

**PBN** PROVIDENCE BUSINESS NEWS  
**BUSINESS  
EXCELLENCE**  
2019 AWARDS



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CHAMBER OF COMMERCE'S

**LAURIE WHITE**

**THE MASTER ADVOCATE**

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# PUBLISHER'S LETTER

**SUCCESSFUL COMPANIES** tend to share common traits, including strong leadership, committed employees and strong services and products.

But keeping the success going, year after year, requires a strategy that keeps you connected to the clients, customers and mission in both good economic times and bad. For this year's PBN Business Excellence Awards winners, a common theme in their approach is the view of themselves and those they serve or sell to as partners, all working toward the same goal.

It is a powerful concept, put into practice regularly by leaders such as Laurie White, president of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce.

"We aspire to be a partner for change in Rhode Island," said White, whose effective advocacy for member businesses relies heavily on consensus-building with both business and political leaders.

And Bryant University President Ronald K. Machtley readily acknowledges the help of board chairmen he saw as mentors serving a common goal.



The view of customers and employees alike as partners has propelled Vertikal6 to twice being named among PBN's Fastest Growing Companies and recognized as one of PBN's Best Places To Work four consecutive years.

It's an approach that also helps companies such as GrowthLab Financial Services Inc. build long-term client relationships beyond the length of individual contracts.

"We don't just parachute in," said CEO and Managing Partner Dan Gertrudes.

If there's strength in numbers, then the businesses that build the strongest partnerships will be the ones best positioned to ride out the tough times.

Our BEA program itself has been built with the help of corporate sponsors. Without them, we could not spotlight the inspiring stories of the state's top leaders, organizations and businesses.

We'd especially like to thank longtime partner sponsor Partridge Snow & Hahn LLP for supporting this year's program.

Roger C. Bergenheim  
President and Publisher

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# SPONSOR MESSAGE

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**Partridge Snow & Hahn** is proud to recognize the winners of the 2019 Business Excellence Awards. The dedication, vision, hard work and commitment shown by those being recognized is exemplary. Congratulations to all honorees.



## BUSINESS LEADERSHIP

LAURIE WHITE, PRESIDENT, Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce



'We aspire to be a  
*partner for change*  
in Rhode Island.'

LAURIE WHITE, Greater Providence  
Chamber of Commerce president

## Under White's guidance, Chamber on right path

BY MARY HOWE | Contributing Writer

**CONSISTENT, FORWARD-THINKING**, strategically targeted planning, followed by action.

Those qualities are central to the economic-development work of the **Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce** and also are embodied in its president, Laurie White.

Leadership means knowing the subject matter well, perceiving the next new issue, advocating for goals and thanking people, said White, who has been Chamber president for 14 years.

Knowledge is the starting point because "the landscape is constantly shifting," White said. "The Chamber has a front-row seat at everything happening in Rhode Island." As a persuader, White said, it's essential "to understand both sides of the story and to understand the counter arguments."

Persuading can involve the heavy work of changing minds. "Your argument has to be honest, sincere and accurate. You have to present your points in a cogent fashion, not using hyperbole," she said.

Appreciation is crucial. "Most business projects don't happen without a struggle," White said. "When a project crosses the finish line, thanking [those involved] is important. That's the way to keep people engaged."

Alden Anderson, chairman of the Chamber board and senior vice president of CBRE Inc., said one of White's great qualities as a leader of the membership organization is the careful, strategic thinking that she invests before taking action.

Anderson said he admires White's "very

measured process of decision-making after thoroughly understanding the landscape and ramifications." He added, "Laurie has a good understanding of what can and cannot get done, so that we don't start going down paths that end in failure. She is conscious of the law of unintended consequences."

Not every problem has a quick or obvious solution. The chronic obstacles to economic growth in Rhode Island include its small tax base and consequently tight public resources. But, White said, it's necessary to balance a fair tax load with important projects, such as improving education and building the economy, to make Rhode Island attractive to new, revenue-generating businesses.

White sees big progress under the leadership of Secretary of Commerce Stefan Pryor, appointed by Gov. Gina M. Raimondo in 2015. She said his time on the job was preceded by a period of unhelpful turnover in economic-development leadership.

Before Raimondo selected Pryor, White said, "there was not a full appreciation of

**CHAMBER CHIEF:** Laurie White, right, president of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, talks with Alexandra Rakip, Chamber marketing and events manager.

PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

economic development. But this is long-term work."

Pryor, White said, "has been able to make the case that economic development is at the base of everything that happens in Rhode Island."

Important work in recent years, White said, has included workforce development, streamlining of regulations, collaboration with the General Assembly, improvement of infrastructure, and development of the former Interstate 195 land as an innovation district.

Crucial improvements that still need work, White said, include public school curriculums and buildings and student performance. Undereducated and undertrained people who cannot contribute to the economy are "an anchor around our neck," she added.

White has economic-development and relationship-building chops that run deep. A 1981 honors graduate of the University of Rhode Island, White started her career as a television journalist, at WLNE-TV Channel 6 in Providence. She worked as a public information officer at the state Department of Economic Development and joined the Chamber in 1989. She rose through the ranks, taking a break from 2003 to 2004 to serve as executive counselor to then-Gov. Donald L. Carcieri for policy and communications. She serves on many boards that work on education and economic development.

White said any accolades she earns are really earned by the entire Chamber. "We aspire to be a partner for change in Rhode Island to put it on a path to prosperity by digging deep and getting into the issues that are prevalent today," she said. ■

# THANK YOU

## Ronald K. Machtley, for 23 Years at Bryant University

From 1996 to 2019, a look at the highlights of one  
of the most dramatic transformations in higher education:

- Establishing the College of Business and College of Arts and Sciences, elevating Bryant from a college to a university in 2004
- Undergraduate applications that have nearly quadrupled to 7,614 in 2019, the highest in Bryant's history, and enrollments that have grown 62%
- Two record-breaking capital campaigns, with the current campaign exceeding its stretch goal of \$100 million at \$108 million
- A move to highly competitive NCAA Division I athletics, with highly accomplished scholar-athletes
- Prestigious national rankings, including a jump to #7 from #24 regionally since 2014 in *U.S. News & World Report*. #8 Innovative, #17 Best Undergraduate Teaching, #25 national ranking in International Business



- A new School of Health Sciences and its first clinical program, the fully accredited MSPAS Physician Assistant program
- Expanding global perspective as an integral part of a Bryant education, creating the unique Sophomore International Experience and a campus in Zhuhai, China
- An increasing percentage of students employed or in graduate school within six months of graduation—99% in 2018, with median first-year earnings of \$60,000
- A campus transformation adding 500,000 square feet of new facilities including the award-winning Quinlan/Brown Academic Innovation Center, the Beirne Stadium Complex, and Conaty Park and Indoor Athletic Center
- An endowment that has increased to approximately \$183 million from \$96 million

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# CORPORATE CITIZENSHIP

RONALD K. MACHTLEY, PRESIDENT, Bryant University



*'You can be more successful than you or anyone around you thought.'*

RONALD K. MACHTLEY,  
Bryant University president

**QUICK LEARNER:** Ronald K. Machtley acknowledges he didn't know much about operating an institution of higher education when he was first hired as president at what was then Bryant College. The school has since become a university. He's stepping down in May, after 24 years on the job.  
PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

## Machtley's influence clear at Bryant and beyond

BY PAUL E. KANDARIAN | Contributing Writer

**WHEN RONALD K. MACHTLEY** was growing up in Johnstown, Pa., he knew college was “the only ticket out,” or he’d likely end up toiling away in one of the nearby steel mills.

He attended the U.S. Naval Academy, then went on active duty, spending some of his time in Newport in 1971. He decided to make Rhode Island his permanent home.

Machtley, **Bryant University** president since 1996, has devoted his life to public service, including a stint as a Naval officer, serving in the Navy for five years and the Naval Reserve for another 20 years, and being a U.S. congressman from 1989-1995.

“My parents were a huge inspiration to me,” in terms of kick-starting his lifelong community service, said Machtley, who is set to retire from Bryant next May. “They were always involved in the community, be it with the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, or coaching sports teams. They did whatever they could do.”

With five children, Machtley’s parents worked hard, “saving for milk, not college, but wanting us all to go to college,” he said. “And we did; they made it work.”

Machtley said one of his childhood mentors was a high school football coach who was an English teacher and “had a different philosophy on sports; you had to be good in the classroom, first and foremost. We still keep in touch.”

Later in life, another mentor was the late President George H. W. Bush, whom he ac-

companied to China during Machtley’s time in Congress; Bush had served in China as head of the U.S. Liaison Office from 1974-1975.

“President Bush was definitely one of my heroes and a role model,” Machtley said. “I was pleased and honored to know him, and in 2008, he was our commencement speaker at Bryant.”

Machtley acknowledges that he was hired at Bryant “not knowing anything about management of higher education,” but he was guided throughout his tenure by various chairmen of the board who were “all very unique and great mentors, all of whom inspired me to lift my game up.”

His contributions to community are many, including serving on the board of directors for the Rhode Island Foundation for 10 years. “It’s the largest charitable organization in the state,” he said. “It helps so many groups and people, it really makes a difference. Being on that board was very meaningful.”

Machtley currently serves as a director for the Rhode Island Public Expenditures Council, where he is a past president, and in 2012, he earned the Rhode Island State Merit Award

in Higher Education from the New England Board of Higher Education.

He points to many things that highlight his community involvement, but he said one that’s had an especially gratifying impact on the community is the Hassenfeld Institute for Public Leadership, which began in 2010 at Bryant. It was an idea that came about during a dinner Machtley had with Alan G. Hassenfeld, a former Bryant trustee and former CEO at Hasbro Inc.

He is also quick to credit his wife, Kati Machtley, for her community involvement; she co-founded the Women’s Summit at Bryant 21 years ago; he said his only connection to the popular event “is having married a woman smarter than me who runs it.”

In February, the couple gifted \$1 million to boost the Expanding the World of Opportunity capital campaign at Bryant past \$100 million.

When Machtley turned 70 last year, he said, he realized it was time to “stop at the top of my game and do something else. It’s a demanding job and I wanted to keep working in a capacity where I could do it, and not have someone say, ‘It’s time to go.’”

As to his legacy, he said with a laugh, “Well for one thing, I hope it’s that, ‘He wasn’t bashful about trying.’ But mostly I hope people look at Bryant and see if you work hard, are committed, find your passion, you can be more successful than you or anyone around you thought. You can make a difference.” ■



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## EXCELLENCE IN COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT



## Mentoring program part of different kind of care

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB | Contributing Writer

### MAKING INTRODUCTIONS:

Monica Anderson, Lifespan director of community relations and corporate citizenship, speaks to people attending a Rhode Island Hospital community job fair in October.

PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

## LIFESPAN CORP.

**LIFESPAN CORP.** came into existence in 1994, when it was founded by Rhode Island Hospital and The Miriam Hospital.

Now the health system is a Brown University medical school affiliate and has multiple locations, including Newport Hospital and Hasbro Children's Hospital.

**Lifespan Corp.** serves a lot of patients. It tallied 62,368 patient discharges and 257,281 emergency-room visits – with 1,165 licensed beds and more than 15,000 employees last year, according to its 2018 annual report.

The nature of Lifespan's industry and widespread locations puts the nonprofit organization in a unique position when it comes to investing in its community. It's an extra challenge to organize so many employees over so many sites. But the company's prominence on the Rhode Island health care landscape makes it even more crucial that it does so, according to its leaders.

Caring is at the core of its mission, after all, so that ramps up the importance of showing that caring in as many ways as possible. Lisa Abbott, senior vice president of human resources and community affairs, said Lifespan has done its best to stay focused and put community efforts where they count most.

"We've said we can't be all things to all people," she said, with all programs getting regular consideration in terms of results. "We have to rechannel dollars

where they do the most good."

One of the areas where Abbott says Lifespan is doing great things is with its 4-year-old mentorship program. While the program is not brand-new, it's constantly being fine-tuned for maximum efficiency.

The company pairs high schoolers with a Lifespan employee for a mentoring arrangement that lasts for two years. The students, who are from challenged environments, said Abbott, meet their mentor in their junior year of high school.

"We like it to be high school kind of coaching," she said, "based on what they need to think about in terms of the college application process and college visits. We get them ready."

Students are also brought to Lifespan locations to shadow their mentors and explore the health care environment as a profession. Abbott pointed out that there is a social and an emotional component of the mentor-mentee relationships as well, with a monthly visit and weekly phone call, text or email. Great care is taken to ensure that the pairs are well-matched.

"They often need a sounding board who is not their parent to talk to about

personal things. And we're good listeners," said Abbott, who also serves as a mentor.

The biggest challenge now, she said, is that there are not enough mentors to go around. Those who do volunteer to mentor a student report getting more reward out of the relationship than they ever expected.

For the younger set, Lifespan's Power Lunch Reading Program matches employees with fourth and fifth graders in Providence schools who need help with reading skills. The program began as a collaboration between Lifespan and Providence nonprofit Inspiring Minds.

Always analyzing community efforts, the company launched Team Lifespan in 2018.

Working with nonprofit partners, Lifespan sponsored fitness events and volunteer projects throughout the year in which employees could participate. It's a way to give back while promoting good health, messaging that dovetails with the company brand. Team captains ensure coordination across locations, creating a unified front.

Team Lifespan events include Earth Day and beach cleanup projects; the American Heart Walk, which raised more than \$43,000; 5K races with paid employee registration, T-shirts and training support; and the Autism Project 15th annual Imagine Walk and Family Fun Day for Autism at Goddard Memorial State Park in East Greenwich.

More than 300 employees participated in the inaugural year of Team Lifespan, according to the company.

The new program joins established initiatives, such as the holiday Season of Giving toy and outerwear collections, as the very latest in Lifespan's ongoing mission of caring. ■

*'We have to rechannel dollars where they do the most good.'*

LISA ABBOTT,

Lifespan senior vice president of human resources and community affairs



## EXCELLENCE AT A LARGE COMPANY

**LAB WORK:** Marc Powell, center, a doctoral student in biomedical engineering, uses magnifying equipment at Brown University's Carney Institute of Brain Science to get a close-up look at his work. Behind him are Dr. Sohail Syed, left, a neurosurgical resident, and David Borton, assistant professor of engineering.

PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

# Carney Institute for Brain Science makes crucial connections

BY MICHAEL J. DECICCO | Contributing Writer

## BROWN UNIVERSITY'S ROBERT K. AND NANCY D. CARNEY INSTITUTE FOR BRAIN SCIENCE

**IT DOESN'T TAKE** a brain surgeon to figure out the reason behind the award-winning success of **Brown University's Robert K. and Nancy D. Carney Institute for Brain Science.**

But it has taken more than one brain scientist to earn the accolades.

Over the past few years the institute has increased funding into its research on how the human brain works, and it has expanded the results of that research by an impressive margin. The center brings together more than 180 world-class faculty members and their research groups across 23 Brown University departments, according to Sara Feijo, communications and outreach coordinator.

Since becoming center director three years ago, Diane Lipscombe has increased the center philanthropic base, Feijo said, as well as improved "diversity and inclusion" in research activities to foster "innovative and game-changing research."

The institute, for example, received a \$100 million gift from alumnus Robert J. Carney and his wife, Nancy D. Carney, for its research efforts in 2018, and it has attracted a total of \$174 million in external funding over the past five years. That funding allowed it to move into a new state-of-the-art facility at the center of Brown's College Hill campus in Providence in January.

"We are a powerhouse research institute with world-class brain scientists of different academic disciplines who collaborate to a degree that is unique and strongly

influenced by Brown University's open curriculum – integrative research and scholarship," Lipscombe said. "Our new space on the fourth floor of 164 Angell St. has further combined discussions and collaborations across disciplines, with engineering, cognition, and neuroscience faculty and students researching in a highly integrated environment."

She noted that the institute also values and supports community and academic discourse by offering workshops and data-science challenges for faculty and students from many departments to enrich the intellectual environment at Brown and to promote new ideas.

She said that through its innovation awards, which encourage brain scientists to launch new, innovative projects, the institute has enabled cross-disciplinary teams of faculty to pursue ground-breaking research that they would not be able to do otherwise. "On average, we invest \$700,000 annually in innovation awards and we've seen a six-fold return on investment, as many of these ideas lead to exciting new discoveries and subsequent support from federal funds," she said.

For example, she said, award recipient

Karla Kaun is studying what happens to the brain during an addiction to alcohol. "We know that after alcohol addiction, people will harm themselves [and sometimes others] in seeking more alcohol," she said. "The normal decision-making centers of the brain are altered, and Dr. Kaun is trying to understand how this change comes about – through changes in the expression of certain genes and altered connections between neurons."

Researcher Michael Frank studies the neural mechanisms underlying learning, decision-making and cognitive control. His lab develops neural circuit and computer models of interactions between the different areas of the brain.

The BrainGate research program, which started at Brown and is led by Carney institute researchers, develops brain-computer interface technologies to restore the communication, mobility and independence of people with neurological disease or injury, or limb loss. The technology is used to record signals from the brain that contain information, for example, instructing muscles to contract when walking or reaching out to pick up a cup. These signals can be recorded from the brains of individuals who are thinking about moving their limb, even if they are paralyzed. The signals can be used to control the movement of artificial limbs. Most recently, the brain-computer interface technology enabled people with paralysis to directly operate an off-the-shelf tablet device just by thinking about making cursor movements and clicks.

Another project by a team of researchers affiliated with the institute develops and tests technology that works at the level of the spinal cord to help to restore limb movement and bladder control for people who have suffered spinal cord injuries. ■

*"We are a powerhouse research institute with world-class brain scientists."*

DIANE LIPSCOMBE, Carney Institute for Brain Science director



# EXCELLENCE AT A MIDSIZE COMPANY



**STEADY GROWTH:** Richard Davia, managing director of creative and branding at (add)ventures, and Carli Kabilyo, assistant director of design and branding, add Post-it notes to a board at the company's new offices in East Providence. PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

## (add)ventures helps brands walk their talk

BY ROB BORKOWSKI | Contributing Writer

### (ADD)VENTURES

**IT'S BEEN A GOOD THREE DECADES** for the Providence-based multi-disciplinary brand-culture and communications firm (add)ventures and their clients.

The firm has added 25 full-time jobs, to nearly 70 communications professionals, since 2014, collected several industry awards and earned Inc. magazine's "Fastest Growing Company" honor a record 11 times, most recently making Inc.'s 2019 list of 5,000 fastest-growing companies in the United States.

"It's been 30 years of really steady, organic growth," said Stephen Rosa, founder and CEO.

During that time, Rosa said, (add)ventures has thrived thanks to its multidisciplinary focus on its clients.

"I think it's just a strong and steady commitment, a strong culture of treating your clients

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right,” Rosa said.

The firm works with Fortune 500 companies, industry and innovation leaders, leading universities, major nonprofits and governments to create unique, multidisciplinary digital brand communications.

“[Our] clients cross industries and geographies. We provide creative and strategy in the health care, insurance, banking and retail industries,” said Mary Sadlier, executive vice president and chief strategy officer at (add) ventures.

Those clients, who include CVS Health Corp., Hasbro Inc. and Timberland LLC, have been hard-won, especially at the start of the company’s history. Rosa, new to the industry with a new firm in the state in the late ’90s, moved back to Rhode Island to be close to his family as his dad turned 70.

“Unfortunately, when I moved back here, it was in the middle of the credit crisis,” Rosa said.

Clients were tough to come by locally, he said. But Southwest Airlines was offering

cheap flights to Chicago, where the credit crisis wasn’t a concern, so he was able to travel to Chicago inexpensively to add clients. His fortunes grew a lot brighter.

With (add)ventures’ first Fortune 500 client, Textron Inc., he said, the company realized the power of telling the story of a brand through the employees and the values they draw on in their work.

“We saw how powerful that was,” Rosa said, and took the same approach with CVS not long after.

“We start from the inside out,” Rosa said. “Branding is not something you create. Branding is something you are.”

Often, when you see a sexy ad for a brand, “They forget to tell the people inside,” Rosa said, but branding works best “if we get the employees on board with the mission.”

Among their own employees, the average staff tenure is six years.

“We’ve grown with some of our clients for decades,” he said. “As they grow, we grow.”

An enduring value throughout that growth,

said Sadlier, has been the firm’s “nice culture.”

“Often our clients all say you guys are so nice to work with,” Sadlier said. “That culture is what makes our work great.”

That work is performed by a 64-person staff of brand storytellers, culture creators, video, design and digital-experience makers.

“We are partners, not vendors, and some say working with us feels like working with family. Not only will we help move organizations forward, we’ll have their back the entire way too,” Sadlier said.

That approach has helped (add)ventures win industry awards, including the Summit Award, the South Florida Marketer of the Year from the American Marketing Association and numerous New England Emmy Awards.

The firm recently expanded into its new New England headquarters in East Providence with room for 60-person meetings, six breakout rooms, two full production studios and a clubhouse kitchen.

The space is designed to foster people’s creativity, Sadlier said. If you’re going to work at a creative endeavor all day, “why shouldn’t you spend it in a place that energizes you?”

The company also has offices in Miami and New York City, as well as partnerships with firms in Argentina.

Regardless of the assignment or the location, Sadlier said, “It’s quality relationships and experiences.” ■

‘Not only will we help move organizations forward, we’ll have their back the entire way.’

MARY SADLIER, (add)ventures executive vice president and chief strategy officer

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# 2020 PBN EVENTS



## BOOK OF LISTS PREMIER EVENT JANUARY 22

The best business networking event of the year! Business leaders and executives join PBN in honoring the many companies featured in the Book of Lists.

#pbnBOLPREMIER



## MANUFACTURING AWARDS MARCH 12

Celebrate the Manufacturing Renaissance that is evolving regionally and across the country. The PBN Manufacturing Awards recognizes manufacturers in multiple award categories, and one individual receives the Leadership & Strategy Award.

#pbnMFG



## C-SUITE AWARDS APRIL TBD

PBN's C-Suite Awards program recognizes top C-level executives for public, private and nonprofit companies who are innovators, trailblazers, role models and leaders in the community.

#pbnCSUITE



## BUSINESS WOMEN AWARDS MAY 21

PBN honors the success of women in a variety of industries and recognizes younger, professional women to watch as well as industry leaders. A career achiever and outstanding mentor are also honored.

#pbnBWA



## BEST PLACES TO WORK IN RHODE ISLAND JUNE 11

Celebrate the state's best employers, who are selected based on extensive employee surveys and feedback reports from Best Companies Group.

#pbnBPTW



## 40 UNDER FORTY JULY 16

Recognizes forty men and women, under the age of 40, who are successful in their careers and involved in their communities.

#pbn40UFORTY



## HEALTHIEST EMPLOYERS AUGUST 6

Healthiest Employers in Rhode Island recognizes employers who have implemented worksite Health & Wellness programs and have shown a commitment to employee health and safety.

#pbnHEALTHIESTEMPLOYERS



## 25 LEADERS & ACHIEVERS AUGUST 20

PBN's newest award program will recognize 25 leaders over the age of 55 for their notable success and strong leadership both in their fields and to the region. Honorees will be chosen based on their long-standing commitment to the business community as well as a sustained demonstration of leading others, community service and mentoring.

#pbn25OVERFIFTYFIVE



## FASTEST GROWING/ INNOVATIVE COMPANIES SEPTEMBER 16

This program highlights the region's Fastest Growing Companies and those that are especially innovative in developing new processes, products and services that improve competitiveness and spur growth.

#pbnFGIC



## BUSINESS EXCELLENCE AWARDS NOVEMBER 5

PBN's Premier Awards Event recognizes leadership and general excellence at private and public companies and nonprofit organizations.

#pbnBIZEXCELLENCE



## DIVERSITY SUMMIT & AWARDS DECEMBER 3

A panel of experts share best practices in leveraging Diversity & Inclusion in the workplace. In addition, companies and leaders will be recognized for their exceptional efforts in promoting D&I within their organization and in the community.

#pbnDIVERSITYSUMMIT



## PBN SUMMITS

Economic Trends	FEBRUARY
Health Care (spring)	APRIL
Cybersecurity	OCTOBER
Health Care (fall)	OCTOBER



# PBN 2020 EDITORIAL CALENDAR

DATE	LIST	FOCUS REPORT	SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT	EVENT
JANUARY	3	N/A	Economic Forecast	
	10	Providence Restaurants; RI Distilleries, Breweries & Vineyards	The Food Industry	
	17	International Tax Preparers; Foreign Owned Companies	Accounting	
	24	Commercial/Industrial Services; Property Management Firms	Commercial Real Estate	Book of Lists Premier Event, 1/22
	31	Employee Benefit Administrators	Insurance	
FEBRUARY	7	Residential Real Estate Agencies	High End Residential Real Estate	Economic Outlook Summit; TBD
	14	Health Care Educators; College Technology Programs	Education	PBN Summit Recap
	21	Rehab & Occupational Health Centers; Physical Therapists/ Sports Medicine	Health Care	
	28	Estate Planners	Law Review	
MARCH	6	RI Banks	Banking & Finance	
	13	Energy Companies	Environment/Ocean Science	Manufacturing Awards
	20	General Contractors	Construction, Design & Architecture	Manufacturing Awards; 3/12
	27	Tourist and Cultural Attractions; New England Resorts	Tourism	
	3	Independent Insurance Agencies	Insurance	Health Care Summit; TBD
APRIL	10	Regional Hotels; Boutique Hotels	Meetings, Corporate & Social Events	PBN Summit Recap
	17	Adult/Executive Education Programs; Online Degrees/Programs	Adult/Executive Education	
	24	Comm RE Sales: Office, Retail & Industrial	Commercial Real Estate	C-Suite Awards
				C-Suite Awards; TBD
MAY	1	SBA Loans; SBA Lenders	Small Business	
	8	RI Health & Dental Insurers; MA Health & Dental Insurers	Health Care	
	15	IP Lawyers	Law Review	
	22	Veteran Employers	Veterans in the Workplace	Business Women
	29	Health Care Educators; College Technology Programs	Careers/Workforce Development	Business Women Awards; 5/21
JUNE	5	Tax Rates, RI	Construction, Design & Architecture	
	12	Manufacturers	Manufacturing	Best Places to Work
	19	Credit Unions, Regional Banks	Banking & Finance	Best Places to Work Awards; 6/11
	26	High Tech Funding Sources; Business Dev. Resources	Innovation/ Start ups	
JULY	3	Meeting Facilities, Caterers; Private Transportation Services	Corporate Outings	
	10	IT Services; RI CIOs, Chief Security Officers	Cyber Security	
	17	Comm RE Leases: Office, Retail & Industrial	Commercial Real Estate	40 Under Forty
	24	Colleges & Universities	Education	40 Under Forty Awards; 7/16
	31	Engineering Firms	Engineering	
	7	Physician Groups; Diagnostic Imaging Centers	Health Care	Healthiest Employer
AUGUST	14	Executive Recruiters; Staffing Firms; Executive Compensation	Human Resources	Healthiest Employer Awards; 8/6
	21	Law Firms	Law Review	25 Leaders & Achievers
				25 Leaders & Achievers; 8/20
	28	Software Dev. Cos.; Web Development Cos.	Technology	
SEPTEMBER	4	MBA Programs	Education	
	11	Accounting Firms	Banking & Finance	
	18	Property & Casualty Insurers; Disaster Prep& Response Resources	Insurance	Fastest Growing & Innovative Companies
	25	Architectural Firms	Construction, Design & Architecture	Fastest Growing & Innovative Companies Awards; 9/16
OCTOBER	2	Cyber Security Companies	Technology/Cyber Security	STUFF Made in RI book
	9	Private Secondary Schools	Education	Cyber Security Summit; TBD
	16	Hospitals; Addiction Treatment Centers	Health Care	PBN Summit Recap
	23	Commercial RE Brokerage Firms; Business & Industrial Parks	Commercial Real Estate	
	30	Providence Employers; RI Employers	Workforce Development	The PBN Giving Guide
NOVEMBER	6	Chief Financial Officers	Accounting/Business Valuation & Succession	Health Care Summit; TBD
	13	Top Private Companies	Law Review	PBN Summit Recap; Business Excellence; Vets Wrap
	20	Family Owned Businesses, Women Run Businesses	Small Business	Business Excellence Awards; 11/5
	27	Stock Brokerage Firms; Wealth Managers	Investments/Estate & Retirement Planning	
	4	Mortgage Bankers and Brokers	Banking & Finance	
DECEMBER	11	Urgent Care Centers	Health Care	Diversity & Inclusion Awards
	18	Highway Projects	Construction/Infrastructure	Diversity & Inclusion Summit/Awards; 12/3
				PBN Summit Recap
	25	N/A	Economic Trends	Profiles of Success

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# EXCELLENCE AT A SMALL COMPANY

**SHOP TALK:** Vertikal6 service desk apprentices Steven Walsh, left, and Dylan Herrera share a conversation in the company's office.

PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY



## Vertikal6 evolving with tech landscape

BY JOHN A. LAHTINEN | Contributing Writer

## VERTIKAL6

**THEY SAY** big things come in small packages, and that sentiment couldn't be more accurate if you're mentioning **Vertikal6**.

With a workforce of 48 employees, nearly double the staff from close to three years ago, the Warwick-based information technology services provider posted close to \$7 million in revenue last year. In addition to twice being named among Providence Business News' Fastest Growing Companies, Vertikal6 has also been recognized as a best place to work four years running.

Vertikal6 has evolved from starting as a tech company in 2002, to focusing on helping small and mid-sized organizations achieve their goals and maximize revenue. The company offers various IT strategies, including outsourcing, professional services, hosting services and software development.

"We help our clients rise above their challenges and take the chal-

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lenge of technology off their plate,” said CEO Rick Norberg. “Our customers are our partners and we work with them to navigate the technology landscape of their business and provide the right solutions to help them accomplish their mission.”

Over the past couple of years, Vertikal6 has made several strategic moves to strengthen itself internally and externally. To accommodate its expanding staff, the company underwent renovations by adding 6,000 square feet of office space in the last six months.

Vertikal6 also invested heavily in its Microsoft Corp. relationship by moving thousands of users to Office 365, by becoming a Microsoft Gold cloud provider, and provided Azure cloud migration and management. The company also developed and launched its own proprietary software called Elevated Strategy Platform, which helps clients turn their strategic business goals into reality by leveraging curated IT solutions.

“As a kid, I always wanted to be an entrepreneur,” Norberg said. “I get to live that dream every day. We are laser-focused on client out-

comes and caring deeply about our people and customers. We develop our team, our tools and our culture based on this mission.”

Norberg said the IT industry in Rhode Island faces its share of obstacles, including finding qualified candidates to fill open positions, and keeping up with the pace of industry changes and ever-constant cybersecurity threats.

“Twenty years ago, we were worried about a two-digit date oversight, and if we got email in a day or two, all was good in the world,” Norberg said. “Today, our lives are online and if that same email doesn’t arrive in three seconds, something is clearly broken. Few other industries evolve at this pace.”

In an effort to help customers stay ahead of the challenge of increased security threats, Vertikal6 recently rolled out two-factor authentication to all of its clients and is locking down environments when it is necessary. The company also conducts customer audits for its clients to ensure information-related controls and processes are working properly.

Creativity and innovation go hand in hand as critical components in the Vertikal6 play-

book, particularly on the rapidly evolving tech scene.

“It is vital to innovate in order to stay ahead,” said Jenna Barboza, Vertikal6’s service operations manager. “One of our core values is ‘Innovate Relentlessly’ and we hold ourselves to that standard every day. One example of this is our employee training. It is a bit ‘out of the box’ compared to most organizations. We train new techs with not just books; each new employee is given hands-on training, interactive videos, classroom-style training and even educational games.”

Although the work at times can be stressful and the hours long, the Vertikal6 team handles all the challenges together.

“I enjoy working for Vertikal6 because it is a great group of intelligent people who can all laugh and have a great time while solving complex technical issues,” Barboza said. “To me, it is like one big group of friends working towards the same goals. There are busy and hectic days, but we still find a way to have a good time and make the environment fun to work in.” ■

*‘We help our clients rise above their challenges and take the challenge of technology off their plate.’*

RICK NORBERG, Vertikal6 CEO

Think differently  
Learn differently



the Wolf School  
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# EXCELLENCE AT A SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCY



## College Crusade enjoying a high degree of success

BY ROB BORKOWSKI | Contributing Writer

**HIGHER LEARNING:** From left, College Crusade of Rhode Island high school adviser Agi Kah and middle school advisers Manuela Garcia, Victor Martinez and Eric Rossi have a conversation at the organization's Providence headquarters.  
PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

### THE COLLEGE CRUSADE OF RHODE ISLAND

**THE COLLEGE CRUSADE** of Rhode Island recently finished a successful year of bolstering graduation rates among 4,000 low-income students in Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls, Woonsocket, Cranston and West Warwick.

In the last five years, the organization reported that its students' high school graduation rate increased from 70% to 89% and saw college graduation rates climb from 69% to 83%.

The College Crusade of Rhode Island was also recently honored with the Rhode Island Foundation's 2019 Community Leadership Award, adding to the many accolades the organization has received in its 30-year history.

"It's been a good 2019," said Andrew Bramson, the organization's CEO and president.

The organization was also a model for the U.S. Department of Education's GEAR UP initiative in 1997 and has designed, implemented and administered Rhode Island's GEAR UP program for more than 20 years.

The organization has recorded an 80% return rate for enrolled students each year.

"Our students spend, really, 11 years with us," Bramson said, noting that it is a significant accomplishment. "Eleven years is a long time, especially in the eyes of someone who's 12 years old."

The longevity of students in the program speaks to the value of the aid the

organization provides students and their families, Bramson said.

College Crusade has placed 29 advisers across 37 schools in Rhode Island to offer individual advising, out-of-school programming, family-engagement workshops, and college scholarship support to provide students with the help they need to make it to – and through – college.

Completing college with a marketable four-year degree is still an effective path to a better quality of life, even with a new awareness developing about trade schools and the demand for people to pursue blue-collar careers. College Crusade emphasizes this to its students. Earning that degree is a crucial goal for many of their students' families.

"Generally, in a good economy, people begin to look at the value of a college degree differently," Bramson said.

About 95% of College Crusade students identify as students of color, and all come from families whose income qualifies them for free and reduced lunch at the

time of enrollment. But the organization makes sure their students are aimed at a target that will reward their hard work with a meaningful career, which will support both a livelihood and the ability to pay off college loans.

"You have to have a reasonable expectation of, if I go into that field, will I pay that [student debt] off," Bramson said.

The organization also coaches families in applying for financial aid, since many are navigating that system for the first time.

"What we're trying to do is level the playing field for our students," Bramson said.

College Crusade also coaches its students on SAT test preparation in order to be ready for college. Advisers can help students increase their scores by up to 120 points in some cases, Bramson said, potentially offering greater educational opportunities.

"A student who can go from a 950 to an 1100 all of a sudden has a whole new set of options," he said.

English vocabulary is a significant challenge for many of College Crusade's students on the SATs, particularly for those who didn't grow up hearing the language in regular household use.

"If they're seeing [certain words] for the first time [during a test], it's a challenge," Bramson said, also noting that the organization plans to bring new communities into the fold.

College Crusade isn't just helping families with low incomes increase their lots in life. Growing the economy depends on a skilled, educated workforce, Bramson said.

"The only way we can do that is for people to get degrees," he said. ■

*'What we're trying to do is level the playing field for our students.'*

ANDREW BRAMSON, College Crusade of Rhode Island CEO and president



## EXCELLENCE AT A NONPROFIT



# An organization pumped to promote heart health

BY NANCY KIRSCH | Contributing Writer

**HEALTHY SMILES:** From left, Jamie Oriol, field support coordinator; Samantha Bowen, director of communications and intern Austin Prario discuss their tasks at the American Heart Association of Southern New England in Providence. PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

## AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHERN NEW ENGLAND

**HEART DISEASE AND STROKE** are among the nation's leading killers, according to 2017 data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and two of the deadliest diseases impacting Rhode Island.

With its ambitious mission, "Building healthier lives, free of cardiovascular diseases and stroke," the **American Heart Association of Southern New England** strives to build a culture of health. The organization prides itself in addressing childhood obesity, implementing CPR training for high school students, spreading stroke awareness and reducing tobacco use.

"Our drive to keep you and your family well is endless. At home, at school and at work, we are paving a path to help save lives," said Tara Comer, the organization's executive director. "Being [in] such a small market can be both a challenge and a win. While there are fewer funding opportunities, which is challenging, being in a smaller market enables the impact of our efforts to spread at a faster rate."

Under Comer's leadership, the organization exceeded its six-figure fundraising goal last year and raised more than \$1 million. Special events, contributions, CPR training fees and bequests are the organization's significant revenue sources, both locally and nationally.

The American Heart Association of Southern New England accomplished several initiatives thanks to collaborations with medical professionals, government officials, local organizations and others.

Recently, Mass. Gov. Charlie Baker acted to temporarily ban the sale of vaping

products in that state, while Gov. Gina M. Raimondo temporarily banned flavored e-cigarettes. The Healthy School Marketing legislation, which Raimondo signed into law, restricts school-based food advertising to foods and beverages meeting governmental-nutrition guidelines.

Rhode Island voters approved two bonds, totaling \$10 million, for additional bike paths and safe play/exercise spaces to be created.

In working with Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island, American Heart Association last year launched the Go Red for Women Heart 2 Heart Initiative. The program helps educate women about heart disease – the nation's leading cause of death among women – and gets local survivors to share their stories.

In 2018, 650 individuals attended the Go Red for Women, a luncheon held on Valentine's Day that focused on ending heart disease and stroke among women. The luncheon also featured keynote presenta-

tions, free health screenings and tips for the attendees to keep their hearts free of disease.

The organization also worked with Lifespan Corp. to offer heart-health information and education to Lifespan employees and the general public. The American Heart Association and Bryant University's Physician Assistant Program also educated students attending Blackstone Academy Charter School about choosing wisely regarding their health.

Seven research projects are currently underway in Rhode Island, with funding of more than \$1 million, at Brown University and Rhode Island Hospital, according to the organization.

New this year, CycleNation invited teams of cyclists to participate in high-energy stationary cycling sessions and an after-party on World Strike Day, held Oct. 29. Recognizing the benefits of youth education, American Heart Association has sponsored other events, including Jump Rope for Heart and Hoops for Health. There, nearly 7,500 students at 142 Rhode Island schools raised \$422,530 for research and education two years ago.

"The AHA ... engages employers to focus on extending the health and well-being of their employees and their families," said Renee Alosio, principal with Citrin Cooperman & Co. LLP and the local AHA organization's board chair.

Celebrating those workplaces that actively build cultures of health, the American Heart Association recognized Brown University, CVS Health Corp. and Southcoast Health System with the Gold Level award, and Westerly with the Bronze Level award.

"Under Tara Comer's exceptional leadership and team, we are leveraging creativity and collaboration. It is exciting ... that companies throughout our community have the opportunity to see the change and impact they are making," Alosio said. ■

'Our drive to *keep you and your family well* is endless.'

**TARA COMER**, American Heart Association of Southern New England executive director



## EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION AND LEARNING



# The Wolf School's model caters to 'complex learners'

BY SARAH PARSONS | Contributing Writer

**TEAM LEADER:** Anna Johnson, head of school at The Wolf School in East Providence, says a team of teachers and therapists is assigned to classrooms to help students.

PBN PHOTO/TRACY JENKINS

## THE WOLF SCHOOL

**WHEN BEN WAS A YOUNG CHILD**, his mother was told he would never be able to read. That was before he was enrolled as a second grader at **The Wolf School**, in East Providence. This fall, years later, Ben is in a graduate program in creative writing at **Columbia University**.

According to school leaders, these sorts of transformations are common at The Wolf School, a private K-8 special education school that caters to “complex learners.” The school’s mission is to change the trajectory of these students’ lives.

Students are high-functioning but have multiple diagnoses, making learning in traditional classrooms a challenge. Students may be on the autism spectrum, or have anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, executive function difficulties or speech and language processing issues.

“There’s no real one type of student or profile,” Head of School Anna Johnson said.

Complex learners, according to research, are more likely to be bullied, drop out of school, or fail in the workplace. Indeed, many of the students who transfer to Wolf have “pretty severe school trauma” after spending years in traditional schools, said Marcie Haines, who teaches second and third grade at Wolf.

“Where they would end up if they hadn’t come here, who knows,” Johnson said. “But the journey is changing, and the story is different from where they started once they get here.”

The school uses an immersion model.

Every classroom has a special education teacher, an occupational therapist, a speech therapist and teaching assistants to help students. The special education teacher guides the curriculum, and occupational and speech therapists embed their own goals within the lessons.

“Rather than send the kid down the hall for 30 minutes and then go back into the classroom, they’re getting a lot of intensive therapy in the classroom all the time,” said Johnson.

This model requires staff to take a team-based approach to education.

“You have to collaborate on every single goal together,” Haines said. “We have weekly meetings; we’re constantly in contact on email every night to make sure we’re all following through on the same things.”

The school’s data suggests the approach is working. All of Wolf School’s 160 graduates have gone on to high school; 83% of them have enrolled in college.

Demand for the school’s services has increased, as well. Since opening in 1999 with three students, The Wolf School now has 65 students from Rhode Island and Massachusetts in eight classrooms. Families have relocated from as far away as Florida, California and Pakistan to enroll their children.

Part of the school’s approach involves giving parents the tools they need to continue the students’ education at home. Staff members host monthly parent cafes, send out a weekly newsletter and call families weekly.

“We try to make sure there’s a lot of communication with families so they can reinforce the same things we’re talking about here,” Johnson said. “Without that piece, the students wouldn’t be as successful as they are.”

There’s also an effort to inform the larger community about complex learners. The Wolf School hosts a spring speakers series and an annual Complex Learners Conference, where prominent researchers discuss teaching and raising children with learning difficulties. The theme of this year’s conference is screen time and social media.

Like many schools, The Wolf School is grappling with how best to navigate social media’s influence on children. The issue is even more complicated at Wolf, since many students struggle to balance their emotions and navigate social norms. Administrators and staff implemented a digital citizen curriculum, hiring a part-time clinician to observe students in the classroom and having an open dialogue with parents and students about digital norms such as texting and Instagram.

Then again, overcoming challenges is just another day at The Wolf School.

“Wolf is a magical place. The culture, the climate, the positivity and hard work are really making a difference in the lives of these families and students,” Johnson said. ■

‘The culture, the climate, the positivity and hard work are *really making a difference.*’

ANNA JOHNSON, The Wolf School head of school



## EXCELLENCE IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

**MOLDING STAFF:** Employees assemble a cable carrier, part of the igus product line, at the plastics manufacturer in East Providence. The company regularly puts new hires through training for a specific product group or position.  
PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

## Investing in employees, training shapes success for plastics maker

BY MICHAEL J. DECICCO | Contributing Writer

### IGUS INC.

**IGUS INC. MOLDS ITS STAFF** as skillfully as it molds the engineered plastics it has sold worldwide for more than 30 years.

The manufacturer of engineered plastics focuses on four main product lines for a variety of industries the company says refine the idea of “motion plastics,” with innovations that include iglide self-lubricating bearings and drylin linear bearings and guides.

Its sales levels have climbed from \$106 million in 2016 to \$133.7 million in 2018, **igus Inc.** spokesperson Kayla Abbate said, because of its workforce philosophy. “It’s the investment in our training programs and our employees overall that makes the difference,” she said.

The headquarters and distribution center in the Rumford village of East Providence regularly puts its new employees through two-week to eight-week training programs.

As part of this effort, a brand-new program over the past two years has sent students just out of college to the East Providence headquarters for eight weeks of training, which includes taking them out on actual sales calls. As much of the East Providence office’s focus is sales, Abbate said, this gives new employees the chance to meet igus customers and find out what they want and need from igus products.

“It’s preparing the sales force, as they will be the company’s representative, the face of the company,” she said. “Growing

the sales force helps grow the company.”

At igus, she explained, “We only hire internally for higher positions. We always give an employee a chance to advance their career. This helps the company by ensuring staff know the company and its products. Knowledge that can’t be obtained from someone on the outside,” she said. “Our products are so technical; an employee has to be knowledgeable of and invested in the company.”

Longtime igus employee Nicole Lang’s own story echoes this.

“I started at igus in 1998 while attending Roger Williams University. I was eyeing a career in law and had goals to go to law school. I worked at igus part time. During the summer or on school vacations, I was able to put in as many hours as I wanted. Igus has always made me feel that school was the most important aspect of my life and work could come second.”

She said igus let her set her own schedule. She was able to do a full internship in the summer of 2001 at what was

then Edwards and Angell in Providence prior to attending law school.

“After my first year, I decided that I needed to work full time and continue my legal education in a part-time capacity. At that point, igus named me the customer service manager. This role taught me a lot about management and helped me with my time-management skills. I had the opportunity to attend multiple seminars, during this time, on management. ... During this time, I was continuously offered product training, increasing and developing my technical skills and product knowledge.”

In 2001, Lang graduated with an undergraduate degree and decided to still pursue her law career and attend law school. After discussions with igus, it was decided she was welcome to stay and even leave for internships when the opportunity presented itself.

She said during law school she was moved to inside sales work, even though igus did not know if the investment in her would pay off if she left for a law career.

“I was always welcomed into all trainings and had the opportunities to attend multiple seminars, as I had in my customer service roles,” she said. “After graduation, I decided that I really enjoyed igus and wasn’t so sure that I wanted to pursue a career in law but would still like the opportunity to use those skills. With some discussion, a new role was created for iglide product manager. With this role, I have had the opportunity to travel overseas. When in Germany, product managers worldwide are trained on new products and sharing experiences [and] ideas. It is an excellent environment to grow in.” ■

‘It’s the investment in our training programs and our employees overall that *makes the difference.*’

KAYLA ABBATE, igus spokesperson



## EXCELLENCE AT A WOMEN-OWNED BUSINESS



**A FITTING MOVE:** Denise Chakoian persevered after she was diagnosed with a life-altering illness to become Rhode Island's first Lagree license holder. PBN PHOTO/TRACY JENKINS

## Cancer didn't stop her from reshaping her company

BY JANINE WEISMAN | Contributing Writer

### CORE CYCLE.FITNESS.LAGREE STUDIO

**ON A TRIP** to southern California five years ago, Denise Chakoian, owner and president of CORE Center of Real Energy LLC, accompanied a friend to a workout in Huntington Beach and met the future of fitness. She will never forget her first Lagree session.

"My heart rate was pumping because I think I was working so hard to hold each move," the 46-year-old former dancer and fitness instructor recalled. "I had to really focus and concentrate."

A Lagree workout, based on the principles of Pilates with added strength and cardio exercises, has become Hollywood's hottest workout – favored by Kim Kardashian, Meghan Markle, Sofia Vergara and Chrissy Teigen.

Now Chakoian's **CORE Cycle.Fitness. Lagree Studio** on Providence's East Side is the only Lagree-licensed fitness studio in the state. It has eight Lagree Megaformer machines along with custom stationary bikes, treadmills and rowing machines. Her studio employs 22, including 14 group fitness instructors, five personal trainers and a nutritionist.

CORE is attracting men for boot camps, cycling and private training, a sign that a woman-owned fitness studio can offer workouts with broad appeal. Male clients were few when Chakoian operated a group fitness and personal training studio on East Avenue in Pawtucket and a Pilates studio on Governor Street in Providence before merging them into her 7,000-square-foot fitness

studio in Wayland Square last July. Now men represent 40% of her clients, Chakoian said.

While Chakoian won't disclose her investment to secure the exclusive Lagree license for the 02906 ZIP code – with its younger, affluent demographic – it's already paying off. The 100 new clients who signed up during the month of September was double what she originally projected.

Chakoian was way ahead of the curve in bringing Lagree Megaformer machines to Rhode Island. But rebranding her business required a huge leap of faith and Chakoian overcoming a major health crisis.

She was thinking about merging into one location but hadn't yet discussed it with anyone when she was diagnosed with stage 3 Hodgkin's lymphoma in February 2018. She had to start chemotherapy very quickly, while also seeking available space for her venture.

"It was a shock, but I think it just sort

of fueled a little bit of the fire," Chakoian said.

Chakoian disclosed her treatment in her first phone conversation with real estate developer David Corsetti, owner of the building at 229 Waterman St., Chakoian's sought-after location. The building houses several businesses, apartments and The Mare Rooftop restaurant.

"I basically told her she should worry about getting well," Corsetti recalled. "I told her that I wouldn't let someone else take it before I spoke with her."

They met again over the summer when Chakoian was halfway through her six-month treatment. Along with trying to maintain her weight, she kept up with her early-morning running group, putting in 4½ miles every other Tuesday before heading to her appointment at the Lifespan Cancer Institute at Rhode Island Hospital.

By the end of 2018, Chakoian had put down a deposit on the studio space and was well under way with her plan to rebuild, rebrand and triple the size of her business.

"She had this spirit. She's a winner. She doesn't quit," Corsetti added. "I told her this, 'I'm investing in you more than you're investing in my space.'"

Chakoian knows trends come and go. She introduced ballet-inspired barre workouts to Providence after starting her own business 14 years ago and saw how quickly other studios followed suit.

For now, she's positioned for continued growth. Asked if she might be eyeing another Rhode Island area with similar demographics to the East Side for a Lagree license, Chakoian mentions East Greenwich.

"I have thought about it," Chakoian said. "I am still thinking about it." ■

*'[Chakoian] had this spirit. She's a winner. She doesn't quit.'*

DAVID CORSETTI, real estate developer



## EXCELLENCE IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP



## Developing the formulas to spark clients' growth

BY ROB BORKOWSKI | Contributing Writer

**BRAINSTORMING:** GrowthLab's CEO and Managing Partner Dan Gertrudes, second from right, and President, Managing Partner and Chief Operating Officer Steven Byler, third from right, have a discussion with, from left, analysts Ben Marszalek and Talia Solomon, and Korey Cournoyer, GrowthLab's manager of strategic growth.

PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

### GROWTHLAB FINANCIAL SERVICES INC.

**EFFECTIVE TALK MAY NOT BE CHEAP**, but it requires follow-ups in action, a fact not lost on **GrowthLab Financial Services Inc.** CEO and Managing Partner Dan Gertrudes, and President, Managing Partner and Chief Operating Officer Steven Byler.

Since its founding five years ago, the company has assessed the financial situation of startups, developed the best growth plan for them, then pitched in on the execution.

Gertrudes left his sales job at Textron Inc. in 2012 to focus on startups and become an entrepreneur. Byler was a brand and marketing manager for Boston-based legal consulting firm Elysium Digital LLC. When they met about five years ago, Gertrudes and Byler realized they had a shared interest in building brands and businesses.

"So, we decided to, call it, join forces," Gertrudes said.

While they had expertise in businesses, Gertrudes and Byler realized the need for solid financial assessments to inform clients' strategies. GrowthLab subsequently acquired a 12-member Fall River accounting firm in 2015.

Now, not only did it blaze the surest path to the future, it was also able to get a good handle on every-day accounting for its clients to iron out challenges in the present.

GrowthLab's approach is more partnership than in-and-out contracting, Gertrudes said.

"We don't just parachute in," he said. Rather, the company applies its deep field of accounting, branding, marketing and strategy experts to carry out the advice offered and plans put in place.

"We have the team behind us to execute on that strategy," Gertrudes said.

"All of that is probably at a minimum four or five people on your team," Byler said.

When they're called in to begin a business's turnaround, "[Businesses have] got to the point where they know that they need some help," Byler said.

A core approach Gertrudes and Byler follow to help their clients grow is aligning sales teams with the company's values and making it worth their time. Too few people, Byler said, think about how their behavior affects their business.

"It comes back to, really, company goals and finance strategy," Gertrudes said.

Part of GrowthLab's success is the variety of work it provides people who might otherwise find themselves either in a corporate environment as one of several people in a single department, or in public accounting with a lot of regular but repetitive work.

Neither option provides an engaging relationship with the people benefiting from their work, Byler said. But GrowthLab does.

"[Our staffers] get to go really deep. They create intimate relationships with the customers," Byler said.

Gertrudes noted the firm hired seven new staffers between May and August. Employees, said John Isola, "growth hacker" at GrowthLab, are encouraged to volunteer in the community.

About a month ago, a group of GrowthLab employees participated in the fourth annual Boston Regatta for Entrepreneurship, which the company sponsored. Proceeds from the event went to Year Up, a one-year, intensive training program providing underserved young adults ages 18-24 with hands-on skills development, coursework eligible for college credit, corporate internships and support.

Such events both create community bonding and introduce the team to startups and small businesses that can benefit from GrowthLab's services, Isola said.

"We also like to promote these nonprofits' events, gathering a 'GrowthLab team' and attending," Isola said.

Year Up, National Alliance on Mental Illness Rhode Island, Bike Newport, Coggeshall Farm Museum and DesignxRI are among the nonprofits GrowthLab has assisted. Additionally, Gertrudes and Byler are each involved in the startup community outside of GrowthLab's client base.

Gertrudes is a mentor at the B-Lab program through Brown University. He and Byler have office hours at CIC Providence. Each have also been involved in Mass-Challenge Rhode Island, which connects entrepreneurs to resources and support in Rhode Island and regional opportunities in Boston.

Gertrudes said GrowthLab's aid quickly brings business owners around to the realization of the time investment they could use more effectively, "that they have spent on the business and not in business." ■

*'[GrowthLab staffers] create intimate relationships with the customers.'*

STEVEN BYLER, GrowthLab president, managing partner and chief operating officer



# EXCELLENCE AT A FAMILY-OWNED BUSINESS



**COMMON THREADS:**  
Longtime American Cord & Webbing Co. employees Joseph and Grace Fura monitor a weaving machine at the company's facility in Woonsocket.  
PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

## Close-knit workers integral to fabric of American Cord

BY MICHAEL J. DECICCO | Contributing Writer

### AMERICAN CORD & WEBBING CO.

**FROM HEAT-RESISTANT PLASTIC BUCKLES** for military equipment to backpacks and sleeping bags, **American Cord & Webbing Co.**, of Woonsocket, has the market cornered to an award-winning degree.

“Our position in the market is unique, as we are the only manufacturer of both the webbing [belts and straps], hardware [such as buckles] and sewings [such as backpacks] for a variety of industries,” said Jordan Krauss, the company manager.

Krauss primarily points to American Cord’s family-owned nature and workforce philosophy for its success. It starts with the company’s training. On their first day, new employees are introduced by human resources staff to personnel throughout the entire facility, from the engineers to the other trainees.

With this leg up on understanding how American Cord operates, the new workforce can develop and progress through the company, Krauss said, and can subsequently move up.

“Having a concentrated focus on workforce development has proven over and over to pay dividends to both ACW and its customers,” Krauss said. “We have a strong core of experienced employees [that] has been built up over the years. When young people join the company, we employ a mentorship and apprenticeship program. It really works wonders in fostering relationships between different generations of workers, nurturing cross-training and ultimately

maintaining ACW’s knowledge base that has continued to grow over many years.”

Krauss said the people American Cord hires take pride in their work. Many staffers are family members, who thusly have good reasons for working closely together, and staying committed to both each other and the company’s goals.

Employing knowledgeable, committed staff only helps to grow the company, Krauss said, sparking innovation because staff people know the company’s goals and its existing products.

Krauss estimates American Cord produces and sells millions of yards of webbing and a million buckles every year to the military and defense industries and other commercial applications. Military equipment, pool covers, sleeping bags and floatation devices are among the items the company offers to consumers.

Over the last five years, Krauss said, American Cord has grown nearly 20% by introducing new product lines such as an

Underwriters Laboratories-approved, heat-stabilized plastic line that’s less expensive, safer and weighs less.

The line developed a total of 20 other different military-approved products, such as plastic components for U.S. Army modular lightweight packs, standard-issue military backpacks, a rifleman set, a forest pack and the U.S. Marine Corps Main Pack. It is also made in conjunction with the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Systems Center in Natick, Mass., and the U.S. Department of Defense’s Defense Logistics Agency.

Max Krauss founded American Cord in 1917, and his grandson, Mark, is the company’s current owner. Mark Krauss’ sons, Jordan and Alex, are continuing the next generation of the company’s family ownership. Two years ago, American Cord celebrated its centennial anniversary.

Karen Frayne has worked at American Cord for 38 years and has nothing but praise for its workforce philosophy. Her first job, she said, was sewer on the factory floor while in high school when the plant was located in Lincoln. From there, she rose to office assistant in the order department – an area that she now leads.

Within that time, American Cord has expanded and changed its product lines. Those lines have been successful, she said, and she’s enjoyed learning about the company’s product lines as they apply to the end use of each.

American Cord has gone through changes and consolidations since Frayne started there, including moving operations to Woonsocket in 1990. But Frayne enjoys working for American Cord, she said. “It’s been great to see [its] growth,” she said.

What also impresses her is that right behind her in seniority are employees who have been there for approximately three decades. “That says something about working here too,” she said. ■

“We have a *strong core of experienced employees* [that] has been built up over the years.”

JORDAN KRAUSS, American Cord & Webbing Co. manager



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