



FUTURE

10

Meet the young leaders of Brunswick County.

BY MELISSA SLAVEN WARREN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MEGAN DEITZ



The future of any community relies on the individual and collective leadership of its citizens to make their communities work for everybody.

Brunswick County is without a doubt well-supplied with an impressive bench of talented leaders who are working to build a strong foundation for growth and opportunity for the next generation of Brunswick County.

Eleven years ago, Brunswick County Chamber of Commerce and *South Brunswick Magazine* first partnered to introduce the Future 10 Under 40, a group of community-minded and enthusiastic young professionals in Brunswick County who are enthusiastically a part of their county and who live up to the chamber's motto of Building Community and Supporting Business.

Again, we are bringing together a new group of Future 10 leaders for 2023. We invited coworkers, supervisors, employees, clients, business owners, friends and family to nominate outstanding young men and women who are under the age of 40 and who have a demonstrated commitment to excellence in their personal and professional

lives. Who are these remarkable leaders? They are teachers, healthcare professionals, entrepreneurs, role models, business owners, public servants and other professionals eager to use their passions to inspire and lead the community.

This year's professionals are helping to shape Brunswick County's future. They have each individually made a difference in their industries whether that is through their leadership skills or their participation in civic organizations, nonprofits and volunteer work. They all have one thing in common: They are passionate about Brunswick County, and they all are making a positive impact here. In this issue, you will read their stories and come to see that they are all key players in the present and future of Brunswick County.

Here are your 2023 Future 10 Under 40 Leaders of Brunswick County.



BILL McHUGH

Councilmember, Town of Leland

Age 38

For Bill McHugh, doing things that really matter is a priority. As an attorney and contract manager for PPD, Part of Thermo Fisher Scientific, he has worked on several drugs and vaccines that have had a positive impact on the world. And as a councilmember for the Town of Leland, “being able to help shape the future of my community is very important to me,” he says.

From an early age, McHugh thought he wanted to be involved in politics. He earned a bachelor’s degree in political science and social science before graduating from St. Thomas University School of Law in Miami Gardens.

“I prepared myself from a skillset level and an education level to enter the political arena,” he says. “I thought our politicians represented the best of us. I saw these men and women who were veterans, war heroes and Rhodes scholars. I thought that was what you were supposed to aspire to be. But as I got older, I realized that a lot of these people were deeply flawed, and I watched the political discourse in America just degenerate into something really ugly and decided I wanted nothing to do with this.”

But then something changed.

One day he caught himself wishing that “the people who were prepared for this, who were ready for this, who understood this, who wanted to conduct themselves with dignity and service would just get some skin in the game and run.” He realized that he was one of those people sitting on the sidelines. “So, I got some skin in the game, and I ran.”

As a councilmember McHugh prides himself on two things: doing what he says and always being available. He shows up whenever he is invited to attend an event and is always ready to answer the hard questions. In one of the fastest-growing areas in the state, there are challenges and concerns that require difficult and complex decisions. McHugh’s personable and professional approach to local politics has helped him gain the people of Leland’s confidence.

McHugh says being recognized by the community as one of Brunswick County’s Future 10 is an honor and a humbling experience.

“I put a lot of work into serving my community, and to know people think that I would be deserving of it really means a lot to me and it motivates me to continue doing what I’m doing,” he says.

McHugh works with many of the local nonprofit and veteran organizations in his capacity as a councilmember. He is also on the executive board for the BSA Cape Fear Council and a member of the North Carolina Coastal Federation and Cape Fear River Watch.

When he is not working, McHugh and his wife, Danielle, are busy being first-time parents to their baby daughter, Riley.

CHRISTINA FULFORD

*Owner, General Contractor of
Fulford Construction Group*

Age 33

Only four percent of general contractors in North Carolina are women. Christina Fulford is proud to be a part of that statistic and hopes that her Future 10 recognition, which she considers “a privilege and a blessing,” will inspire other young girls and women to think about a career in construction.

Fulford’s career in construction began when she and her husband, Justin, who owns Fulford Heating and Cooling, decided to build some spec homes on a few pieces of property they owned. She got her general contractor’s license and worked on these few homes. Then, she started getting referrals.

“It wasn’t supposed to turn into a business, but I kept getting referrals,” Fulford says.

That is when Fulford Construction Group was formed. At this writing, she had 12 projects going on at one time across three different counties.

When she earned a bachelor’s degree in business with a minor in Spanish from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Fulford had no idea that both degrees would serve her well in this industry.

“Some of my trades speak Spanish so I’m able to make them feel more comfortable by speaking their language,” she says.

As the owner, Fulford runs the show, but she says she has an amazing team of sub-contractors behind her.

“I’m just blessed and excited that I get to work with people that I enjoy doing life with,” she says.

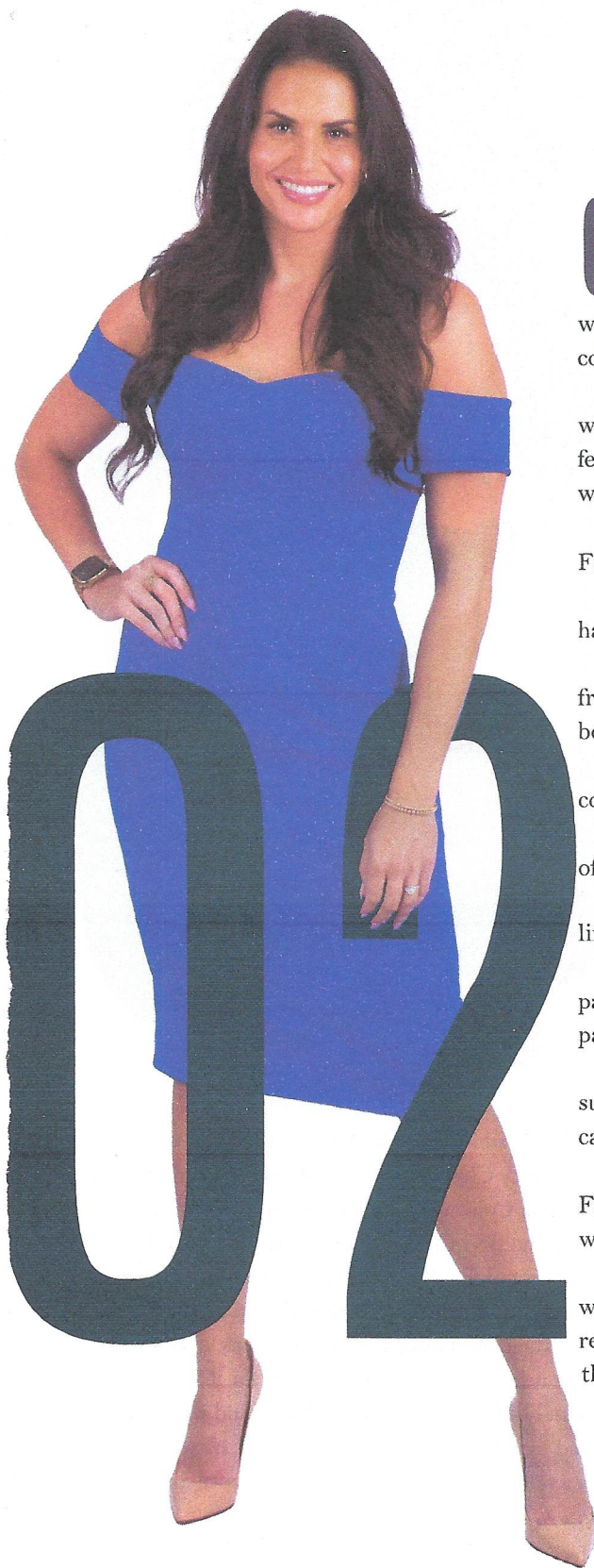
When it comes to her day-to-day, there are the must-dos — a stack of paperwork, phone calls and budget preparations. And then there is her favorite part: seeing the homeowner’s vision come to life.

“On my site visit days, I check on things and meet my contractors to make sure they get their questions answered and have everything they need so we can bring the dream to fruition,” Fulford says.

On the continuous word-of-mouth referrals for her construction company, Fulford credits her reputation as a good general contractor who keeps her word.

“I hear too many stories from people who have had unfortunate experiences with contractors,” she says. “I want to call on contractors to be better and respond to their clients. If you can’t take a job, let them know. Just don’t ignore them.”

Ideally, this mom of four, including three daughters, would also like to inspire women to “go against the grain and do something that might be out of their comfort zone” whether it is contracting or opening their own business: “As women, we can do anything we put our minds to!”



HEATHER MADDOX

*Chief Operations Officer, National
Property Inspections*

Age 36

I knew eventually that I would join forces with my parents in their business, National Property Inspections (NPI), or take over it completely one day," Heather Maddox says. "I just didn't know it would happen sooner than later."

In 2017 Maddox left her job in the medical field and started answering phones and setting appointments at NPI. She quickly learned the business inside and out, and after a short two-and-a-half-years, she is now the chief operations officer, overseeing both of the company's offices in North Carolina and South Carolina. She and her husband, Bruce, along with her parents, are now joint owners of the company.

With Maddox's outgoing and pleasant personality, she is often the face of the business, attending events and networking with area Realtors, mortgage professionals and homebuyers.

"What I like best about my job is meeting new people," she says. "I'm definitely a people person. I'm passionate about helping companies in the industry with referrals to grow their businesses and helping homebuyers make informed decisions when it comes to their forever homes."

Under Maddox's leadership, she has worked to grow NPI into a first-rate, highly respected commercial and residential inspection service provider in the coastal Carolinas.

"I work hard to ensure that we as a team are successful and a reputable resource in the community," Maddox says.

Maddox's commitment to the community extends far beyond her professional leadership. She gives her time unselfishly to multiple organizations including Habit for Humanity, Meals on Wheels and local food banks across Brunswick County. Most recently, she became heavily involved with the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

"I had the opportunity to work with the Cape Fear Realtors Association to grant a wish to a young girl with cancer to redo her bedroom," Maddox says. "After that, I was hooked. I got connected with a Make-A-Wish rep, and I have since gone to Raleigh several times for training."



Additionally, Maddox is an ambassador for the Brunswick County Chamber of Commerce, a member of the Georgetown and Conway chambers of commerce and a visitor host of the BNI Coastal North Carolina Chapter.

On being selected for this year's Future 10, Maddox says, "It's heartwarming. Every day I just wake up and do the best I can for the community and my business, and it's awesome that other people recognized me for it."

Her personal life is just as fulfilling. She and Bruce have been married for 13 years and are parents to 16-year-old Charlie. As a family, they enjoy off-roading in their Jeep and boating.

SHANTA JOHNSON

*Kindergarten Teacher,
Southeastern Christian Academy*

Age 39

At the age of five I knew I would become a teacher,” Shanta Johnson says. “I would come home from school, shut the door to my room, line up my stuffed animals, and I would teach them everything I had learned that day.”

Johnson’s passion for teaching was inspired by her teachers who made learning fun and creative, something that she strives for in her class. She enjoys teaching through themes, like the seasons.

“In fall, I love being able to take them on nature walks and scavenger hunts and incorporating things like pumpkins and apples into our lessons,” she says.

As a singer, Johnson also teaches through songs to help students remember material more easily. Affectionately called Mrs. J by her students, she has been teaching for nearly 15 years in several different capacities. After graduating in 2011 from the University of North Carolina Wilmington—Watson School of Education she started a summer preschool camp called Thee Education Station, a Christian-based preschool program that served children 18 months to 7 years old. The camp offered parents a productive and creative outlet for their children during the summer.

Her gift for teaching comes from her experience as a student and from her mother’s inspiration. Her mother is recently-retired art teacher with Brunswick County Schools and is now the middle and high school art teacher at Southeastern Christian Academy.

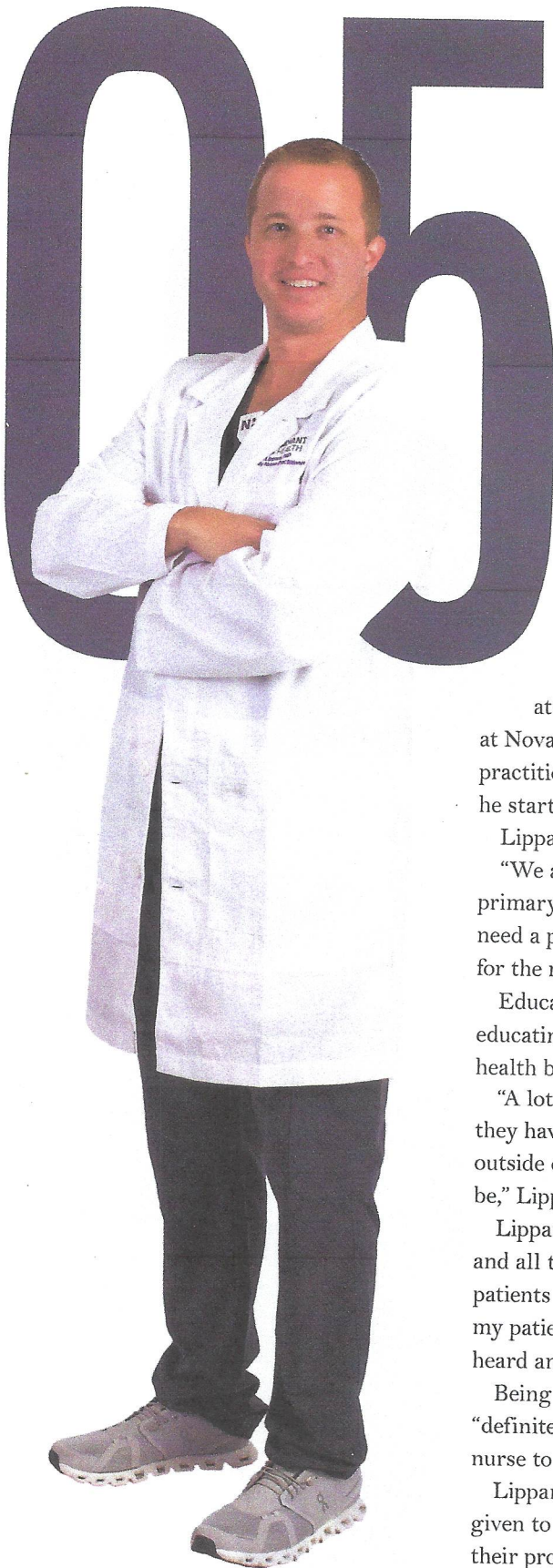
“I’ve always seen teachers in a great light, and I just want to pay it forward and hope that I become part of my own students’ memory banks one day,” Johnson says.

On being part of this year’s Future 10, Johnson says, “Teaching is something I do because I love watching those light bulbs go off when my students grasp a concept, but being recognized and given an opportunity to share some things about myself means a lot.”

In addition to teaching, Johnson is a singer and choir director. She is a member of two local gospel groups including Purple Reign, a trio, and Voice of Adonai, a quartet. She also directs children’s choir at her church, Eastside Fellowship, as well as the Kidz-N-Harmony choir at Embracing Christ Fellowship Church.

Johnson is very focused on her family when she is not busy caring for her students. She is a loving wife to husband, Tony, and devoted mother to her two children, 9-year-old Wesley, and 2-year-old Olivia, both of whom enjoy listening to and learning music.





ROSS LIPPARD

*Family Nurse Practitioner, Novant Health
Family Internal Medicine*

Age 29

Before heading off to college at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC), Ross Lippard was working as a certified nursing assistant (CNA) at a nursing home while he was still in high school. At UNCC, he earned a B.S. in kinesiology and exercise science with his original goal of becoming a physical therapist. However, he found that he “really enjoyed the hands-on, bedside experience that nursing offered.”

After graduating from UNCC in 2016, he interned in the Cardiopulmonary Rehab at Novant Health Rowan Medical Center and worked as a CNA at Novant Health Matthews Medical Center while also attending nursing school. In 2019 he moved to Brunswick County and started at Novant as a nurse. He finished his bachelor’s in nursing and completed nurse practitioner school — all while working full-time during COVID-19. In July 2023 he started his new position as a family nurse practitioner.

Lippard sees his role as a primary care provider as unique.

“We are the gatekeepers of healthcare really,” he says. “Patients come through primary care after a hospital visit and they come back to primary care before they need a procedure done. If they have an issue they’re worried about, we can handle it for the most part until we need a specialist involved.”

Education is a big component of Lippard’s day-to-day responsibilities, as in educating each patient on what they can do on an individual basis to make their health better.

“A lot of my patients have chronic conditions like diabetes or hypertension, or they haven’t had healthcare in over a decade, so it comes down to what they can do outside of the doctor’s office, from a daily perspective to be the healthiest they can be,” Lippard says. “That’s why education is so important.”

Lippard’s commitment to education and his dedication to his career in healthcare and all that he has accomplished at the age of 29 speaks to his devotion to his patients and community. The impact he would like to make “in this county and for my patients is to always go above and beyond to make my patients’ voices feel heard and give them the most quality of life they deserve,” he says.

Being recognized this year as part of the Future 10 class is something he says he “definitely didn’t expect, but it comes at a unique time as I just transitioned from nurse to nurse practitioner, so it’s very cool.”

Lippard has also been the recipient of the prestigious Daisy Award, which is given to nurses who have gone above and beyond in service to their patients and their profession.

In his personal life, Lippard is also gratified. He and his wife, Paige, whom he met in college, love spending time with their children Madi and Alden.

RYAN HILL

*Business Development Coordinator,
FOCUS Broadband*

Age 33

With Brunswick County ranking once again as the fastest-growing county in the state, Ryan Hill has his work cut out for him. He is the liaison between FOCUS Broadband and the building community.

"I make sure all of our services are properly distributed and on time for new and existing communities," Hill says. "I work on getting contracts with builders and make sure residents have the correct service." With the company's expansion into 10 counties, Hill says he has "a lot of ground to cover."

A native of Brunswick County, Hill grew up in Shallotte. After graduating from West Brunswick High School, he attended the U.S. Naval Academy, where he played football. He earned his bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and an MBA from Western Governors University.

His talent and drive have contributed to making him an integral employee at FOCUS Broadband, where he continues to offer new ideas and ways to approach business practices, making him a leader in his field.

Both personally and professionally, Hill is invested in Brunswick County and in making it a better place for young families. He volunteers his time by providing private baseball lessons and training for children in the county. Hill is also an active member of his church, where he assists with youth activities and church ministries including the Kids Own Worship Team.

"I really would like to inspire the younger generation," he says. "Sometimes I see that my own generation gets a bad reputation for not working hard and putting in the effort. I want to change that narrative. That's why I like working with young kids and put all my accomplishments out there, not for bragging reasons, but because I want to show them that they can be productive members of society; as long as they work hard and stay true to their faith and good things will come to them."

The Future 10 recognition "is an honor" Hill says. "First of all, I've worked really hard in this role, so it's a blessing to see all the hard work be recognized."

In his downtime, Hill spends time with his wife, Kristen, and two children, 4-year-old daughter Charlee and 2-year-old son James. They can usually be found at the beach or at Carowinds.



ZACHARY HEWETT

Finance Director, Village of Bald Head Island

Age 37



When he was a student at West Brunswick High School, Zachary Hewett was one of those gifted musicians who could play multiple instruments — trumpet, piano and baritone horn. In fact, he got a music scholarship to Coastal Carolina University in Conway, South Carolina.

“I realized that I loved playing music, but it just wasn’t my passion,” Hewett says. “I knew I did not want to teach music as a career. I wanted to explore other things.”

That is when Hewett transferred to East Carolina University and immersed himself in finance, economics and business communications courses. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Economics, a Master of Business Administration and a Certificate in Management Information Systems, all from ECU.

After graduate school, Hewett got his start as a finance officer at a regional library system in Washington, North Carolina. From there, he held both the finance director and city manager positions for Randleman, North Carolina. This allowed him to take a more direct role in helping community members — and not only from a financial side, but also a more customer service and face-to-face role with the public. He knew public service was his calling.

But his deep family roots in Brunswick County were calling him back. Both of his parents are public servants and Brunswick County natives. So, in July 2020, he accepted the finance director position for the Village of Bald Head Island.

A day in the life of a public servant is never the same, and Hewett likes it that way. He may be responsible for overseeing all the financial aspects of the Village, but at the end of the day, what he does directly benefits the residents, visitors and the business community of Bald Head Island.

“It’s a rewarding job, being a public servant,” he says.

Being named as part of this year’s Future 10 means a lot to Hewett.

“I take pride in what I give back to the community, and everything I do is in the best interest of Brunswick County, so it means a lot to be recognized for my efforts,” he says.

But this is not his first recognition for his success as he was part of the 2022 class of East Carolina University’s 40 Under Forty.

Away from the office, Hewett spends time with his wife, Brittany, their daughter Brooklynne, and their goldendoodles, Clover and Arlow. He coaches his daughter’s softball team, and when he can “convince the girls to attend an East Carolina football game,” they head to Greenville. He also serves on the Board of Trustees of Brunswick Community College, as treasurer of Town Creek Dixie Youth, Inc., and as secretary/treasurer of the North Carolina Government Finance Officer’s Association.

LAUREN BOROWSKI

*Founder of Blondie's Boutique, LLC
and Band Director at Shallotte
Middle School*

Age 38

For Lauren Borowski leading and inspiring nearly 150 band students at Shallotte Middle School is a very rewarding vocation, but turning a hobby into a business has also become a fulfilling and creative opportunity.

For 18 years Borowski has been an educator, with the last 16 spent teaching at Shallotte Middle. She never thought about starting her own business. But the seeds of her entrepreneurial journey were planted in 2021 when her husband, Jeremy, bought her a Cricut. It's a smart, app-based cutting machine that is used to design and personalize clothing, totes and a variety of everyday items.

"I was making things for fun, some kids' shirts, and then people started asking me to make things for them," Borowski says.

Once the number of orders increased, she purchased new equipment, including a commercial direct-to-film printer to handle the volume. That's when Blondie's Boutique, LLC was born.

Blondie's Boutique (the moniker comes from Borowski's childhood nickname) is a small, family-run custom apparel shop that designs and creates t-shirts, hats, hoodies, polos and much more based on the client's vision.

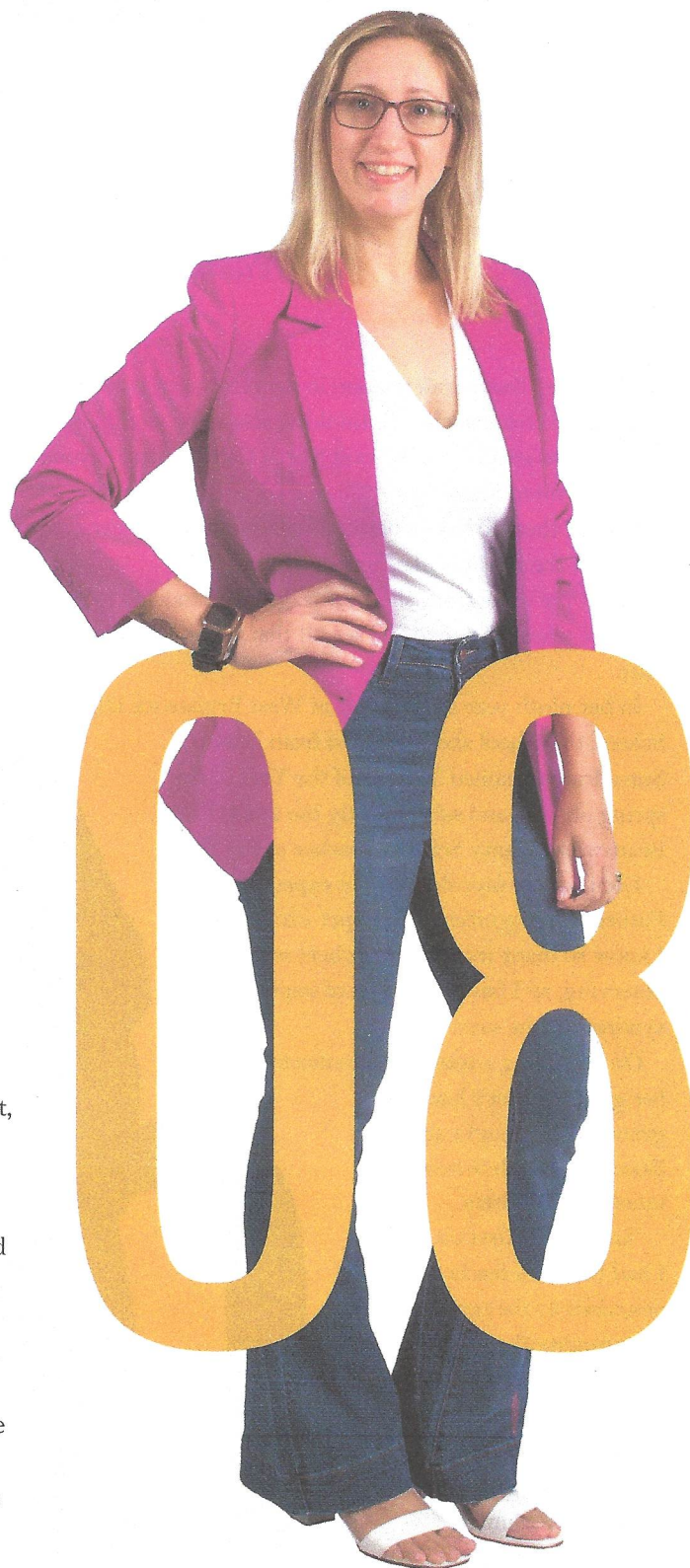
Her determination as a business owner is something that she hopes inspires her students.

"When I first started Blondie's, I was so unsure of how to do it," she says. "I reached out for advice from others who were successful and then things just slowly began to build. I want to be the kind of person that my kids and students and even other business owners look to for advice as they think about their own possibilities."

Borowski finds that several of her skills as a teacher have helped her succeed as an entrepreneur. She is driven by organization and attention to detail.

"I have a very systematic process with lots of spreadsheets," she says. "Being very organized allows us to quickly turn around our orders."

These same skills help Borowski balance running a business, teaching and managing a family with three active kids. Giving



everything 100 percent is who she is. Her inclusion in this year's Future 10 leaves her "excited to be recognized for working hard and creating something from nothing."

When Borowski isn't working, she loves spending time camping with her husband, Jeremy and three kids, Zachary, Bradley and Charlee.

KOURTNEY SAAVEDRA

Teacher, West Brunswick High School

Age 30

Kourtney Saavedra's mission in her classroom is to create global citizens who are thinking about the world beyond Brunswick County, beyond North Carolina and beyond just the United States.

"I want them to have a better understanding of other cultures and what the world is like," she says.

But at the same time, she encourages her students to embrace where they live and see all that the county has to offer.

In her ninth year as a teacher at West Brunswick High School, the school she graduated from in 2011, Saavedra was named Teacher of the Year in the spring of 2023 and subsequently the 2023-2024 Brunswick County Schools Teacher of the Year.

Even so, she says she was not expecting a Future 10 recognition. "I'm super excited, and I know so many incredible teachers who are deserving, so I have a little bit of imposter syndrome," she says.

On becoming a teacher, Saavedra followed her grandmother's lead. Her grandmother taught at West Brunswick High School for more than 20 years.

"In fact, the first classroom I had here as a teacher was next door to the room where my grandmother taught," she says.

Saavedra currently teaches three classes for ninth through 12th grades: AP US History, AP Human Geography and Latin American Studies.

"We're the only high school in the county that teaches Latin American Studies, and I'm the only teacher who teaches it," she says. "It's a fun social studies class."

She also leads the after-school sewing club.

What she enjoys the most about teaching are the relationships with her students. Because she teaches several different subjects, she will have some of the same students more than once.

"I may have a kid who takes my geography class, then sociology, then history or Latin American studies, so it gives me a chance to see them grow over the years, and that's very rewarding," she says.

Saavedra is passionate about the teaching profession; she is on a self-described

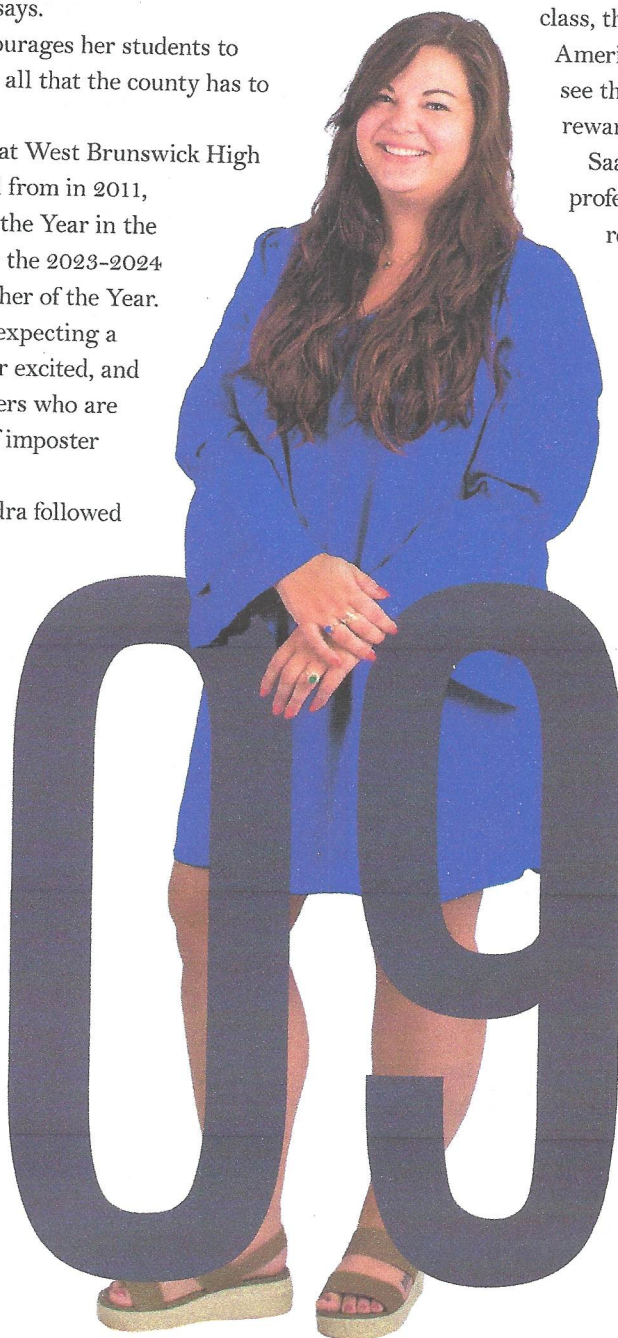
recruiting mission to encourage students to become teachers. She admits there are factors like pay, working conditions, lack of support and bitter politics that may deter people from pursuing the profession.

"But some of these kids are such powerful, awesome leaders, I would love for them to go out into the world, get their degrees and then come back here to teach," she says. "It would be great to see West Brunswick High full of alumni!"

At the end of the day, Saavedra wants people to know that teachers are professionals, degreed and licensed, and their goal is to do what is best for students.

"I wouldn't do anything else," she says. "I don't feel like there are many other opportunities to make this kind of difference."

Away from the classroom, Saavedra spends her time with her husband, Miguel, working on home improvement projects, bowling, watching movies, reading and enjoying their two dogs — Mia, a chihuahua, and Otis, a maltipoo.



LAUREN & JASON GORE

Owners and Operators, Huckleberry Farm

Ages 36 and 37

For Lauren and Jason Gore the desire to live a healthy and simplified lifestyle was the inspiration for starting their farm. Unable to find options for local, organic produce, they decided to grow their own — not just for their own family, but for others in search of farm-to-table foods.

“Goods that are grown or raised locally help build relationships within the community and create independence when we can support each other for our needs,” Jason says.

In 2015 the Gores purchased 6 acres in Ocean Isle Beach and began to build their farm, naming it after their pointer, Huckleberry. Owning a farm was not unfamiliar territory for the Gores. Lauren grew up on her grandparents’ farm, helping with gardening and canning, and Jason had a deep interest in landscaping and agriculture. Both graduated from North Carolina State University. Jason studied both agronomy and turf grass management, and Lauren studied elementary education and horticulture.

Since they started farming, they have been growing organic crops and providing eggs from their pasture-raised hens. They also offer fresh flower subscriptions throughout the year, including an annual season subscription with blooms typically available May through August, a spring bulb subscription and a fall sunflower subscription.

“We always try to offer different varieties of flowers that you wouldn’t find at a local florist,” Lauren says.

Produce and flowers can be delivered or picked up. Lauren gets excited when people choose to come to the farm.

“I want to share the farm lifestyle with the community,” she says. “We’re a small farm compared to others, but it gives families a little taste of farm life and how grounded it can make you feel.”

A big part of that lifestyle for Lauren is horse riding. She is a PHBA Western Riding World Champion, and she teaches lessons for beginner to advanced riders. They also have a monthly Pony Club program for children ages 10 and younger.

Operating Huckleberry Farm has given the Gores a chance to introduce a new way of life to others.



“Where I grew up, it seemed like everybody lived on a farm, and when I moved here, I realized it was very different,” Lauren says. “Some kids don’t realize that food doesn’t just come from the store. I want our farm to allow them to get a hands-on connection and experience, so I hope we make a great impact on local kids and families.”

Jason adds, “Knowing where our food comes from is important to us.”

When they are not busy with the farm, Jason is a soil scientist for Brunswick County and Lauren homeschools their son, Wyatt, who is in the first grade. They are also parents to two-year-old daughter Lena. They enjoy spending time at the beach when they can. ■