

The New Establishment 2008

A new generation of business leaders, focusing on building a better Emerald Coast
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By Lori Hutzler Eckert and Christy Kearney
Photos by Scott Holstein

There is no denying that the Emerald Coast is growing and changing at a rapid rate. And, while we are benefiting from the best-laid plans of Okaloosa and Walton counties' founders, the area also is being molded by some new leaders among us.

Emerald Coast Magazine's 2008 selection of 'The New Establishment' includes 10 men and women who hail from across the country with diverse personal, professional and educational backgrounds. But what unites this generation of movers and shakers, all under the age of 40, is that they are clearly focused on the future. Members of the 2008 'New Establishment' are armed with problem-solving agendas, a desire to create a more unified Emerald Coast, and a passion for the unique people, places and things that make this area a place they are proud to call home.

A. Benjamin Gordon : The Legal Eagle

Shalimar native A. Benjamin Gordon, 33, soared to the top of his class while attending Washington & Lee University School of Law in Lexington, Va., and hasn't looked back. Gordon, a partner at ASG Litigation Group in Fort Walton Beach and one of Florida Trend magazine's '2007 Legal Elite Under the Age of 40,' is passionate about his profession and the community that his family has called home for generations.

How long have you lived on the Emerald Coast?

Most of my life, except for undergraduate and graduate school and the time I spent practicing law in Washington, D.C.

What's the best advice you have ever gotten?

My dad, the late Judge Ben Gordon, said, 'Try to be a doctor, but no matter what, don't be a lawyer.'

What role do you see yourself playing in the Emerald Coast's evolution?

The Emerald Coast faces complex political, social, environmental and legal issues that did not exist 20 years ago. I hope to help navigate these issues with the understanding of what the Emerald Coast was 20 years ago and what it can be in the future.

What is the Emerald Coast's strongest asset?

Emotionally, it's the people. Financially, beyond the military, it's the bayous, bays and Gulf. Nowhere is there a comparable natural resource that is so accessible to the community. Our area has the best of a vacation destination combined with the community and personal relationships of a small town.

Fast-forward 10 years:

Where are you, and what are you doing?

The same thing that I am doing now, only better. I don't see myself leaving the Emerald Coast. I've looked around and decided there is not a better place to live. So I'll be right here.

Given one week off from work, what would you do? I'd travel to Europe. I haven't been back since I was in college. It'd be nice to do it again without deciding whether I should use the money in my pocket for the train or to eat.

What is something about you that would surprise most people?

Ninety percent of what I say is meant to be funny. Since no one ever laughs, I assume they would be surprised by that.

Nancy Stanley : The Branding Boss

At 28, Nancy Stanley may be the youngest of Emerald Coast Magazine's 2008 'New

Establishment's group, but she is no novice when it comes to her job. Stanley has held the position of marketing and communications manager for the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa for nearly five years. The Hattiesburg, Miss., native and Mississippi State University graduate plays a leading role in branding one of the Emerald Coast's most notable resort hotels.

What are your job responsibilities?

I provide the direction and guidance for all marketing efforts for the hotel, Seagar's restaurant and Serenity by the sea Spa.

Who is your mentor and why?

Jimmy Abraham, executive director of Mississippi State University's alumni association, who I met when I was part of the college's recruiting team. He is the ideal example of a leader who has the ability to motivate. It has been seven years since I graduated, and I still get letters and e-mails with words of encouragement from him.

What is the Emerald Coast's strongest asset?

The business community has an open door here. Sometimes, you don't feel the pressure of direct competition because we are all working together for a common goal with tourism. You realize you are part of a bigger team when you work on the Emerald Coast.

What about your job brings you satisfaction?

I love so many things about my job. I consider myself very lucky to drive onto this beautiful resort every morning and promote this premier hotel. My job gives me an opportunity to meet so many people. I couldn't imagine being anywhere else right now. I feel lucky and blessed.

What's your dream job?

To be quite honest, it would be to own a stained glass store. I love being a marketing professional, but my dream job would be to work for myself.

What's your passion?

I play the piano – not on a competitive level anymore, but I play for my friends and family.

What's your personal challenge?

Balancing the efforts of raising a family and maintaining my career is difficult at this point.

Given one week off from work, what would you do?

(Laughs.) I can't even picture that!

Tracy Louthain : The Communicator

Tracy Louthain isn't afraid to speak up, especially when it comes to promoting the Beaches of South Walton. Louthain, 35, a native of Tampa, is the award-winning director of public relations and visitor services for the Beaches of South Walton Tourist Development Council. Among her responsibilities, the Florida State University graduate serves as the organization's spokeswoman, delivering the Beaches of South Walton message through the media in what she calls "the most amazing job in the world."

What brought you to the Emerald Coast, and what keeps you here?

I came here for the job two and a half years ago. Prior to moving here, I actually represented the destination while working at Edelman, a global public relations firm in Atlanta. And what doesn't keep me here? I love it here.

What's the best advice you have ever gotten, and who gave it to you?

The advice that goes through my head the most: My father always tells me, "What have you done for me lately?" In other words, I can't rest on my laurels.

What role do you see yourself playing in the Emerald Coast's evolution?

I have a lot to offer in this area through my job. One of the big things that I am going to do is introduce this area to new

markets and visitors.

What is the Emerald Coast's strongest asset?

Our sugar-white sand beaches – you won't find them anywhere else in the nation. And with the opening of the Panama City-Bay County International Airport, so many more people will have access to this destination. It is going to open the Emerald Coast up to national and international travelers.

What about your job brings you satisfaction?

I take pride in promoting an area I love and believe in.

What's your passion?

My daughter, Reese, who is 4 years old.

Movies or books?

My favorite movie is “Pretty in Pink.” And I love the soundtrack too.

Are you on the go 24-7, or are you a homebody?

Anyone who knows me will say I am on the go.

What's your dream job?

I have it – I really do. When I was at Edelman, I knew this was my dream job.

Adam Shiland : The Producer

Event producer and small-business owner Adam Shiland, 28, is in the profession of creating experiences. A graduate of Emerson College in Boston, he has an impressive and diverse résumé, including work ranging from the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics and NBC's “The West Wing” to event management for The Village of Baytowne Wharf and Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort. After four years staging events at the Village, Shiland, with business partner Abby Jordison, launched asquared events Inc., an event marketing, consulting and production firm based in Santa Rosa Beach.

What brought you to the Emerald Coast, and what keeps you here?

My first job at The Village of Baytowne Wharf in May 2002. The relationships I have built keep me in this magnificent locale. The growth in the market has opened so many opportunities for asquared events.

What one quality do you most admire in a leader?

Honesty, a willingness to take responsibility, and someone who will not ask their employees to execute a task that they wouldn't do themselves.

What about your job brings you satisfaction?

I am currently living the American dream. Not only do I own my own business, but I am working in a field that I truly love. I am able to wake up each morning and be excited each day about the possibilities that await me.

What's your passion?

Alabama football. Roll Tide!

What do you do when you are not working?

How weird would it be if I said I like to attend events? Strange, maybe, but I enjoy seeing what other people can create. I am also an avid runner, food junkie and movie- and concert-goer.

Are you on the go 24-7, or are you a homebody?

While asquared events keeps me going just about 24-7, during those few precious moments away from work, I am very much a homebody.

Given a week off from work, what would you do?

It has been so long since I have taken a real vacation that I would have trouble deciding between visiting friends in Boston, New York and Los Angeles or traveling somewhere to be out of cell phone service, without Internet connection and with a few good movies.

Sarah Schreifer : The Chef

Sarah Schreifer has a head for business and a heart for sharing fine food, so when the Notre Dame graduate and former financial industry executive decided to mix her two passions, she cooked up Sarah K’s Gourmet in Destin. Schreifer, 30, opened the gourmet-foods-to-go store in 2005 and has since developed a strong local and tourist clientele with her strong work ethic, not to mention thousands of crab cakes.

What brought you to the Emerald Coast, and what keeps you here?

My family moved here in 1999, and I followed two and a half years ago. I came here with a goal: I saw there was an opportunity for a business like this here, and I recognized that Destin cultivates the entrepreneurial spirit.

What’s the biggest challenge the Emerald Coast is currently facing, and how can it be resolved?

We must consider the best way to allow for growth but keep our values, our sense of community, in tact. I think a lot of greed was shown with the real estate market growth a couple of years ago, and we need to learn from that.

What about your job brings you satisfaction?

I enjoy so much about my job, but it is a great feeling to know that people trust me to provide them with a meal. I feel like I am able to give time back to families; that I am making it a little easier for someone each and every day.

Fast-forward 10 years: Where are you, and what are you doing?

Hopefully, I will not still be mopping the floors and taking out the trash! I would like to expand Sarah K’s and possibly franchise my business.

What’s your dream job?

I have it; I am living it.

What’s your passion?

To get up every day and make a difference. I enjoy feeling a sense of accomplishment every day.

What’s your personal challenge?

In business, I want people who work for me to like me. I struggle with that, I really do.

What is something about you that would surprise most people?

The second day of culinary school, I caught my hair on fire. It didn’t just singe – the instructor actually had to put my hair out.

Craige Hoover : The Man Behind the Curtain

Craige Hoover set the stage for his career on the Emerald Coast at an early age. In 1999, when Hoover, a native of Columbia, Tenn., was 22 and living in San Francisco, he realized that the need for live theater in Seaside, a favorite childhood vacation spot, was his personal and professional opportunity knocking. Now 32, Hoover is executive director of the Seaside Repertory Theater, which he founded in 2001. The nationally recognized theater offers performances year-round and has entertained more than 150,000 people.

What are your main job responsibilities?

I focus on the relentless pursuit of the organization’s mission, which is to bring high-quality professional theater to the Emerald Coast.

What one quality do you most admire in a leader?

A leader is someone who is able to bring the best out of people, making them even better than they thought they could be.

What's the best advice you have ever gotten?
My mom always told me to be honest with everyone.

What's the biggest challenge the Emerald Coast is currently facing, and how can it be resolved?
I think the big problem is building a middle class and a group of young professionals, and attracting those people to our area. And if I could solve this problem, I would be running for office!

What role do you see yourself playing in the Emerald Coast's evolution?
I hope that the arts can serve as sort of a facilitator for unification. The arts can bring people together; it's a catalyst for fellowship.

What about your job brings you satisfaction?
I love a new challenge, and the great thing about theater is at the end of a show, you tear it down and you start over. You learn from your mistakes, and you have a brand new set of challenges.

Movies or books?
Movies – and my favorite movie has yet to be made.

What do you do when you are not working?
I love to travel. I like to be on a plane going somewhere new, trying to figure out a different culture and what makes other people tick.

Christopher Renteria : The Restaurateur

The first time Christopher Renteria heard of the Emerald Coast was last spring, when he was presented with the position of operational partner for the soon-to-be-opened Fleming's Prime Steak House & Wine Bar at Grand Boulevard. After one visit, Renteria, 34, a native of San Antonio, Texas, who has been with the Fleming's company for five years, says he was "blown away" by the opportunity and the area.

What's the best advice you have ever gotten?
My Fleming's joint-venture partner in the Southwest, Tom Jenkins, taught me to stay in the problem long enough to figure it out.

What is the Emerald Coast's strongest asset?
I'd have to say that the area's strengths are its visionaries. In the short time I have been here, I have been able to tap into groups of people who are serious about transforming the Emerald Coast. Everyone is taking opportunity by the teeth, and they are actually building this area. I feel like I have a chance to be an integral part of evolving Northwest Florida.

What about your job brings you satisfaction?
It brings me pleasure when someone walks out of Fleming's and they feel they have been taken care of – that it wasn't just dinner, it was an experience.

Fast-forward 10 years: Where are you, and what are you doing?
I'm still with Fleming's, enjoying the fruits of everyone's labor in building this business and this town. It will be a time to take a step back and see how all the area resorts are enjoying a synergy, which will be key to our success.

What's your passion?
I have a passion for wine – and experiencing how wine is life, because there are so many parallels.

What's your personal challenge?

I need to refocus and enjoy my progress and accomplishments before moving on. I have a tendency to work full speed all the time – I always want to improve it and be better.

What do you do when you are not working?

I spend time with Max, my 1-year-old, and my wife, Lacey, experiencing all the Emerald Coast has to offer. I am just amazed I see something new every day, and I say, "Wow, I live here!" It's awesome.

Callie Barker : The Beautifier

When it comes to her career, Callie Barker doesn't mind getting her hands dirty. Barker, 32, is owner and president of Callie & Co., a landscape architecture firm she opened in Destin in 2003. The Montgomery, Ala., native and Louisiana State University graduate also is first lady of Destin.

What are your current job responsibilities?

I create landscape plans for projects from single-family homes to large-scale subdivisions. I love what I do because I am not affecting just one person, I am affecting many people, as well as the environment.

How long have you lived on the Emerald Coast?

I've lived here since 1999. I kind of grew up here, during summer vacations. And at 14 years old, I got my first job on the Emerald Coast, pumping gas on the docks at Marina Point. I was outside and the work was fun.

What role do you see yourself playing in the Emerald Coast's evolution?

Hopefully, by doing work that allows me to create a better standard of living through implementing sustainable designs that really impact the quality of life on the Emerald Coast.

What's the biggest challenge you think the Emerald Coast is currently facing, and how can it be resolved?

We have been blessed with the most beautiful natural resources, but they are being damaged by a fundamental lack of respect. It drives me nuts! We need a change in our culture that takes into account this gift that we have been given.

What's your passion?

I love to read; I love art; I like anything that I can do with my hands. I love salvage shopping – taking something really old and making it nice again.

What's your personal challenge?

I just don't have enough time to get everything done. I want to do too much. There are just so many things that I love to do. I'm not much of a procrastinator. I am just slow.

What do you do when you are not working?

Play with our dogs, Mollie and Marlee, doing anything outside, and I like to read. We are also renovating a house – I am the cleanup crew. I am not good at the actual construction part, but I point and direct very well!

Steve Akers : The Community Banker

Working with people is what makes the bank for Steve Akers, the 36-year-old senior vice president of Parish National Bank in Destin. A self-described "people person," the Alabama native and University of Alabama graduate already has made his mark on the Emerald Coast through his involvement in community projects such as United Way, Leadership Okaloosa, the Destin Seafood Festival and the revitalization of downtown Fort Walton Beach.

What are your main job responsibilities?

Commercial lending.

What one quality do you most admire in a leader?

Never giving up on winning, whatever that may be in relation to what you are trying to accomplish. Resilience.

Who is your mentor?

Many of them have been bankers, including my dad, who was a banker for more than 30 years – 30 of those with the same bank. Loyalty is also something you have to admire.

What’s the best advice you have ever gotten?

I have received a lot of good advice, most of which I wish I had taken. In sales, you could go with: “You never sell a deal more than once. Once it is sold, shut up.”

Fast-forward 10 years: Where are you, and what are you doing?

I suspect I am in sales in some capacity. Probably banking; it’s in my blood. Hopefully, I will still be in Destin.

What’s your dream job?

Professional athlete; however, I think I missed that one. (Laughs.) Next would be a musician; however, I don’t play an instrument. Doesn’t look hopeful!

What’s your passion?

Music, Alabama football, food, hunting, fishing, watching any major sporting event.

What’s your personal challenge?

My wife and assistant would say organization.

What do you do when you are not working?

I hang with my family and cook or go out with my friends; I watch football and play sports every now and then.

Movies or books?

Smart people would say books, but I am really a movie person.

Given one week off from work, what would you do?

Travel. One of my mentors told me that the world is a book. If you don’t travel, it would be like reading one page.

Billie Gaffrey : The Creative Spirit

For self-taught artist Billie Gaffrey, 37, the line between life and art is a thin one. The Fort Walton Beach native continues to set the tone of the thriving art scene in Northwest Florida. In 1992, with her husband, Justin, she opened Gaffrey Art Gallery in Blue Mountain Beach to showcase and sell her colorful, spirited pieces. The award-winning artist participates in juried art shows throughout the nation, and her work often graces posters for events such as Via Colori, the Italian street painting festival she organizes in Seaside each fall.

What brought you to the Emerald Coast, and what keeps you here?

Mom and Dad fell in love here 40 years ago. What keep me here are, of course, family, friends, the beautiful beaches and my children’s education. Once they are finished with school, Justin and I are going to see the world.

What one quality do you most admire in a leader?

To be yourself, tell the truth, work really hard and still make time for your family.

Who is your mentor?

Local artist Eileen West – she is my “art mom.”

What’s the biggest challenge you think the Emerald Coast is currently facing, and how can it be resolved?

It's a challenge to drive to town in the busy months, but if it wasn't for all our visitors, a lot of people would not have jobs. Pretty much, I think we are doing fine. This is growth.

What is the Emerald Coast's strongest asset?

The small-town attitude.

What about your job brings you satisfaction?

I'm doing what I've wanted to do since childhood, and being an artist allows me to spend time with my children.

What's your personal challenge?

To be healthy.

Are you on the go 24-7, or are you a homebody?

I go in spurts. My home (which serves double duty as the Gaffrey Art Gallery) is a busy place, so I try to hide as much as possible.

Given one week off from work, what would you do?

I would go skiing, surfing, fishing or camping with the kids or to New York without the kids.

What is something about you that would surprise most people?

I want to write a book.