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Independent Record



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2026

20 Under 40

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Presenting the 2026 class of 20 Under 40

The Independent Record and Helena Chamber are proud to present 20 stalwarts in our community. These are people nominated by their peers – several times over in some cases – for demonstrating and exemplifying outstanding leadership in business, philanthropy and community.

Whether they are business owners, program directors, health care-workers or educators – just to name a few – their day doesn’t end after clocking out from their day jobs.

This group of Montanans understands which component of the community is most critical: people.

Whatever the cause may be, these honorees have not only gone above and beyond the call in assisting those in need, but also connecting with people on a personal level.

Narrowing the field down to just 20 was difficult. If you nominated someone who wasn’t chosen this year, please reach out to us again next year if their age allows.

And without further ado, here are this year’s 20 community power-houses under the age of 40.

Please join the IR and Helena Chamber in congratulating them.

Joy Kelso	3	Troy Ford	13
Michael Gray	4	Kayla Morris	15
Brus Layson	5	Patrick Kenny	16
Kara Paul	6	Tom Bischoff	17
Gina Mazza	7	Emily Dean	18
Carley Smith	8	Katie Verderber	19
Lindsey Kamerzel	9	Bob Schultz	20
Connor Prendergast	10	Kenzie Lombardi	21
Vanessa Larson	11	Emily Kroll	22
Brian Kessler	12	Laura Turek	23

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Get latest news, events and information on Montana sports,
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JOY KELSO | 37



Tell us a bit about yourself are you a Helena Native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

As an Army Veteran, my spouse (who is from Butte) and I came to study at Carroll after both of us left the service in 2016. I graduated class of '20 with a bachelor's in Theology. We meant to move back to Alaska, but stayed here because we fell in love with Helena.

OCCUPATION

I am a local Artist & Picture Framer. I own Queen City Framing & Art Supplies, and am passionate about preserving art & memorabilia with picture framing. My favorite thing to do is to support and create artists in this beautiful state.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

I run and facilitate several art groups at no cost to participants in Helena. While we offer classes (seasonally), we also need low-stakes art spaces to help us grow. Messy Sketchbook Club, Queen City Scribes, Tiny Stamp Club, and

Helena Urban Sketchers are groups where you can practice, and give you room to make mistakes. I'd love it if you joined us (they're free!)

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

The longer I've lived here, the more I realize that Helena has unprecedented support for its own. Never have I lived anywhere that had such a vibrant local community. I love how Helena is big enough to have a Symphony & Ballet, but you can still run into someone you know at the grocery. But the city's connection to the natural surroundings is something I absolutely love. How many places have near immediate access to a mountain?

What else should people know about you?

I'm collector of artistic knowledge and skills, a knitter, a ceramicist, used to bartend at Gulch Distillers (the Rum is my favorite), have a tiny lil' King Charles Cavalier Spaniel, & I have the most supportive spouse in the world. I love hearing people's stories, & I'd love to meet you!



MICHAEL GRAY | 38



Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I was born and raised in Virginia, which is where I met my wife, Tascha. She was born in Missoula and raised in Helena. We met while singing in an opera together in Virginia, where we were cast as the romantic leads in *Carmen*. Shortly after, we moved to Helena for work in 2020 and married in 2021.

That same year, we both began working as adjunct professors of music at Carroll College, and shortly afterward I became the Choir Director.

OCCUPATION

My occupation is best described as an opera singer and choral conductor, but that work spans many different institutions. I serve as either a singer or conductor or manager for Carroll College, the Helena Symphony, the 204th Army Band, and the Cathedral of St. Helena.

When I was younger, I traveled the country singing opera full-time while living in a camper. Today, I primarily teach at Carroll College and direct the choirs. Of all the opportunities I've had, watching the artist in each chorister blossom has been the most rewarding experience of my professional career.

I am incredibly proud of the work our students have put into the Carroll College choirs, which recently earned an invitation to perform at Carnegie Hall in 2027. We couldn't be more excited to represent Helena on such an iconic New York City stage.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

I think nearly all of my employers could be considered community service or non-profit organizations. So often, I think, "This is just what I do," and I don't spend much time defining it that way. However, so much of our work is centered on bringing music education and performance to the people of Helena.

Whether it's *Symphony Under the Stars* with the Helena Symphony, the Carroll College Choirs singing annually at the *Capitol Christmas Tree Lighting*, adjudicating high school District Music Festivals, or veteran and military appreciation events through the Army Band, nearly all of it is intended to enrich the cultural life of Helena and serve our community. Service to our community and country through music is at the core of each of my jobs.

My most recent labor of love is the co-founding of the Helena Classical Music Festival with my wife, which will premiere this August. We have spent the summer coordinating and fundraising to create additional performance opportunities for classical musicians in Helena while bringing classical music into casual, family-friendly downtown spaces that can inspire the next generation of music lovers.

Helena reminds me of the close-knit

Please see **GRAY**, Page L14

Carroll College

Congratulations to our

20 UNDER 40 SAINTS

Dr. Michael Gray (faculty)

Emily Dean, '14

Brus Layson, '14

Joy Kelso, '20

Kayla Morris, '21

You continue to make us proud — the world needs more Saints!

"Not for School, but for Life."



BRUS LAYSON | 34

Tell us a bit about yourself are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I moved around the country due to my father's career in journalism, but I spent chunks of my childhood visiting Montana and family. My exposure to Montana as a kid is what sparked me to move here in 2010 after high school to attend Carroll College. I met my wife Karla in philosophy class, and once we graduated, we moved to Southern California for me to attend graduate school. We left quickly after I was awarded my degree to head back to Helena in 2017, and we have been here since. My family was scattered until we had our two girls, now most of us live here in Helena.

OCCUPATION

I am the owner of Advocate Physical Therapy and a treating physical therapist in the practice. I absolutely love my career. I get to help people get out of pain and get back to doing what they love. It has never felt like work. I also feel incredibly blessed to have built such an amazing team, who are not just kind and compassionate, but also leading experts in their respective fields.

I also teach classes throughout the country and soon internationally to other physical therapists and healthcare professionals in advanced topics, treatment techniques, and difficult-to-conquer diagnoses through Torrentia Medical Education.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

I am an active member of the Montana Chapter of the American Physical Therapy Association and though I do not character-



ize myself as a political person, you can find me testifying at the capital to push our profession forward and ensure access to care for our patients.

We try to make as wide of an impact as possible whether big or small. The team and I at Advocate PT volunteer to work sports medicine coverage at events, provide screens at Special Olympics events, host charity events/fundraisers at the clinic, donate all our used linens to Lewis and Clark Humane Society, a supporter and fundraiser for Jefferson County Animal Shelter, and sponsor multiple local sports teams, arts, dance, and music. One of the things I love doing the most is teaching at local schools. From career days and fairs at elementary schools, high schools, Carroll College and Helena COT, I have such a large passion for inspiring the next generation toward healthcare and in particular



physical therapy. Maybe it is because I fell in love with PT when I was 14 at a job fair myself. I love that Advocate PT is not just a place of clinical excellence but also educational excellence to shadowing students, students on clinical rotations, residents in training to specialize, and fellows in training to sub-specialize.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

Helena is the perfect size. We have everything we need in town, but you can drive 15 minutes in any direction and get out into the beautiful public lands, waters, and trail systems that we have access to. I really appreciate the "pulse" of the town. Helena has always been a place where we have each other's back and when someone is in need, we all come together to help. I feel so blessed to be able to run a business that is

for our community and live in a wonderful place to have a family and raise two kids.

What else should people know about you?

I truly believe the impossible is possible...and I think it can be fun at the same time. I take my job and my responsibilities very seriously, but I don't take myself very seriously; life is too beautiful not to laugh every single day. I think working hard is incredibly important, and it's a grit-based work ethic that has taken me this far. However, as my father has always told me, I want to "Enjoy the Trip". You may find me out in the woods hunting, on the river fishing, at a Grandstreet play, listening to local music, hiking with my parents, or at my kids sporting events. My wife Karla and my two girls Charlee and Quinlee keep me grounded in the important things in my life...and that's love and family.

CONGRATS, BRŪS!

From your team at



"Brūs is an excellent recourse for not only the physical therapy world but the Helena community. Thank you for doing all that you do." - Dallas

"Brūs always finds a way to connect with everyone he meets and can always bring a smile to their face, with a deep dedication to his community." - Alese

"Brūs is an amazing boss, always understanding always caring." - Michelle

"Congratulations on your 20 Under 40 in Business nomination! It's a well-deserved recognition of your hard work, passion and dedication." - Kyla

"Brūs has also created a facility/organization that allows me to treat my patients at the highest level. It is an honor to work and support him with the things he is doing in the profession." - Travis

"Thank you for being such an understanding and motivating boss! I look forward the future of all the things we will accomplish as a team!" - Karley

"Brūs is such a fun person and always strives to further his education to aid his community. He stays late and works on weekends in order to put forth the effort to better himself and his business." - Teagan

"Brūs, through your leadership, hard work, passion and commitment to physical therapy, you have improved the lives of thousands in Helena. This is only the beginning..." - Chris

"Brūs is by far the best boss/owner that I have worked for. He always wants what is best for his employees and his patients. He is the team captain of the cheerleaders in our office." - Lily

"You are the testament to what it means to be a caring provider. Whether for your patients, your friends, your family, or your employees. It's an honor to work alongside you and see you thrive." - Matthew

"Brūs is one of the hardest workers that I know. He puts in so much time to not only help his business but also help all of those around him. He is never going to shy away from putting in extra time to help those around him." - Cory

KARA PAUL | 34

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I was born in Hawai'i and lived there until I moved to Helena on New Year's Eve, 2019. I joke I'm "The Girl Who Left Paradise for the Last Best Place." I moved here sight unseen to work as the Senior Executive Assistant to the former President of Carroll College, John E. Cech, Ph.D. I started slowly falling in love with Helena and was head over heels in love with Helena by 2023.

OCCUPATION

I am a Strategic Project Specialist in the Fiscal Services Division at the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT). I work on improving documentation, recommending enhanced workflows and tools, incorporating ADA compliance into documentation, creating training videos, providing staff training, and assisting with both strategic planning and leadership initiatives. When I'm not at work, you can find me working on my blog and social media platforms to share Helena businesses and broader Montana travel (please see the last question for all the details!).

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

I am the President of Helena Young Professionals. I became involved with HYP in 2024 when I started out as Secretary, then became Vice President in 2025, and now serve as President. HYP is one of the best ways for adults ages 21+ to connect with each other in Helena, and the organization is how I started making friends here. I also just wrapped up a term as President of the Last Chance Toastmasters Club, which meets at MDT on Thursdays (come join us!).

I am involved with community theater, especially The Last Chance New Play Fest and The WordsMatter Playwrights.

I love Helena, want our businesses and residents to thrive, and want to do whatever I can to help our city. I also like to keep busy and to feel like I'm making a difference, so I try to use my talents to help strengthen our community as well as contribute to my overall personal fulfillment.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

Gosh, I wish I had enough space to list all the reasons! To name a few, I love the natural beauty and mountains surrounding



us, our architecture, the people, our restaurants, our watering holes, The Original Montana Club, our central location in Montana, and our incredible small businesses. I get a thrill seeing the town and valley lit up at night when I'm driving back home from Great Falls or Missoula. I even love the mule deer wandering the streets (although it would be nice if they would stop ruining my garden!).

What else should people know about you?

I have a blog (roamingnearandfar.com)

and am active on several social media platforms. I'd love for people to follow my Helena business spotlights, local event ideas, and travel adventures. Enjoy all things Helena on Helena Highlights (Facebook and @roaminghelenamt on Instagram). Discover Montana adventures, regional trips, and more on Roaming Near and Far (@roamingnearandfar on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube).

I am also proud to be a member and long-term promotional partner of The Original Montana Club in Helena. Established in

1885, it is one of Montana's most historic institutions. Being trusted to help share its story with both residents and visitors is something I'm incredibly proud of.

I strive to share experiences in an authentic way to help locals and tourists discover Montana and to help promote our wonderful town and amazing small businesses. I look forward to continuing to do so.

Last but not least, I recently got into pottery and hope to keep that up through Helena's thriving pottery community!

GINA MAZZA | 38

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I've been in Montana for about 15 years, but settled in Helena about 2.5 years ago.

OCCUPATION

I am the Wildfire Geospatial Data Analyst for NorthWestern Energy. I use geospatial modeling and analytics to assess wildfire exposure and inform decisions that support the safe and reliable operation of the electric grid.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

I recently started volunteering with the Friendship Center in Helena because I wanted to find a meaningful way to give back to the community. Their mission is one I'm proud to support. As someone still getting established in Helena, I enjoy being an active community member on a small scale by finding a few organi-

zations and causes I care deeply about and focusing my time and energy there. As I continue putting down roots, I look forward to becoming more involved and finding additional ways to contribute to the community.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

I love the views around the Helena Valley and all the sunshine compared to west of the Divide. I've also enjoyed discovering the people, trails, and opportunities that make Helena a hidden gem.

What else should people know about you?

I spend my workdays looking at maps and data, so when I'm off work, I like to get outside and enjoy the places I spend all day staring at on a screen. I enjoy wandering around in the mountains, exploring new places, trying a new recipe and eating the food from said recipe, or finding some fun way to be creative. I'm endlessly curious and driven by problem solving so I have a hard time saying no to learning something new.



Congratulations Gina!

Your leadership, innovation and impact make a real difference, both across our teams and throughout our community!

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CARLEY SMITH | 38



Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here - what brought you to Helena?

I am not originally from Helena. I went to MSU-Bozeman for undergrad, then after grad school at University of Victoria in British Columbia, I found my way to Helena and loved it. I originally started at MSU with the intention to study architecture, but discovered that graphic design and fine arts better aligned with what I wanted to do. Throughout college, I worked on various projects combining a skillset of graphic design, marketing, and community outreach. When I found A&E + SMA Design, the architecture and marketing/community outreach roles collided in a perfect way.

Helena has a great small feel, close to mountains and rivers, and the best trail system and downtown. We also have an amazing art scene.

OCCUPATION

Director of Community Impact with A&E + SMA Design - I lead the firm's marketing, community outreach, stakeholder engagement, and public involvement efforts, helping connect people, projects, and communities.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

- Holter Museum of Art - Board Member since 2021, Vice President 2023-2026, Fundraising Committee, Volunteer
- Leadership Helena - 2025 Graduate
- Helena Ales for Trails - Volunteer for 2026, 2025, 2024, 2022, 2021, 2019, 2018, 2017
- Spirit of Service - 2x Volunteer
- Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) - Membership Commit-

tee & Milestone Chair from 2017-2025

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

It's amazing collaborating with different groups in Helena to achieve really beneficial work for our community. We have such a great network of talented, connected community members. I've been fortunate to have been part of the educational outreach and planning for multiple school projects, including: Central Elementary School, East Helena High School, and most recently the Helena School District Master Plan which led to pre-bond planning and a successful bond election for \$283M worth of improvements across the District. I've also been leading the stakeholder engagement and community outreach for the design of the new Helena HS and PAL. Having had amazing educators and mentors throughout my life, education is such a big part of my why and it's been incredible to be part of creat-

ing opportunity for future generations. As a single, child-free woman, the perception that we don't care about our community and other's children and future's is outrageous. In a world filled with AI world, it's even more important to build up the success of education and the arts, the incredible benefits, and that real human interaction is still at the core of what we all need.

What else should people know about you?

- Creative / Artist
- Love to Travel (recent places included Morocco, Costa Rica, Thailand, Cambodia, and New Zealand)
- Live Music
- Trying out Sourdough
- Always trying out any new recipe, including homemade hot sauce (I love spicy things)
- Trails (Mountain Biking, Hiking, Trail Running), Skiing, Yoga
- Craft Beer

LINDSEY KAMERZEL | 33

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here - what brought you to Helena?

I was born in Baltimore, MA but both of my parents grew up in Helena, so we moved back here when I was 2. I started ballet when I was 3 and continued this until high school when I joined the Helena High cheer team. While dancing and cheering, we would often spend summer weekends Drag Racing cars at local tracks around Montana. To this day, I take pride in doing the unexpected and trying new things. It was really rewarding growing up in a family that would all participate in a ballet performance while also racing cars.

I went to college in Bozeman beginning in Architecture but switching to Graphic Design. I worked for several years in Bozeman until I ultimately returned to college to get my Master's degree in Architecture and moved back to Helena where I am now raising a four-year-old daughter that also does ballet. (We're a few years away from getting her in a junior dragster!)

OCCUPATION

Where to begin with Architecture... I grew up with a father that was also an Architect. I saw how much he put into this community by also being a Board Member of the Helena Chamber, being involved in our local AIA chapter, and participating in fundraisers and other events to help support Helena. Even with all of this involvement, he would come home and was there for us. He was my inspiration that I could do whatever I set my mind to, to help make this world a better place and leave an impact that will last far beyond us. Architecture was a natural career path for me. Initially I worried about directly following in his footsteps and wanted to prove myself professionally and personally prior to working with him. After several years in Marketing and working at a few other firms in Bozeman, I came back to Helena to work at Dowling Architects.

Working in Architecture in Montana allows

Please see **KAMERZEL**, Page L14



CONGRATULATIONS, LINDSEY!



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DESIGN. YOU INSPIRE THOSE AROUND YOU
EVERY DAY!

FROM ALL OF US AT

DOWLING
ARCHITECTS

HELENA 2026 20 UNDER 40 | HELENA AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

CONNOR PRENDERGAST | 31



Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here - what brought you to Helena?

My family moved to Montana when I was 12 years old from Illinois, we moved here because my parents wanted a better place to raise kids compared to the city we came from. We always grew up hunting and riding four wheelers, Montana gave us access to the outdoors right in our backyard. From the time I was 12, I grew up in Helena.

OCCUPATION

Currently, I am the owner of Freedom Fabrication & Excavation, a local Helena business that performs excavation, concrete and landscape services. I started the business in 2016 and have been steadily growing it since then, we are blessed with an amazing team and enjoy what we do

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved

with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

I am an active member of God's Church in Helena; I enjoy spending time loving and helping others that are in need. I also sit as a board member for a nonprofit called Tactics, this organization was formed to help young people experience and potentially pursue a lifelong career in the trades. We started this organization from a long-term dream and desire to help the Helena and entire state of Montana community fill needed positions within their companies. Ever since I started working in the trades as a young man, I have seen businesses struggle to find enough people to fulfill positions to meet the demand of work they were hired to do by the community. After I started my business, our team has experienced the same issue for years. I believe we have a lot of young people who are not being informed of how great a career working in the construction trades can be, and also the financial op-

portunity they have without taking on college debt. This organization exists to introduce the young people to hands-on experience working with concrete, heavy equipment, framing, electrical, direction drilling, masonry and several other trades. I appreciated the opportunity to grow up in Montana where the "small town vibes" still exist compared to the big city I was born in. I want to give back some of my time and skillset to the community to help have a positive effect to the young people.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

Some of my favorite parts about being able to work and live in the Helena community would be the people, the mountainous environment, and the opportunity for recreation. We have access to what I would call the "freest state" to see God's creation so close to home. Some of our coolest jobsite we have worked on sit thousands of feet up on top a mountain

with an amazing view of different peaks and lakes. After work or on the weekends, I can easily go hunting, fishing or dirt bike riding in the mountains. People will come from all over the nation to experience what we get to live on a daily basis here in Montana.

What else should people know about you?

In 2017, as a young man, I was an atheist. Jesus came into my world and flipped it upside down in a very powerful way. He's changed my life for the better since then through an increasingly fervent relationship with him. I appreciate the opportunity to be chosen for this award, but truly all the glory goes to Jesus. I would not be the person in this community that I am today if God didn't intervene in my life and show me how to grow into the living sacrifice that he's called us to be. If you see something in me that is good, it is only a reflection of what he has done in my heart, mind and soul.

VANESSA LARSON | 39

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here - what brought you to Helena?

I grew up in Lewistown, Montana, and made my way to Helena about 10 years ago. Along the way, I spent some time in Bozeman, where I met my husband while he was attending Montana State University. After he graduated, we moved to Sheridan, Wyoming, for an engineering position he accepted after college. We spent about eight years there, but after our daughter, Eleanor, was born, we decided we were ready for a change of pace. When my husband accepted a job opportunity in Helena, we jumped at the chance to return to Montana and have been happy to call Helena home ever since.

OCCUPATION

That's a loaded question for me because I wear several different hats! My full-time role is as the Marketing Manager for [Elite Worldwide](#), a company that specializes in coaching independently owned automotive repair shops and helping business owners build thriving, successful companies. I'm also a part owner of CarGeeks Tire & Auto right here in Helena. We opened our doors in April and have hit the ground running, helping local drivers stay safe and reliable on the road through automotive maintenance and repair services. When I'm not working in marketing or at the shop, you'll often find me sharing Helena's rich history as a tour guide with the Foundation for Montana History. This summer, I'm will be guiding the *Pedaling Through the Past* tour on Bert & Ernie's Pedal Pub. It's a fun way to combine my love of local history, storytelling, and connecting with people while showcasing some of Helena's fascinating past!



Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

Community involvement is something that is very important to me. I am an active member of the Helena Exchange Club and volunteer whenever I can at the many events and projects the club supports throughout the year. I also serve on the planning committee for the Annual Festival of Wines, a fundraiser that supports the Coats for Kids program.

Another event that is especially close to my heart is the Helena Septemberfest Soapbox Derby. I began helping with the event during its second year and have had the privilege of watching it grow into one of Helena's most anticipated community events. This year marks the sixth annual derby, and it's shaping up to be the best one yet.

Beyond those commitments, I enjoy

volunteering with a variety of local organizations whenever the opportunity arises. Whether it's serving as a crossing guard during the Governor's Cup, helping with yard work on Spirit of Service Day, or lending a hand wherever it's needed, I love finding ways to give back to the community.

I spend much of my workday behind a computer, so getting out into the commu-

Please see **LARSON**, Page L14



Congratulations
VANESSA LARSON!

*We Fix It Right.
So You Can Drive Happy!*



We're proud to celebrate **Vanessa Larson**, co-owner of **CarGeeks Tire & Auto**, for being selected for Helena's **20 Under 40!**

Stop by the shop to congratulate Vanessa and meet the team!



1100 CHESTNUT ST. | HELENA MT **406.449.2077** **CARGEEKSAUTO.COM**

BRIAN KESSLER | 37

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here - what brought you to Helena?

I was born and raised in Helena and am a proud graduate of the Helena Public Schools. I have spent a little bit of time away from the city - attending college in Bozeman and teaching in both Livingston and Havre, but I always find my way back home.

OCCUPATION

I am the proud principal at Helena High School. This past school year wrapped up 13 years in education, the majority of those spent at HHS. Being an educator is the most rewarding profession, in my opinion. Each day, we get the opportunity to see students grow - both in their understanding of content, and as people. As the principal, I've had the great opportunity to work alongside incredible educators and help them continue their desire to ensure students are given the best opportunity possible to build foundational skills and prepare for whatever is next in their lives. I also get the chance to build connections with community partners and share the amazing things our students and staff are working on each day, hopefully building awareness of the capable individuals we are growing and the hard work that our teachers are putting in every day.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

Currently, I serve as the Chair of the Angel Fund Board, helping students and families in need. Knowing that many of our current and future Bengals benefit from this program, it is rewarding to attend fundraisers and community events with this organization to ensure a major barrier (clothing, supplies, etc.) to students attending school is eliminated. Outside of that, most of my time in the community is spent supporting our students at events. Whether that be the current production our theater students are putting on, a game, or celebration of excellence, this is one of the most rewarding parts of the job - seeing students excel in this extra-and-co-curricular avenues. I believe our students are the most important resource we have, supporting them and ensuring that they have the skills and resources neces-



sary to be successful is incredibly important.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

Helena has so much to offer - whenever we have people from other communities visit, they always highlight how lucky we are to live in this community. With the outdoor recreation possibilities, the support we can show each other, and the excitement we have around our high schools are amazing. We also have a strong contingent of individu-

als and business who care deeply about our students and children. The amount of support we see when our students need it the most is heartwarming and encouraging to know that we collectively recognize the importance of building our future up and giving them the best opportunity for success.

What else should people know about you?

I'm not sure there is much else at this point. Thank you for this recognition!



CONGRATULATIONS

BRIAN KESSLER

Your dedication to education, leadership, and the Helena community has made a lasting impact on countless students and families.

We are proud to see you recognized as one of Helena's 20 Under 40. Thank you for your commitment to excellence and for inspiring the next generation.

Congratulations on this well-deserved honor!



TROY FORD | 34

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I was born in Billings, Montana, and moved to Helena at a young age. Helena is where I grew up, so it has always felt like home to me. Before graduating from Montana State University (National Champions, Go Cats!), I had an offer to join the Golden Eagle Construction team and was able to start my career back in Helena.

OCCUPATION

I work as a Project Manager with a specific focus on Commercial Construction. I was recently promoted to Vice President, which has expanded my responsibilities within the company. I enjoy the opportunity to help lead projects, support our team, and contribute to the growth of the company and the communities we serve.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

At this point, I would say I have some room to grow when it comes to formal volunteer and community service activities. That said, being an active community member is important to me. I have volunteered time Grocery Packing in the past and sure appreciated giving back that way. Our family also helps local families

in need around the Holidays.

Through my work in construction, I get to be part of projects that shape the Helena area, and I take pride in helping build spaces that support local businesses, schools, organizations, and families. I am interested in continuing to find more ways to give back and stay involved in the community outside

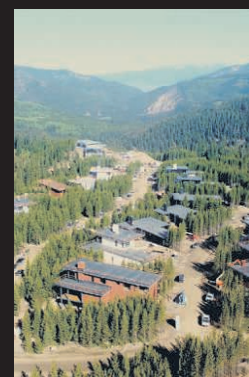
What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

What I like best about Helena is the people and the small-town feel. Even as the community continues to grow, Helena still has a strong sense of connection. It is a place where relationships matter, people look out for each other, and you can see the impact of the work being done around you.

What else should people know about you?

People should know that I am a Dad of two kids, and that role is one of the most important parts of my life. My amazing wife was also raised in Helena and we are proud to call it home.

Outside of work, I enjoy spending as much time outdoors as I can and have a wide range of outdoor hobbies that keep my family and I active and connected to Montana. I also love a good dad joke, so I try not to take life too seriously and enjoy bringing a little humor wherever I can.



CONGRATULATIONS, TROY FORD!

On being named one of Helena's 20 Under 40 honorees.

This recognition reflects Troy's hard work, leadership, and dedication—not only to our team, but also to the Helena community.



20 UNDER 40

Gray

From L4

community where I grew up. It brings back some of the happiest memories of my childhood. Everyone knows everyone, and if you don't know someone directly, you probably know someone close to them.

With every performance given or music lesson taught, you can see the impact ripple through the community. People talk about how moving a choral performance was, how a music lesson inspired someone to join the Helena Symphony Chorale or a church choir, or how it encouraged someone to audition for a solo at Grandstreet Theatre.

What I love most about working with the college and the symphony is seeing people's confidence blossom, not only artistically, but personally. Something changes when they step off the stage and return to the community. That confidence carries forward and resonates throughout

our city.

Music is one of those things we often expect at the most important events in our lives - weddings, funerals, holidays, festivals - it's a grand journey that requires oversight, perpetuating artistry from one generation to the next through inspiring performance and instruction. Often that can mean performing or teaching for the love of it because you believe in the gifts of a student or know the perfect song will make a once in lifetime event more memorable for a family; when you see your work inspire others, it's worth every second.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

Helena is the kind of community people idolize. It's the kind of place where people want to raise their families.

I want to contribute to that vision by helping provide inspiring musical experiences, encouraging people to experience classical music through live performance rather than through a screen and headphones, and meeting people where

they already love to gather; places like the Walking Mall or the sledding hill at Carroll College.

More importantly, I see so many others contributing to that same vision and I'm grateful to be a part of such a community. Whether it's museum staff, local businesses participating in the Art Walk, organizers of Alive @ Five, or countless other community leaders, the best parts of a thriving community are already hard at work here and it inspires me to do the same.

What else should people know about you?

My wife and I have a 1-year-old little boy named Roman who is painfully adorable. He is a 5th generation Montanan and I can't imagine raising him anywhere other than Helena.

He loves waving to dogs, eating ground beef and bananas, and humming little tunes because Mommy and Daddy sing far too much at home for entertainment. If you ever see us on a hiking trail, be sure to wave - he'll probably want to say hello!

LARSON

From L11

nity, connecting with people, and making a tangible impact is incredibly rewarding. Volunteering is one of the ways I recharge, and it truly fills my cup.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

Honestly, it's the people. Helena is one of those places where you can't go anywhere without running into someone you know, and I love that. Through my work, volunteering, and involvement in the community, I've gotten to know so many amazing people who genuinely care about making Helena a great place to live.

I love seeing how people come together to support local businesses, nonprofits, schools, and community events. There are so many people willing to roll up their sleeves and help when something needs to get done, and that's something really special.

For me, volunteering and being involved in the community has helped me build friendships, learn new things, and feel connected to where I live. Helena has given my family so much, and I enjoy finding ways to give back whenever I can. It's a great place to raise a family, build a career, and be part of a community that truly cares.

What else should people know about you?

People are often surprised by how many different things I have going on at any given time. One day I might be working on a marketing campaign, the next I'm helping at a community event, leading a history tour, or helping out around the shop. I like variety, and I love being involved in things that help people and bring the community together.

Outside of work and volunteering, I'm happiest when I'm spending time with my husband and daughter. We love being outdoors, trying new activities, and making the most of everything Montana has to offer. Whether it's checking out a hiking trail, spending time at Great Divide, or listening to some live music at Ten Mile Creek Brewery, we love to keep things interesting. My husband and daughter keep me grounded and remind me to make time for fun and adventure. Life is busy, but I wouldn't have it any other way!

KAMERZEL

From L9

us a unique opportunity to be involved in a small interior renovation or community art project, to a 40,000 square foot laboratory building. Every single day is different and provides a new challenge. My favorite part of my occupation is the connection that buildings have with the occupants. A person's story and brand play a huge part of how they will use a building and that relationship is key to the design.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

I just finished last year's class of Lead-

ership Helena which was an incredible opportunity that I would highly recommend! I'm a board member at the Helena Chamber and am on the Parking Advisory Committee. Having grown up in Helena, lived in Bozeman for ten years then returning to Helena, I see so much potential in where we live and work. We have a strong community with a lot of passion and care behind it. Being back here, it was important to me to connect and help be a part of positive growth and change for our next generation while respecting the history of Helena's origins.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

I love that no matter where you go or what you're doing in Helena, we have a sense of connection to place. People care

about the small details here and looking out for their neighbors. I don't see that being something that will ever change in Helena and I want to continue to be apart of it.

What else should people know about you?

I think it's important for us to all stay strong as a community and support each other by going to local events and showing up! If we want more restaurants and local stores, we need to keep going to the ones we have and be apart of their local impact. I'm proud of what we've done and will continue to do in Helena. I can honestly say that when I graduated High School, I assumed that I would leave and likely not end up back here. Helena has so much opportunity and I can't wait to see what the future holds for all of us.

KAYLA MORRIS | 27

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I grew up in Oregon and came to Helena in 2017 to attend Carroll College as a pre-med student with plans of ultimately becoming an OB/GYN. Like many college students, I thought I had my life mapped out.

While I was at Carroll, I found myself increasingly drawn to leadership and systems change. I helped lead a Culture of Respect grant that ultimately contributed to the creation of a student-run Peer Advocacy Center on campus, in partnership with The Friendship Center. Looking back, it was probably one of the first signs that my interests extended beyond direct patient care.

After graduating, while applying to medical school, I accepted a position at St. Peter's Health to partner with our community and launch a brand-new Housing is Healthcare initiative. Around the same time, I was accepted into several medical schools. Rather than beginning medical school that next fall, I chose to defer my admission for a year so I could see the project through.

Over the next year, as I worked alongside healthcare providers, housing partners, behavioral health organizations, nonprofits, and local leaders, I began to see that many of healthcare's biggest challenges weren't clinical, they were systemic. Across the country, too many patients struggle to navigate a fragmented healthcare system despite the incredible work being done by dedicated clinicians every day. It became clear that I wanted to spend my career building systems that allow patients, providers, and communities to thrive. I felt that I could make a bigger impact by bringing organizations together to solve complex problems and ultimately made the difficult decision to step away from going to medical school and pursue a career in population health instead.

Nearly ten years later, Helena has become home. It's where I've grown professionally, found lifelong mentors and friends, fallen in love, and discovered a community that believes collaboration can accomplish incredible things.

OCCUPATION

I serve as the Manager of Community-Based and Crisis Care Delivery at St. Peter's Health, where I oversee programs including Frequent Users of System Engagement (FUSE), Community Health Workers, Peer Support Specialists, and Mobile Crisis Re-



sponse.

Without question, the best part of my job is the people I get to work with. I have the privilege of leading an incredible team of people who show up every day with compassion, creativity, and a deep commitment to our community. They meet people where they are, earn their trust, navigate complex situations, and, in so doing, change lives for the better. They're the ones doing the truly difficult work. My role is to remove barriers, build partnerships, and create the conditions that allow them to do what they do best. I'm incredibly proud of them and grateful to support their work.

What excites me most is building systems that better support both patients and the people caring for them. Whether that's launching new programs, strengthening partnerships, or rethinking how care is delivered, I enjoy bringing people together to solve problems. Most recently, I've been leading the transformation of our Mobile Crisis Response Team into a 24/7 response model that ensures people experiencing behavioral health crises receive care from the most clinically appropriate team while allowing law enforcement to focus on public safety.

Last year, I completed my Master of Health Administration at Dartmouth College. One of my biggest takeaways was realizing that many of the ideas people were excited to discuss were already taking shape here in Helena. It reinforced my belief that some of healthcare's most innovative solutions come from communities willing to collaborate and think differently.

I feel incredibly fortunate that St. Peter's Health and this community have trusted me with this work. My hope is that every partnership we build leaves our healthcare system stronger, easier to navigate, and our community healthier than we found it.

Please see **MORRIS**, Page L18

A CHAMPION FOR OUR COMMUNITY

Congratulations on being named to Helena's 20 Under 40:

KAYLA MORRIS, MHA

Manager of
Community Based &
Crisis Care Delivery



Kayla's innovative work has transformed community-based care across Helena, building strong partnerships that improve the lives of individuals experiencing crisis, housing instability, and behavioral health challenges. Through her leadership, she launched the St. Peter's Health Community Health Worker Program, introduced Peer Support Services, and helped develop programs that have reduced unnecessary hospital visits while connecting vulnerable community members with the care and support they need.



PATRICK KENNY | 37

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I grew up on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois. My wife is from Missoula and after several moves for school we wanted to find a permanent home before our daughter started school. We moved to Helena 6 years ago and it has been great. Other than a lack of professional sports (I miss Bears, Bulls, Blackhawks and White Sox games) Helena is perfect for us.

OCCUPATION

The first thing you should know about me professionally is that I am a Soap Box Derby racer. Me and a couple of co-workers are going to work out some kinks in our steering system and I think we have a real shot at glory this September. I work at Shodair Children's Hospital. My wife and I are both psychologists. I started at Shodair doing psychological assessment, but after about a year shifted over to working as a therapist. Now, I work with kids and families to improve communication, create healthier lifestyles, and deal with the fact that life is unfair but worth living. People often hear about work at Shodair and express something along the lines of "that must be really hard work." I disagree. My job is to talk to people and encourage them to make better decisions. One of my grandfather's worked for years in a railyard in Chicago outdoors 12 months a year. Most

of his work-related stories ended with a guy losing 1 or more fingers. He worked harder, for longer, and could afford less. My other grandfather served in WWII. Whether we are happy or miserable day to day depends on our perspective. If I focus on a co-worker who I think I am smarter than, but drives a nicer car, I am choosing misery. Being a good therapist requires some knowledge and abilities, but I do not believe it is HARD work. I think I am one of the luckiest people to ever live and my job at Shodair is a big part of that.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

Outside of work I spend the vast majority of my time with my wife and daughter. I play pick-up basketball Sunday mornings with a mixed group of men, women, and an occasional child. I recently joined the Catholic Church's Diocesan Review Board which meets with the goal of providing a safe environment for children. Helena has been an excellent community for my family. I look forward to continuing to find ways to support the community that makes a great home for my family.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

Helena is a nice place to live because it's citizens have col-



lectively decided it should be. A community reflects its members values. I think this community will continue to thrive as long as people care more about one another than the other distractions that pop up around us. If addiction, greed, vanity, politics, or a dozen other things we can worship become more important to us than being decent neighbors, parents, and co-workers the world provides us many examples of what this town will turn into. My co-workers, neighbors, and

Church community give me hope that Helena will live up to Montana's motto. I am lucky to live in the last best place.

What else should people know about you?

Me as an individual being nominated for an award is nice, and I accept it. But, it's also ridiculous. It's easy to do well when you have an excellent support network. When you have two parents that consistently care about and support you, and you later find a

wife who cooks, cleans, works, and sacrifices for the family, life is easy. It's not hard to stay motivated when after work you can return home and your daughter makes you laugh, reads out loud to you, and asks excellent questions about a world that fills her with wonder. A good childhood and a lot to look forward to makes life simple. Thanks for the positive attention. I get recognized for the fact that about a couple dozen people around me make my life excellent and fun.

CONGRATS TO

PAT KENNY, PSY.D.

Congratulations to Pat Kenny on being named one of Helena's 2026 20 Under 40 honorees!

Pat walks alongside the families he serves at Shodair Children's Hospital with care and candor. He leads with compassion and gives back to the community through numerous volunteer efforts. Most importantly, he exudes love for his friends and family.

Through his compassion, expertise, and volunteer efforts, Pat makes a meaningful difference in the lives of others. We are proud to celebrate this well-earned honor and grateful for the impact he has on our organization and community.



Shodair
Children's
Hospital

TOM BISCHOFF | 39

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I was born in Madison, WI, and after a stop in Butte and two more years in Wisconsin, we moved to Helena when I was in 3rd grade. I grew up here and graduated in 2005 from Capital High School. I met my wife, Emily, when I was a junior at Capital. After High School, I went to college at Washington State in Pullman, WA and received a Bachelor's of Science in Chemical Engineering. That took my family and I to Alaska, Utah, and Colorado while working in the Oil and Gas Industry. After moving around and having 3 kids, my wife and I realized how much we missed Helena and the community and wanted to move back. American Chemet was a top target of mine and when a Quality Assurance Manager position became available I applied and the rest is history. We moved back to Helena in June of 2018.

OCCUPATION

My role at American Chemet Corporation is the Director of Safety, Quality Assurance,



and Global Regulatory Affairs. At American Chemet we make products that Move, Shelter, and Feed the world. These are copper based chemicals that in their application, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, make industries more efficient, and make build-

ing products more enduring. Many of our products are pesticides that must be registered globally. My team functions to drive our workplace injuries to zero, maintain and improve product quality, and ensure regulatory compliance locally, federally, and globally. One exciting part of my job is that I get to travel to global conferences to advocate for use of our product, specifically in marine anti-fouling paints. This has taken me to London, Sweden, Italy, South Korea, and Germany.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

I have been a youth sports coach ever since we moved back to Helena. I have spent seasons coaching baseball for Babe Ruth, football for Small Fry and West Side Flag, and soccer for HYSA. My main reason for being involved in youth sports is to teach kids the value of being active, involved, good sports, and members of a team. Apart from the kids learning the sport itself, I value the opportunity to teach how to be a support-

ive teammate, understanding that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts, being socially active

in a healthy way, being a humble winner, and understanding that losing is just an opportunity to get better. Playing youth sports teaches you skills you can apply to the real world later in life and I love being a part of that for these kids.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

What I like best about the Helena area is the availability it allows me to take part in family activities, such as concerts, dance recitals, and school performances. I discovered that, in the other areas we have lived, that wasn't possible either with constant work travel or long commutes. Our parents, siblings, nieces, and nephew all live in Helena, and we have become much closer as a result of being here. I really enjoy seeing my kids connect with their grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. The Helena community is very easy to connect with and as

Please see **BISCHOFF**, Page L19

Congratulations, Tom Bischoff



Congratulations on being named a Helena 20 under 40! Thank you for all you do at American Chemet Corporation to support our global business and safety in the workplace. Your hard work and dedication has led to your growth and success. We look forward to all your future accomplishments.

AMERICAN
chemet
CORPORATION

EMILY DEAN | 34

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I'm lucky to be the third generation of my family to call Helena home and was also very much shaped by growing up in Butte and living in Missoula.

OCCUPATION

I'm honored to serve in two very fulfilling roles, as Mayor of Helena and serving an education nonprofit dedicated to supporting Montana's public schools to develop the full potential of each child.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

Serving our community in elected leadership keeps me out of trouble and keeps my cup full. I feel fortunate to have the opportunity to work with so many incredible organizations made up of diverse perspectives who create impact for Helena in areas like housing,

mental health and substance abuse treatment, economic development, and youth engagement.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

Helena is the full package, our way of life and tightknit community is hard to beat. Until I moved out of state after college, I did not fully appreciate how blessed I was to grow up in a place that was equal parts beautiful landscape and remarkable people. It's a good reminder of the obligation we have to preserve what makes this place so special and leave it in better shape for the next generation.

What else should people know about you?

One of my personal heroes often says that "family is the beginning, the middle, and the end." That sentiment could not be more true for me. Public service is a family endeavor and I will forever be grateful to my family and close friends who constantly demonstrate grace, compassion, and love.



MORRIS

From L15

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

One of the unique things about my career is that community collaboration is woven into my everyday work. Whether I'm working alongside local nonprofits, housing providers, law enforcement, behavioral health organizations, or government agencies, my job is centered on building partnerships that strengthen our community.

Outside of work, I recently was elected to serve as Vice President of the Gym 406 Cheer Booster Club and am a member of the Good Samaritan Ministries Advisory Board.

I've learned that meaningful community change rarely comes from one person or one organization. It happens when people are willing to show up, listen, and say "yes" to working together. I feel fortunate to be part of a community where people genuinely care about one another and are willing to roll up their sleeves to solve difficult problems together.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

Helena is the perfect size to make a real difference. It's large enough to have incredible organizations doing meaningful work, but small enough that relationships matter and meaningful collaboration can occur. If someone has a good idea, chances are you can get the right people around a table and start making it happen.

Professionally, Helena has opened doors I never imag-

ined. Personally, it's become home. The scenery is hard to beat, but it's the people who make Helena special. This is a community that shows up for one another and isn't afraid to tackle hard problems together.

What else should people know about you?

If you would have asked me as a high school senior if I was going to stay in Montana, I would have told you 'no way!' Ironically, I almost transferred out of Carroll College during my freshman year. Looking back, I'm incredibly grateful I stayed.

Outside of work, life revolves around my family. Being a bonus mom to two incredible kids is one of the greatest joys in my life. I also love to travel, spend time outdoors, and am always looking for opportunities to learn something new.

BISCHOFF

From L17

result of living, working, and volunteering I see someone I know almost everywhere I go, which provides a tight-knit family feel.

What else should people know about you?

I married my high school sweetheart, Emily, shortly after college and since then we have had quite the journey, living in four states, welcoming four kids into the world, and celebrating our 17th wedding anniversary this fall. Our oldest, Eddie (14), will be a freshman at Capital High this fall and already in the high school football mode, coupled with baseball and track. Our second, Crew (13), will be an 8th grader at CR Anderson and he can literally build anything with

Legos and is excited to explore the world of Robotics. Our daughter, Elsie (9), will be a 5th grader at Kessler and while being rough and tumble with her brothers and literally saying yes to all sports, is as graceful of a ballerina as you will see and evens out the playing field in our house with her pink dresses. Our youngest, Ace (6), will be a 1st grader at Kessler and he fills our life with humor and goofiness, while starting his own journey into baseball and football.

I am obsessed with golf and Emily and I get out as much as we can. As a family we enjoy getting out to the lake with our camper to relax and spend quality family time. I am a huge Green Bay Packers fan and get the privilege of being a partial owner in the only professional sports franchise that fans can own. My fall weekends revolve around the Packers kick-off time.

KATIE VERDERBER | 36

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I'm a proud Montana native and have always considered Montana home. I wasn't born and raised in Helena, I grew up in Valier and continued my undergrad degree at Western in Dillon. My career brought me to Helena once I was medically retired from the Army. Helena offers the unique opportunity to build a meaningful career while remaining connected to the people, values, and outdoor lifestyle that make Montana so special. My wife and I love being part of this community, and we're excited to be raising our growing family here.

OCCUPATION

I am a civil litigation attorney with Silverman Law Office, where I represent individuals, families, ranchers, agricultural businesses, and small businesses throughout Montana. My practice includes business disputes, estate and probate litigation, employment law, construction litigation, real property disputes, and other complex civil matters.

Before entering private practice, I served as an attorney in the United States Army. That experience instilled in me a deep appreciation for service, leadership, and finding practical solutions to difficult problems. Today, I strive to provide my clients with thoughtful advocacy, honest advice, and effective representation while helping them navigate some of the most challenging situations they face.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

Since becoming a wheelchair user, I've become passionate about disability awareness, accessibility, and adaptive sports. I enjoy sharing my journey with others to help challenge misconceptions about disability and to encourage people to focus on what is possible rather than what seems impossible.

I also enjoy speaking with students, community organizations, and local groups about resilience, overcoming adversity, setting goals, and the importance of inclusion. If my story helps even one person see disability differently or inspires someone to keep pursuing their dreams despite setbacks, then sharing it is worth



it.

Being involved in the community is important to me because I've experienced firsthand how much a supportive community can change someone's life. I want to help create that same sense of support and opportunity for others.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

Helena has a way of making people feel connected. It's a community where neighbors support one another, local businesses care about giving back, and people genuinely want to see each other succeed.

I also love that Helena embraces the Montana lifestyle, whether that's enjoying the outdoors, volunteering, or simply taking time to support community events. It's a place where people work hard, care deeply, and come together when it matters most.

What else should people know about you?

Today, I'm proud to represent Team USA in wheelchair curling and to advocate for greater disability awareness and accessibility throughout Montana. My experiences have taught me resilience, patience, and the importance of surrounding yourself with people who believe in you.

Congratulations!

Helena 20 Under 40 Winner

Katie Verderber

Silverman Law Office

Attorney | Veteran | Paralympian



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mttaxlaw.com



BOB SCHULTZ | 39

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I was born and raised in Cody Wyoming, moving to Billings Montana for about 15 years and have now called Helena my home for the last 5+ years. I'm married to my amazing wife Hollie and have twin boys (age 5) Henry and Leo. We live a very active lifestyle, traveling regularly and taking advantage of all that Helena has to offer, be it boating on Canyon Ferry, drifting down "The Mo", taking adventures into the mountains, or just relaxing with our friends and family here in Helena. I was brought to Helena for a leadership role at a utility infrastructure here in Helena; however, I was soon presented with the opportunity to lead Finstad's as its President. This has been a long dream of mine to run and own my own business, since Finstad's is an employee-owned business, this has checked both boxes.

OCCUPATION

My occupation has been mostly geared in the financial and accounting realm with leadership roles from Controller to Chief Financial Officer and now sits as President of Finstad's in Helena. When I think about occupation, it is very easy to say, well I do finance, or accounting, or sales or etc., but I like to think of my occupation as challenging the status quo, leading and coaching team members, and learning all there is about business as a whole! I find that most businesses and business leaders, even throughout varying industries, all have a great desire to succeed, and not just a financial success. It is amazing coaching, leading a team, and seeing their wins (the same can easily be said for parenting with my boys). I work and strive to make my business, or business I'm in, better each day and better than the day I entered. Being part of leadership and executive teams has been a part of my professional career for the last ten plus years. Helping owners, team members, investors and co leaders accel is a true joy of mine. I also am part of a larger network of companies where I oversee three other businesses throughout the nation and am involved in many working groups and strategy sessions within this network to help other Presidents succeed in their companies; in fact, I was voted by my peers as 2024 Teamshares President Community Awards winner.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

As Helena is new to me, I am working on increasing the organizations I'm involved with and keeping a balance between my family, my work, and my volunteering. In Billings, prior to moving to Helena, I worked as a Booster Club Member for the Billings Mustangs and sat as a Board Member for the Moss Mansion Preservation Society. Since moving to Helena, my family and I have been able to participate in giving to local events and organizations from the Carroll College events to Rural Resilience and Big Sky Bravery. I have become part of the Helena Building Industry and was a candidate for the 2026 board members. My work through Finstad's has increased giving to the Carroll College Saints Athletics as a Corporate Sponsor, building out an in-kind giving program with Helena Habitat for Humanity and many, many other sponsorships and community engagement. What really interests me most about being active in the community is remembering that the customers we serve and the organizations I work with are there to help. It isn't just a community, it is my friends, my neighbors, and my family, and that is the most intriguing part of giving back to the community.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

Living in Helena has been great, don't share all the secrets to the big world! Jokes aside, the peacefulness of a community that is a larger community in Montana but reminds me so much of my hometown. We have some of the best, most accessible geography in the state, and arguably in the nation and world. It's great to take evening walks with our dogs and my family and know the people are good people, it's safe and it's clean; very easy to see the pride in the community. You can be in the water on a river or lake, or on top of a mountain in 30 minutes. Helena still has a smalltown feel that I hope can continue as we see the demographic change coming. Working has been great, coming to Helena to work for a 350+ employee business to a now much smaller business, the people are all great. This goes from people I've worked with and people I continue to work for. There are endless volunteering options here in Helena and I'm excited to continue to help support and grow in more within the community.

What else should people know about you?

My family and friends mean the world to me. As much as I enjoy having strategic and inspirational business discussions and



work on achieving this; I'm equally as excited to spend time at home. As a typical Montanan, you'll find me in the mountains, on the rivers, or sneaking away to sit in one of the state's many hot springs in Montana. Chico is where I proposed to my wife Hollie! I'm always open to good conversation

and enjoy meeting new people and listening to different perspectives. My family has been in Montana now for 4 generations and has helped in building and contributing to this state for many, many years. I know I'll never be a "native" but think I'm getting dang close!

CONGRATULATIONS

2026

20 Under 40 Recipients!

Tom Bischoff
Troy Ford
Dr. Michael Gray
Lindsey Kamerzel
Pat Kenny
Brian Kessler
Emily Kroll
Vanessa Larson
Brus Layson
Kenzie Lombardi

Kara Paul
Bob Schultz
Carley Smith
Emily Dean
Joy Kelso
Gina Mazza
Kayla Morris
Connor Prendergast
Laura Turek
Katie Verderber

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KENZIE LOMBARDI | 31

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena Native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I was born in Helena and am a proud Four Georgians alum! My family moved to Missoula when I was still in elementary school, and I primarily grew up there. After college at UM, I worked and lived in Billings for nearly six years before taking a job at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Montana in 2023 and moving back to Helena. My grandparents have lived here for over 50 years, and it's been great to be closer to them.

OCCUPATION

I work in Strategic Communications for Health Care Service Corporation (of which BCBSMT is a division). I primarily focus on internal communications supporting senior leaders all over the country. I also get to be involved with our volunteer and community initiatives including helping with the annual Governor's Cup.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

I am honored to serve as a board member of Grandstreet Theatre. I grew up doing theater, and it was such an impactful part of my childhood. It's been such a joy to get involved with an arts organization again and see all the incredible work that GST does in the community. The upcoming season is going to be absolutely phenomenal – from Shrek the Musical to How the Grinch Stole Christmas to one of my all-time favorite shows – Come From Away.

I am also an Assistant Coach for the East Helena High School Speech, Debate, and Drama team. Go Vigilantes! Speech was another hugely influential part of my life, and it's been so joyful to be a part of the community across the state again. Our competitors are some of the most talented, kind, thoughtful students I've ever met, and I love getting to watch them grow, learn, and thrive each season. We also rely on hundreds of community volunteers to judge each year, and it's been the absolute

best way to meet folks from across the valley who love and support Speech, Debate, and Drama. We're the

reigning two-time Divisional Champs and will be hosting the Class A State Meet for the first time on January 29-30, 2027.

I deeply believe that our community is only as strong as we make it, and regardless of where I've lived, I have tried to get involved with causes that are important to me. It's the best way to meet like-minded people, and as someone who has benefited from so many wonderful community organizations and programs throughout my life, it feels really satisfying to invest in the next generation. I read "Man's Search for Meaning" by Viktor Frankl in college and a quote from him has stayed with me – "Success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself."

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

I just celebrated my third year living in Helena, and I've been met with so much kindness in my time here. I had the opportunity to participate in Leadership Helena Class of 2025, and Callie, the Chamber crew, and everyone in my class really gave me the Helena 101 intro! I also got to serve on the committee for the Helena Schools bond last spring, and it was so deeply inspiring to see folks from all sorts of different backgrounds come together to support our kids and schools. I also can't speak highly enough about my coworkers at BCBSMT. That building is just bursting with kind, smart, enthusiastic people and it's been a blast getting involved with everything from the Governor's Cup to Festival of Trees.

What else should people know about you?

I live with my cat Stella and love the New York Times Crossword, podcasts, and floating rivers. I also love (and sometimes hate) the Chicago Cubs, and have started making ceramics recently thanks to the kind help of folks at the Archie Bray and the Mud Hole.



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Kenzie Lombardi

Communications Consultant at
Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Montana

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EMILY KROLL | 29

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I am originally from Wisconsin and moved to Helena in 2021 after accepting a position with SMA Architecture + Design. What started as a career opportunity quickly became home. I was drawn to Helena's strong sense of community, easy access to the outdoors, and the opportunity to make a meaningful impact through my work.

OCCUPATION

I am an Interior Designer with SMA Architecture + Design. My work focuses primarily on educational, civic, healthcare, and community projects throughout Montana. I enjoy creating spaces that support the people who use them every day and help strengthen the communities they serve.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

I serve as both a Big Sister and a Board Member for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Montana. I also volunteer at community events and races such as Just for the Helena of It, Ales for Trails,

and the Dusty Bandita, which support organizations like Girls Thrive. After moving away from my family, I wanted to build a strong sense of community and connection here in Helena. Volunteering has helped me create meaningful relationships while giving back to a place that has given so much to me.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

The best part about Helena is the people. No matter where you go, you're likely to run into someone you know. This community truly shows up for one another, and there's a genuine sense of support and connection that makes Helena feel like home.

What else should people know about you?

I moved to Helena not knowing many people, and now it's one of those places where I can't go to the grocery store or trailhead without seeing a familiar face. Through work, volunteering, and a lot of time spent outside, I've found an incredible community here. If I'm not at my desk, there's a good chance I'm mountain biking, skiing, trail running, or spending time with my Little through Big Brothers Big Sisters.



Carley Smith
Director of
Community Impact
SMPS-CPSM

Emily Kroll
Interior Designer
NCIDQ

Celebrating Carley & Emily for being recognized among Helena's 20 Under 40. We're proud of the impact you're making!

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LAURA TUREK | 39

Tell us a bit about yourself, are you a Helena Native born and raised? If not, when did you move here – what brought you to Helena?

I was born and raised in California and moved to Montana with my family when I was 13 years old. After graduating from high school, I moved to Nebraska, where I built and operated a successful ranch and trucking company while raising my family. Those experiences taught me the value of hard work, perseverance, problem-solving, and leadership.

About three years ago, I returned to Montana to be closer to my family, who still call Montana home. While a career opportunity with Montana Internet helped make that move possible, returning felt like coming home. I was drawn back by the strong sense of community, the quality of life, and the opportunity to raise my three children surrounded by family and in a place that values connection, integrity, and hard work.

OCCUPATION

I serve as the Chief Operating Officer of Montana Internet Corporation, a locally owned internet provider serving communities throughout Montana. In my role, I oversee customer experience, sales, technical support, field operations, and strategic growth initiatives across the company.

Since joining Montana Internet, I have had the opportunity to grow from a leadership role within the organization to COO. Throughout that journey, my focus has remained the same: building strong teams, creating exceptional customer experiences, and helping expand access to reliable internet service across Montana.

What I enjoy most about my work is that it directly impacts people's lives. Reliable internet is no longer a luxury, it is essential for education, healthcare, business, and staying connected with loved ones. I am proud to be part of a team that helps connect families, businesses, schools, and communities throughout Montana.

Q&A

What community service or volunteer activities/organizations are you involved with? And what interests you in being an active community member?

Community involvement is something I value both personally and professionally. Through Montana Internet, I help support and participate in a variety of local initiatives that strengthen our community.

One of my favorite annual traditions is Montana Internet's volunteer day with



Helena Food Share. Each year, our company closes for the day so our entire team can volunteer together and give back to an organization that serves so many local families. We also partner with the American Red Cross to host quarterly blood drives, helping provide a critical resource that saves lives throughout our region.

Beyond organized volunteer efforts, I enjoy supporting local events, building relationships with other businesses, and finding opportunities to give back. I believe strong communities are built by people who are willing to invest their time and talents, and I am grateful to be part of a company that shares those values.

What do you like best about living, working and volunteering in the Helena area?

What I love most about the Helena area is the people. There is a genuine sense of

community here that is difficult to find elsewhere. People support one another, local businesses collaborate, and there is a shared commitment to making this region a great place to live, work, and raise a family.

I also appreciate the balance the area offers. It provides tremendous professional opportunities while still maintaining the outdoor lifestyle, family values, and sense of connection that make Montana special. It's a place where you can build a career, make lifelong friendships, and truly feel like you're part of something bigger than yourself.

What else should people know about you?

I am a mother of three, a business leader, and a lifelong believer in resilience and personal growth. My journey has included entrepreneurship, ranching, operating a trucking company, raising a family, and

building a career in executive leadership. Each chapter has shaped the way I lead and the values I bring to both my work and my community.

I am passionate about developing people and creating opportunities for others to succeed. Whether I'm mentoring team members, helping drive strategic growth, or supporting local organizations, my goal is always to leave people and places better than I found them.

Being recognized as part of Helena's 20 Under 40 is an incredible honor, especially as I approach my 40th birthday. I am grateful to work alongside so many talented people, to be part of a company that believes in giving back, and to contribute to a community that has welcomed my family with open arms. I look forward to continuing to serve the Helena area for many years to come.



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Congratulations, Laura

Laura Turek

Chief Operating Officer, Montana Internet

Thank you for choosing Montana Internet to be where you mentor, cheerlead, and inspire the next generation of thought leaders in our region. You make us — and our community — stronger.

With gratitude, your Montana Internet family

