possible. It also doesn't hurt that she traded a typical 65- to 70-hour work week in Bentonville for an average 55-hour week at Radio Shack. ★

An aptitude for mathematical thinking runs in Matt DiBona's family—both his parents have graduate degrees in math or science. While other kids rode their bikes or played touch football, "I was the guy who spent many a summer in the basement writing programs on my Commodore 64," said DiBona, senior business analyst at Interstate Batteries. The retailer operates 60 stores, selling all types of batteries to consumers and businesses.



Call him a computer geek if you will, but history has rewarded them quite nicely in recent years—just consider Bill Gates. For DiBona, using computer analysis to figure out how to sell more batteries and tailor battery

Matt DiBona, 31

Senior business analyst, Interstate Batteries, Dallas

Major accomplishment: Leveraging IT experience and a technical background to drive business improvement through analysis from within the business

products to specific store customers is a fulfilling science.

"Having the data smarts within the business allows us to get rapid results and rapid insights," DiBona explained.

Before joining Interstate in 2003, DiBona worked as a business consultant for Ernst & Young. He had been recruited after earning a mechanical engineering degree from Iowa State University in 1998. A new family and the stresses of extensive travel for Ernst & Young eventually led DiBona to accept his current position at Interstate Battery in Dallas.

"I'm uniquely positioned to straddle the fence and enjoy the fact that I can bring insights to business questions on issues by using data and technical solutions," DiBona said. "I'm able to be technical, but I'm able to use my business experience as well." ★

One thing that led John St. Pierre, 32, to name the company he co-founded in 2003 after a geometric shape was the fact that, like the four-sided slanting square, Rhombus Services had four partners. What he liked most, however, was the forward-moving energy that the shape conveyed.



Rhombus Services, which already has more than \$5 million in projects on the schedule for 2007, has more than lived up to St. Pierre's vision of forward momentum. The company, which manages field service and installation projects for large retail chains, began by installing in-store kiosks and quickly expanded its services to include digital signage, fix-

John St. Pierre, 32

President, Rhombus Services, Haddon Heights, N.J.
Major accomplishment: The company is entering its fourth year with more than \$5 million in booked projects.

tures, POS systems and facilities maintenance including painting, electrical, roofing and HVAC.

"When we first started, I wore a lot of hats—president, janitor, accountant and project manager," noted St. Pierre. "Now, we have 15 employees at our corporate office, compared to only four employees 18 months ago, and a network of more than 5,000 subcontractors across North America. But I still wear a lot of hats and I'm personally involved in most, if not all, of our projects."

The biggest challenge facing St. Pierre, albeit one he relishes, is developing business processes and accounting controls to keep pace with the growth of his company. Among the retailers that he has managed large projects for are RadioShack, Wal-Mart, Sam's Club, BJ's Wholesale Club and Tuesday Morning—as well as a number of rollouts for manufacturers' displays at stores including The Home Depot and Circuit City.★

At 27, Larry Sajdak has experienced a surprisingly full life. A college degree in chemistry could hardly have prepared him for a senior-level real estate career, yet that's what has unfolded. His age didn't supply the skill sets to raise a 16-year-old brother—yet that, too, was written into Sajdak's life's plan. But not without support. "Personally, my greatest support has come from my wife," said Sajdak. "When my parents passed away, she stepped into the role of helping me to raise my brother. I can't think of anyone else who would do that, especially on top of supporting my professional climb and what that has entailed."



Larry Sajdak, 27

VP, property management, Inland U.S. Management, Oakbrook, Ill.
Key challenge: Making a successful transition from heavy acquisition mode to one that focuses on managing existing shopping center assets.

Professionally, Sajdak, who was recently promoted to VP at Inland U.S. Management, found a mentor in a 20-year company veteran. "Tom McGuinness, president/property management, took me under his wing from the time I was in college," Sajdak said.

As a student, Sajdak worked part-time as an administrative bookkeeper. A full-time opening landed him back at Inland less than a year after graduation, and Sajdak never looked back. With McGuinness as his mentor, Sajdak transitioned into property management, becoming regional manager and, in 2004, assistant VP. The most recent promotion has put Sajdak in charge of 29 employees, entrenched him in leasing, marketing, acquisitions and development, and given him more reason to savor time off with his younger brother, his dog Dixie, and his wife, with whom Sajdak shares a love of wine and gourmet cooking. "We work pretty well in the kitchen together," he added.★



Jason Gautereaux, 36

VP, merchandise planning and inventory management, Sport Chalet, La Canada, Calif.
Major accomplishment: Built systems and processes for inventory management that support the company's growth

As a teenager, Jason Gautereaux was a scuba enthusiast who spent a lot of time at the Sport Chalet near his home. When the store manager suggested Gautereaux work at the store and, in effect, get paid to hang out, the 18-year-old saw a perfect opportunity to support his hobby.

Even as he grew up with the company, working his way from scuba instructor to department manager and then director of scuba operations, Gautereaux did not envision a career at Sport Chalet.

"As I was finishing college, I realized the tactical business learning I got working at Sport Chalet was invaluable," he explained. "About every three years my responsibilities were changing, and my role at Sport Chalet was growing. I fell in love with the company."

Gautereaux, 36, became director of replenishment for the growing chain, which has grown from seven stores to 45 locations since he started there. In recent years, he became responsible for merchandise planning, allocation, replenishment and EDI, and built the technical infrastructure, systems and processes to support inventory management across the expanding portfolio.

"What I enjoy most is being in a key position to contribute to the company's growth, and being with a company that is growing profitably," Gautereaux said. "We've been able to open our stores without acquiring short-term or long-term debt."

Outside of work, Gautereaux is still a sporting enthusiast. He can be found on the slopes or fairways, enjoying his passions for snowboarding and golf.★

Veronica Smith Katz, VP of strategic partnerships for David's Bridal, considers herself fortunate on all counts. She has a supportive husband, a wonderful 7-year-old daughter and a job she relishes. Katz, 38, who joined David's Bridal in 1999, was named to her current position in 2004.



"We work to create partnerships with the best companies out there in order to offer brides extra support and resources for planning their weddings, with the ultimate goal of enhancing our customers' shopping experience with David's," Katz explained. "It's exciting because it's a relatively new program."

Associates say Katz is a role model who leads by example.

"When you are a manager, an important part of your job is to motivate, guide and inspire the people who report to you," she said. "You have a real responsibility to manage their careers and to help them be all that they can be."

It's a responsibility that Katz takes seriously. So much so that she spent every weekend last year in Washington, D.C., attending Georgetown University as a graduate student in an executive leadership master's program. As always, her family was behind her 100%.

"My daughter said, 'Go for it, Mom,'" Katz said. "She and my husband came down to D.C. as much as possible so that we could have some family time."★

Veronica Smith Katz, 38

VP, strategic partnerships, David's Bridal, Conshohocken, Pa.

Key challenge: Expanding the wedding-planning services we offer brides in our stores and on line



Roman Tsunder was just out of college when he moved from Los Angeles to New York City to work as an investment banker. The hours were punishing and the work was challenging. The little free time he had was spent at the gym.

"I would watch MTV as I worked out," Tsunder recalled. "And it hit me: 'How great would it be to work at MTV?' I decided that if I was going to work as hard as I was, I should at least get some

personal satisfaction out of it."

Tsunder never did pursue his dream to work at MTV. But he eventually left New York and headed back to California, where his ambition took shape. In 2003, with about \$50,000, he founded Access Retail Entertainment, an in-store entertainment

company targeting teens. The business has been profitable from day one.

One of the pioneers of multi-store, entertainment programming networks, Tsunder is nothing if not media- and tech-savvy. He was one of the first, for example, to understand the potential of mobile marketing.

"Things are changing fast," Tsunder said. "It's a different world in many respects than it was five years ago. Retailers can now connect with consumers 24/7."

Tsunder wants to help them do just that. The company recently changed its name to ACCESS 360 Media to better reflect its expanded retail, mobile and on-line platforms. And with an eye to future growth, it has secured venture capital funding.

"It's been a big breakout year for us," Tsunder said.

Tsunder still puts in long hours, but he considers it time well spent.

"I can't think of anything I would enjoy doing more than this," he said. "Working with teens, entertainment companies, exciting brands—I enjoy it all."★

Roman Tsunder, 32

CEO, ACCESS 360 Media, Los Angeles

Key challenge: Changing retailers' mind-sets so that they view themselves as media networks

Todd Littler, 36, climbed the Dollar Tree ladder at break-neck speed, and then he broke his neck—literally. Last July, after earning three promotions and helping



grow the chain from 700 stores to 3,300, Littler had a water-sport accident that left him momentarily paralyzed, and in danger of permanent paralysis.

"I suffered the reverse of whiplash, where my chin went to my chest so violently that I herniated my C5 disc into my spinal cord," he said. Emergency spinal-fusion surgery was successful, but it took Littler three months—and much support from family and friends—to return to his pre-accident self.

His wife, Kristin, and Dollar Tree

Todd Littler, 36

VP of leasing, Dollar Tree, Chesapeake, Va.

Major accomplishment: Having "touched" 2,600 Dollar Tree stores since arriving at the company in 1997, whether by opening, expanding, relocating or managing them

colleagues provided invaluable aid during Littler's recovery.

"I missed one week of work, then went back part-time the second week, and full-time thereafter," Littler said. "I couldn't drive, so Kristin or people from the company went out of their way to pick me up and drop me off."

The show of support enabled Littler to continue his hefty responsibilities at Dollar Tree with little interruption.

"As VP of leasing, I oversee all new store growth," he said. "I manage the process, the people, anything related to new store growth."

The very path he is on is one that Littler wants to continue traveling.

"In 10 years, I'd like to think that I will still be making deals and teaching others the art of deal-making. I thrive on teaching people the business."★

After graduating from the University of Bridgeport with a B.S. in marketing on a soccer scholarship, Joe DiDomizio played the sport semi-pro. Eventually, however, his father Mario, the founder/CEO of Hudson



Group Retail Division, asked him if he had any interest in the retail business.

"I knew it was time to hang up the soccer boots and see where this could take me."

DiDomizio said. "I've always had an affinity for retail and the detail behind it, from establishing consumer interest to driving sales."

DiDomizio, 36, started as an operations manager running the company

Joe DiDomizio, 36

Executive VP/COO, Hudson Group, East Rutherford, N.J.

Key challenge: Maintaining a consistency that consumers expect of a national brand, while keeping the entrepreneurial spirit among management

site at New York's LaGuardia Airport, which had 12 Hudson News stores. Today, 14 years later, he leads the company as executive VP and COO.

Hudson News is rapidly expanding and now has more than 500 stores in 70 airports and transportation terminals throughout North America.

"There is so much more untapped business throughout the United States and Canada," he said. "We are also beginning to explore international opportunities."

When not at the office, DiDomizio plays tennis and still follows soccer. He also enjoys reading to his three children before bed each night.

"I still make time for all the things that are important to me," he said. "The only thing that's lacking these days is sleep, because it's amazing what you can get done on a BlackBerry in the middle of the night."★

Chris and Christine Cook certainly haven't been sleeping on the job. Their business, Sleep Experts, which was founded in 2003, has expanded to 22 stores and has seen its revenue expand more than eightfold. It holds a 14% market share in the Dallas market.



In launching the company, Chris Cook, 38, combined his financial background and experience working at his father's bedding firm with his wife's expertise in marketing and advertising. Together, they studied the competition.

"We found that the two largest competitors and a lot of mom-and-pops had a high-pressure sales environment," Chris Cook said. "From our perspective, the stores didn't appeal to women."

Chris Cook, 38 CEO Christine Cook, 37 President

Sleep Experts, Carrollton, Texas

Key challenge: Differentiating and succeeding in a market with two large national competitors

The Cooks saw an opportunity to build a business whose stores offered a different, more comfortable atmosphere. "We also focused on sales training and understanding the customers' needs," he added.

Sleep Experts' success, according to the Cooks, is the result of creating an inviting store environment with excellent customer service. The products, mattresses priced from \$99 to \$7,000, are placed in vignette settings, complete with accessories.

Although Chris Cook is a third-generation retailer (his grandfather sold beds and his father founded Sleep Country USA), he initially started out as an analyst for a money manager, and became part of the founding team of Site Stuff, a Web-based marketer of procurement services for real estate property managers. His wife, Christine, 37, worked for advertising firms (the two had attended Southern Methodist University in Dallas). The idea of pooling their talents to start a business eventually took hold.

"This gives us the opportunity to control our own destiny," Chris Cook said.★



Kate Kuntz, 36, has made a home for herself at Best Buy. "I graduated from Bethel College in Roseville, Minn., with a B.A. in business management, and have been with Best Buy most of my professional career [19 years] in a variety of roles and responsibilities," Kuntz said. "Property management was not the path I was planning to take at the company, but I really fell in love with the challenges it presents." Kuntz has property-management, retail-facilities and environmental-affairs teams within her area—

about 40 people, both corporate and field staff.

Kuntz has made it a practice to share the knowledge she has gained with her professional peers, through involvement in the National Retail Tenants Association (NRTA). "NRTA has been the cornerstone of training and education for my property-management teams," she said. Kuntz serves on NRTA's board of directors and co-

Kate Kuntz, 36

Director of property management, Best Buy, Richfield, Minn.

Major accomplishment: Launching the property-management department at Best Buy to keep operating costs at an acceptable level and ensure that landlords comply with lease terms

chairs the curriculum committee for the annual conferences. "I am passionate about education and training, both professionally and personally, which is why I am so active in this area of the organization. Education is key to a person's success as it broadens and challenges the boundaries of what you think you know."

Kuntz credits her mother as the cornerstone of her own personal education. "It is her values that I live my life by and that I teach my son, with the hope that someday he will have the same amount of respect for me that I have for my mom," she said.★

Tod Fox is not an average five-store retail owner. This 40-year-old CEO is a strategist with a vision for transforming his niche bicycle concept into a national brand. And he has the business acumen to make it happen.



In 2003, Fox acquired four bicycle stores in three months and began laying the groundwork to position his burgeoning company, Bike America, as the dominant cycle retailer throughout the country. Fox was approached by his brother, who had partnered in a bike shop for 21 years, about a store that was available to buy.

“My brother is the cycle enthusiast. Bicycling is a hobby for me, but I love retailing,” explained Fox, who had sold his interest in a software company that was on the cutting edge of developing inventory-management solutions for multichannel retailers.

Tod R. Fox, 40

CEO, Bike America, Pompano Beach, Fla.
Key challenge: Taking his niche retail concept national, with each of the existing stores averaging \$1 million in annual sales

In addition to its five stores, Bike America sells on line and is launching a catalog in 2007. Plans are under way to acquire another six bicycle retailers, with 15 to 20 stores expected to join Bike America in the coming months. Fox is also contemplating expansion into California,

Colorado and Texas. “Our expansion strategy is to enter a market by acquiring the established bike retailers, then build additional stores in the area to gain market dominance,” Fox said. “Bicycle retailing is a very fragmented industry but one with annual sales approaching \$6 billion. There are 4,800 bike shops in the United States, but only one chain with more than 25 locations.”★

To Abel Villacorta, life is all about balance. And he has found it at Boulder, Colo.-based Wild Oats Markets. As director of innovation for the natural-foods supermarket chain, Villacorta is able to put both his marketing acumen and visual expertise (he has separate degrees in business-marketing and fine arts-graphic design) to work for a company he is passionate about.



“I’m always looking for new ways to push our brand forward,” Villacorta said.

Since joining Wild Oats in 1997, Villacorta has helped the company enhance its visual brand identity and develop a strong presence in the natural- and organic-foods category, cul-

Abel Villacorta, 37

Director of innovation, Wild Oats Markets, Boulder, Colo.
Key challenge: To make food the “hero” in the company’s stores and to align the entire organization behind that same idea

minating in award-winning designs in both store design and packaging.

Villacorta was born in Lima, Peru, and moved to New York City when he was 11 (his mother worked for the United Nations for 22 years). He enjoys traveling and is always on the lookout for interesting design and how consumers behave in different spaces. But he is happy to return to Boulder.

“It’s a phenomenal place,” Villacorta said. “There is the environment, to start with, and I also think you get a better balance between life and work here.”

The 37-year-old Villacorta has energy to spare. In his downtime, he runs a martial-arts business specializing in Aikido instruction. His life, already full, is about to become fuller. He and his wife are expecting their first child. “We’re both thrilled,” Villacorta said.★



Upon graduating from Marquette University in Milwaukee in 1995, Marcus Lemonis began his retail career at his family’s two Florida-based Chevrolet dealerships. However, a visit with family friend and mentor Lee Iacocca sparked Lemonis’ entrepreneurial spirit.

“He said, ‘You can only make your mark on an industry if you pioneer or change something,’” recalled Lemonis, 33. “Then he told me about the opportunities evolving in the RV industry.”

Marcus Lemonis, 33

Chairman and CEO, FreedomRoads, Chicago; Camping World, Bowling Green, Ky.
Major accomplishment: Servicing a growing baby-boomer generation on the move

A confident Lemonis started buying up RV dealerships, then consolidated them under one banner he called FreedomRoads. Next, he was asked to lead Camping World, a retailer of RV merchandise and outdoor accessories and

services. By spearheading a partnership between Camping World and FreedomRoads last year, Lemonis created a foundation to service the ever-growing baby-boomer generation. “I love creating long-lasting customer relationships—a great fit in the RV industry as boomers make this lifestyle commitment,” he explained.

Lemonis builds these relationships through data-mining efforts and by tapping the experience of his team. “I supplement my lack of experience [within the business] by surrounding myself with a team of knowledgeable, experienced veterans,” he said. “Without this balance, my career would probably look very different.”

Lemonis plans to expand Camping World to 100 locations by 2008. He also plans to strike a better balance between his professional and personal lives. “Getting married four years ago definitely forced me to stay grounded and strive for a work-life balance,” he said. “Achieving this balance will allow me to accomplish my next goal—children.”★

Kevin Elder, 37, might have settled into a long-term career as a professional athlete, but he heeded the call of retail instead.



Elder played football at California State University at Long Beach and later turned to golf, where he participated in long-drive exhibitions and sold wireless-phone solutions on the side.

Eventually, the side business became so good he decided to devote himself to it full time. His sports background, however, is integral to his operating philosophy.

"I run our company with the concept that everything is team," Elder said of GoWireless, the chain he helped launch in 1995 and later bought from Robey & Associates, the communications-services com-

pany he worked for while playing professional golf.

"Your salespeople are your front-line people, and if they're not delivering a smile and front-line customer service when you come in, the customer may not come back."

GoWireless operated seven stores in California when Elder bought the chain. Under his direction, it has grown to more than 160 locations in nine states.

The company is projected to exceed \$100 million in revenue this year, up from about \$60 million in 2006. Elder expects to add about 75 new stores in 2007, expanding Go-

Kevin Richard Elder, 37

CEO and president, GoWireless, Las Vegas

Major accomplishment: Heading the first cellular-service company in a unique wireless-boutique format on a multi-state scale

Wireless to 15 states.

"Our long-term goal is to become the elite premier wireless communications company for the consumer," Elder said. ★



Taking part in one of the most significant IT projects for FedEx Kinko's in 2005 marked a significant milestone in the career of Baron Concors, an up-and-coming technology guru at FedEx who might otherwise have become an accomplished doctor like his father.

"I was into computers as a young child, and growing up, that was my true passion," Concors said, despite achieving a double major in biology and anthropology.

As VP of field systems at FedEx Kinko's, the 36-year-old Concors played a key role in the implementation of the company's cutting-edge Order to Pay technology system. The solution automates and integrates store-based and enterprise processes

such as order entry, POS, production management and back-office retail processing.

Concors began his career as a management consultant with

Ernst & Young, and later moved to Deloitte & Touche where he helped business clients with different technology projects. In 2002, he joined FedEx Kinko's, heading up in-store technologies, from hardware to application development. Rather than take credit for the division's IT achievements, Concors attributes his success to recruiting and inspiring others.

"It's really about surrounding yourself with people smarter than you and empowering them and trusting them to do what's right," Concors said. "One of the reasons I left consulting is I felt it was very project- or delivery-focused. There wasn't much opportunity to lead people and help foster their career development and ambitions." ★

Baron Concors, 36

VP, field systems, FedEx Kinko's, Dallas

Key challenge: Keeping pace with an aggressive store expansion program of 200 stores for fiscal 2007, including rollout of technology.



Kevin Napper, 40, initially thought he would follow his father's footsteps and become a carpenter. After working as an apprentice, he decided to go to college before settling into a career.

It was a hard decision, as he loved what he was doing and made good money.

Intrigued by business and statistics, he

Kevin Napper, 40

Facilities manager, Longs Drug Stores, Walnut Creek, Calif.

Major accomplishment: Addressed inefficiencies and completed major overhauls in facility categories

attended San Diego State University and received a degree in economics. After graduating, he worked as an estimator for an underground-pipeline company and later in sales

for an HVAC contractor. He joined Longs Drug Stores in 1997.

Napper oversees facilities for the company's 505 locations. With stores located throughout the West Coast and in Hawaii, the job keeps him on the go.

"No day is ever the same," he said. "I'm putting out fires as they arise on a daily basis, but I like that I never really know what's in store for the day."

When not working, the die-hard Oakland Raiders season-ticket holder loves attending the baseball and soccer games of his children Justin, 10, and Nicole, 7.

"Even when I coach Little League, I'm pretty crazy about keeping track of things," he said. "I calculate the player's pitching and batting averages to help with strategy."

In high school, the sports fan was a decathlete, which involved competing in 10 events in two days.

"It really helped shape who I am today because it taught me how to time-manage and balance everything," he said. "I'm always applying things I've learned." ★

Stephanie and Ken Wright know where to draw the line between work and home—but it's not in the kitchen. In 2003, two weeks after their European honeymoon, they launched The Dinner A'Fare, hoping to introduce a romantic Tuscan atmosphere to the traditionally utilitarian meal-assembly retailing concept.



stores in five states, and an additional 12 franchises sold including locations in two new states. In December, the couple was happily relocating their home office to a new corporate location, hopefully making it easier to separate their professional and personal lives.

When asked which came first in their relationship, romance or business, Stephanie answered emphatically: "The romance! We met at a Cincinnati bar and fell in love immediately. We moved to Atlanta six months later and opened our first business, a pottery-painting studio, eight months after that. After working in retail together, seven days a week, we knew marriage would be a piece of cake."

Married now for three years, Stephanie, 32, and Ken, 28, have actually been in business together for more than five years. After visiting a meal-assembly kitchen, they were eager to create their own recipe for success. Today, Dinner A'Fare has 12

**Stephanie Wright, 32
Ken Wright, 28**

Co-founders and Co-owners, The Dinner A'Fare, Cumming, Ga.
Major accomplishment: Sold 24 franchises with 12 stores opened in two years, while maintaining a happy balance between home and work

"Our philosophy is work hard, then play hard," Stephanie continued. "We work really hard for a couple of weeks, then leave town, because that is the only way any retail owner can get away."

Stephanie, who admits that separating work and home has been a challenge, has never allowed the fact that she relies on a wheelchair to slow her

down. Stephanie focuses on the positive: "The best thing this has brought to our company is awareness and the creation of our Stand-in Chef policy for anyone with a disability. We usually charge a \$35 fee to make meals for pick-up. But we waive this fee for anyone in a wheelchair or needing assistance."★



As a retail industry executive who started loss-prevention programs at four different companies, Kevin Lynch, 39, had the experience and business skills to launch a firm specializing in this field. In 2001, he did just that, establishing, along with his partner Bill Petropoulos, P&L Solutions. The company specializes in loss-prevention outsourcing and customer-loyalty programs.

"Retailers we've been working with for five years now started out in the 2.5% range [with regard to shrink] and are now under 1%, which is almost half the industry shrink average," Lynch said.

What is P&L's secret to making such a significant

Kevin Lynch, 39

Partner, CEO, P&L Solutions, Fontana, Calif.
Key challenge: Working with retailers on a proactive rather than reactive strategy in loss prevention

losses related to theft.

Lynch's can-do attitude arose out of necessity when his dream of a career as a police officer was shattered due to a leg injury. He then began working in loss prevention, landing his first job in 1990 at Chick's Sporting Goods in Covina, Calif. With a double degree in criminology and management in hand, Lynch moved up the ranks in loss prevention at retail chains such as W.H. Smith, HMS Host, Windsor and Forever 21.

"More than anything else, what's made me successful is that I don't give up. I keep pushing and striving to do better and accomplish more," he added.★

dent in shrink reduction? According to Lynch, it's based mainly on effective employee training and implementation of proactive loss-prevention programs that help avert

Terry Pratt has worked every side of retail store development. And he definitely likes the side that he is on now the best.

"Working on the retail end gives you more of a feeling of accomplishment because you see the projects unfold," said Pratt, director of construction and store planning for Spencer Gifts, Egg Harbor Township, N.J. "And once a store is open, you can track its progress through its sales."



Pratt joined Spencer Gifts in 2005. Previously, he was VP of operations for U.S. Design & Construction and, prior to that, director of construction for General Nutrition Co. (GNC), where he was involved in the company's aggressive expansion and remodel efforts throughout the '90s. Earlier in his career, he served as a tenant coordinator for Simon Property Group and worked on the opening of Mall of America.

Terry Pratt, 39

Director of construction and store planning, Spencer Gifts, Egg Harbor Township, N.J.
Key challenge: Reducing store-construction capital expense

The job at Spencer Gifts is fast-paced, but Pratt has proved himself more than up to the challenge. Associates credit him with improving the chain's relations with landlords and general contractors, and with reducing square-foot construction costs. Along with being in charge of construction and remodels, Pratt oversees facilities management for the 600-plus Spencer's locations nationwide as well as its corporate facilities.

Throughout the industry, Pratt has developed an enviable reputation as being honest, respectful and truthful in all his business dealings. He is known as a hard worker who gets stores built.

"I really enjoy what I do," Pratt said.★

Robert Almond Jr. spent his teenage summers working at his father's global facilities maintenance consulting firm, NEST International. But even a college degree didn't ensure him special treatment at the company.



"I joined the company in May 2002 after graduating from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a degree in business administration," he said. "But I came up through the ranks like everyone else."

After cutting his teeth in account management and sales, Almond Jr., 26, was named general manager in December 2005. He jumped right into his first task:

creating a client-centric team concept for the 11-year-old company while still focusing on a positive work environment.

Almond Jr. imposed "flexible" programs that enable associates to work a half day during the week, then work a four-hour

shift on Saturday. He also leads 15-minute breaks that involve putting golf balls or taking walks in the neighborhood.

"Our employees spend one-third of their lives at the office," he explained. "They should know we appreciate their time. When their morale is high, so is their productivity."

Almond Jr. is so committed to his work that friends often say that he "never clocks out."

"When I see my father at a family barbecue, for example, we can spend eight hours discussing how to take the company to the next level," he said.

Interestingly, these plans are already under way. "Within five years, I want to make internal operations as efficient as possible," Almond Jr. said. "I'd also like to see the company expand into new segments beyond retail, hospitality and banking."★

Robert Almond Jr., 26

General manager, NEST International, Gloucester City, N.J.

Major accomplishment: Creating a client-centric team concept while upholding a positive work environment



In five years, John E. Gularson, 38, still plans to head up the retail division for enterprise-applications developer MICROS Systems. "However, it will be the company's biggest division—not the smallest as it is now," he predicted.

Gularson began selling software at age 16. His talent later earned him positions at a range of high-tech companies. He joined MICROS last

June and quickly began overseeing the retail division's global development team, human resources, marketing, sales and communications. He treats all 465 team members the same way: with honesty.

"My management style is to be honest and open—both within and outside our four walls," he explained. "In sales, it

John E. Gularson, 38

Senior VP, retail systems group, MICROS Systems, Columbia, Md.

Key challenge: To transform the company's retail division from the smallest business unit to the largest

is easy to mislead people. I quickly learned that it was more satisfying to play on the ethical side."

Realizing it's unusual to hold such a prominent role at his age, Gularson doesn't take this accomplishment for granted.

"When you are younger, you lack experience. So you have to work three times as hard to learn and succeed," he said.

Gularson has his own definition of personal success. "I know I'm successful if my family still loves me," he said. Gularson's family includes his wife of almost 14 years, Beth, and two young children.

A typical day keeps Gularson busy between 6 a.m. and 8 p.m. "But I make it home in time to read my kids a book and put them to bed," Gularson said.

"My relationships with my wife and kids are most important," he added. "Jobs and money come and go. Family is forever."★



While attending Colby College in 1988, Jen Millard split her free time between an internship for a Supreme Court judge and a part-time job at Sears. "However, I quickly realized that I enjoyed my part-time job more than my internship," she recalled.

After being invited to join Sears' management training program in the spring of 1988, Millard, now 38, dismissed the idea of a career in law. Instead, she made Sears her home for the next 10 years.

"I learned early that you have to love what you do," she said. "You can have a job or a passion."

Millard's passion eventually led her to take positions at a

Jen Millard, 38

Director, McMillan Doolittle, LLP, Chicago

Major accomplishment: Helping retail brands expand their operations

number of other retailers, including Bed Bath & Beyond and Saks Fifth Avenue. "I was always attracted to chains that had fast growth patterns but managed to sustain their brands," Millard said.

That said, it made perfect sense for Millard to become director for consulting firm McMillan Doolittle, LLP, Chicago, last summer. "Helping clients' ideas come to fruition and then watching reactions from consumers are the best parts of my job," she explained.

A busy schedule keeps Millard on the road three weeks a month at times, but she always finds time for her 8-year-old daughter and 5-year-old son.

"People often comment about my travels," Millard said. "But I've always had a busy schedule, and it's normal for them [her children]." She added that her son and daughter sometimes join her on trips as "junior consultants."★

Jake Nickell, 26, and Jacob DeHart, 24, founded and head up one of the nation's hottest Internet sites: Threadless.com. The young Chicagoans, who met in an on-line design community, based the site on an unusual model: an on-line T-shirt design competition.

The Threadless site receives some 150 T-shirt designs daily and 90 are chosen for the weekly contest. The winning designs are selected by the site's approximate 400,000 users. Every Monday, the top seven designs are printed on T-shirts and sold on Threadless.com for \$15 each. The company's batting average is impressive: Every design that Threadless has printed has sold out (it averages 500 to 1,500 shirts per print run).

There is plenty of interaction on Threadless.com, including design submissions, blog postings and links to other places, including the personal Web sites of Nickell and DeHart. The site has a hip, irreverent tone that is right in sync with the mostly young audience. It is not afraid of controversy. One of the all-time best-selling Threadless shirts is called "Flowers in the Attic," which shows a

young woman shooting herself in the head, causing birds to fly out.

The business garnered \$6.2 million in sales in 2005 and, when everything is accounted for, will likely have tripled that number in 2006. Revenues, combined with the low costs of procuring the designs (each winner gets \$1,500 in cash) and printing the shirts, have resulted in reported profit margins of 30%. A new venture, Naked & Angry, applies the Threadless model to more upscale products. (Nickell and DeHart have other Internet sites as well. All of them, including Threadless, which is the most successful, are operated under the skinnyCorp umbrella.)

Nickell and DeHart are both college drop-outs. Their lack of conventional credentials, however, hasn't proved a hindrance. In fact, it has probably worked to their advantage. Heralded as the vanguard of a new generation of Internet retailers, they understand that more than selling just a product, they are selling a community, one that is now attracting visitors from around the globe.★

Jake Nickell, 26
Jacob DeHart, 24

Threadless.com
Chicago



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