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Meet the
10

innovative, inspirational,

BIG IDEA Toledoans

who are invested in the
Glass City's future

by Alia Orra
photos by Nick Amrhein

Some want to leave the Glass City behind. Others roll up their sleeves and quietly pick it up by its proverbial bootstraps. We asked Toledoans, from business owners to CEOs, to tell us who inspired them with their efforts to move the community forward. The result is a list of ten progressive thinkers working towards a better future.

ROCK STAR PHILANTHROPIST

NICOLE KHOURY

CRIMINAL DEFENSE ATTORNEY & FOUNDER
OF PROJECT iAM

Nicole Khoury is not your typical lawyer. The Syrian-Armenian's black curls are streaked with purple and blue; she's known to sport fishnet tights in court, and spends nights playing rock star as the frontwoman of the lasciviously-titled cover band Arctic Clam. But more importantly, she is the founder of Project iAm, a charity she started in 2008 because she'd seen friends struggle with their children's autism diagnosis and "couldn't stand the fact that I was donating money, but that kid wasn't benefiting from it because it was going to a national or statewide [organization]."

Khoury approached the problem by combining her passion for music with philanthropy, creating twice-yearly Acoustics for Autism benefit concerts. She figured out ways to draw big-name acts (Skid Row, Rusted Root)

and, in turn, big profits to her charity. She refuses to take a salary, and though the emphasis on eliminating paid staff means

*Nominated by Lexi Staples,
Toledo Pride executive director*

she sleeps little and often charges her cell phone four times a day in the frenzy leading up to an event, it's allowed Project iAm to donate \$50,000 in the past five years to area kids. Khoury's modus operandi? "If you see something wrong that's bothering you enough, fix it."

www.aboutprojectiam.com



REDEFINER

TAYLOR DUNGJEN

CRIME REPORTER AT THE BLADE

Taylor Dungjen is a woman with a lot of stories to tell. They're just not her own stories — as The Blade's crime reporter, she is witness to real-life theatre, learning about Toledoans' tragedies with the aim of sharing them compassionately. "I don't want to reduce people to a rap sheet or a criminal record," Dungjen says. "I really do try to look for the life that is happening in and beyond someone [being a victim]."

But with the space considerations of print media, Dungjen was often left with interesting stories untold. Rather than accept those limitations, she began a crime blog, in addition to Tweeting regularly to her (now 1,000-plus) followers. At 24, she is one of the youngest reporters in The Blade's newsroom, and more importantly, one of the first to use social media as a tool in her journalism work, interacting with readers and inspiring her colleagues to follow

*Nominated by Alia Orra,
Toledo City Paper assignment editor*

suit. Dungjen says a more visible identity in the community is an inevitable (and positive) consequence of reporters' social media presence. "People want to be involved and they want to feel like they can have a say in the way stories about their community are being told," Dungjen says. "And they have a right to that." toledoblade.typepad.com/ridealong



SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

LANCE ROPER

ENTREPRENEUR, ACTUAL COFFEE

Lance Roper's mission? To share the truth about that seemingly innocuous beverage we brew every morning: coffee. Shedding light on the industry's standard practices — coffee bean farming that's environmentally destructive and unfair to third world laborers — has become the mission behind his socially conscious roasting business Actual Coffee. "I can't think of any other industry that does a better job at hiding the truth from people," Roper says. "What I really want to do is tell the story accurately."

The entrepreneur delivers high-quality, thoughtfully-sourced coffee beans to locally-owned coffee shops weekly, and hopes to build his business into a larger wholesale distributor that retains its conscience (and Toledo roots). His plans for growth are, of course, as inventive as he is: he wants to crowd-source the funding for a bigger roaster through kickstarter.com, an online community where investors trade a pledge for goods or services. And he's been contacting local coffee shop owners in the hopes of starting a coalition that would give them more buying power (and public awareness). "Toledo is a rust belt city, and everywhere you look you see what was," Roper says. "I'm starting to see what could be." www.actualcoffee.com

*Nominated by Sandy Spang,
owner of Plate 21*



GRACEFUL GIVER

SAM MELDEN

CHIEF THOUGHT OFFICER AT FOOD FOR THOUGHT, A SOCIAL JUSTICE ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO FEEDING THE HUNGRY

Sam Melden's first order of business when he was hired to lead Food For Thought was to change his title. Though it was officially executive director, "when I started there were no other employees. I just felt like I wasn't very executive." So he became "chief thought officer," a moniker that embodies his insightful approach. "My job is to be thoughtful in everything I do, and lead the organization out of that."

He is applying that thoughtfulness to the growing problem of hunger, one he says has penetrated even Toledo's suburbs in the wake of the economic downturn. A staggering one out of every four to five people in Northwest Ohio don't know where their next meal will come from, and so Melden and the volunteers he leads pack Food For Thought's 13 mobile pantries every week, distributing groceries to 1,300 families a month in places as economically diverse as downtown Toledo and Perrysburg.

But Melden has his sights set on quality, not just quantity: he wants to change the way food pantries approach hunger and shift the focus to "locally-sourced, healthy food" as well as education on how to prepare it. "The amount in your bank account shouldn't define the amount of healthy food you have access to." feedtoledo.org

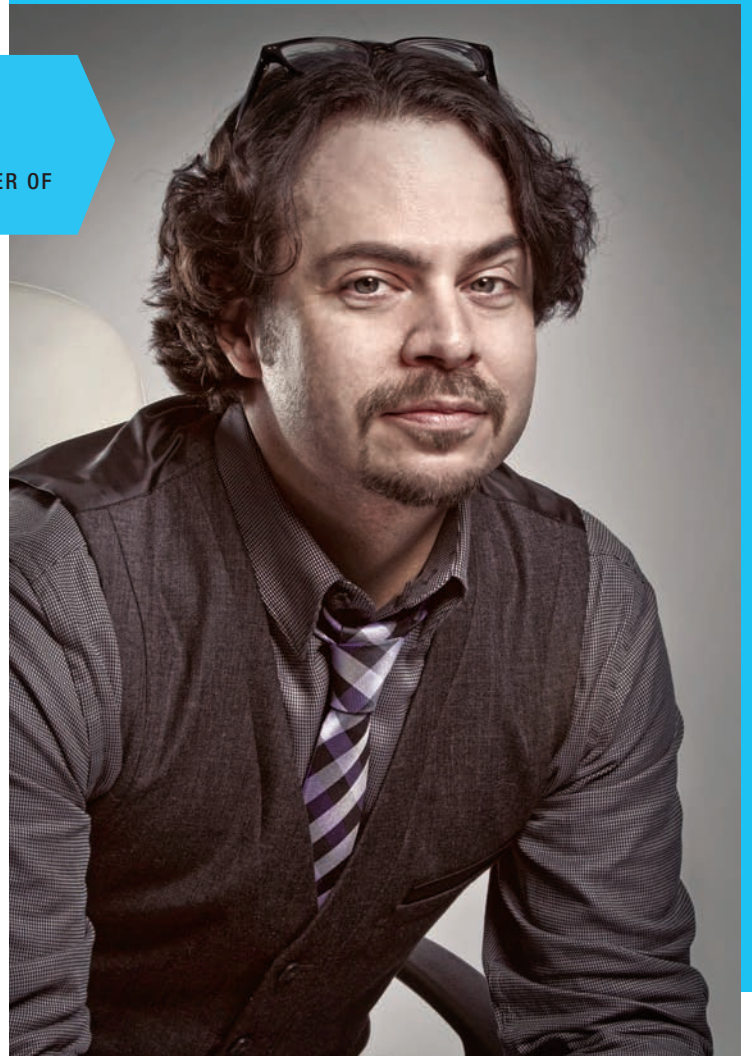
*Nominated by Paula Ross, research
associate at the University of Toledo
Urban Affairs Center*



TALENT WRANGLER

GENE POWELL

FOUNDER OF DIGITAL MARKETING AGENCY SPOKE, CO-FOUNDER OF STARTUP TOLEDO, SEED COWORKING



When the economy unraveled in 2008, Gene Powell did the unthinkable: he quit his job and started his own business. “People thought I was crazy,” he says. “But in my opinion there was nowhere to go but up.” The graphic designer created Spoke, an agency that specializes in web development and design, and landed his first client, pharmaceutical giant H.D. Smith, within the first week. “With the way we communicate today, geography didn’t seem to mean anything,” he says of his ability to compete for work with agencies in coastal cities. “I don’t have to be in Boston to have clients in Boston.”

But Powell, a genial guy who looks deceptively younger than his 44 years, wanted more than personal success; he craved collaboration. Operating Spoke out of his home meant there was less interaction with other creative types, and so he began seeking connections, co-founding StartUp Toledo, a monthly networking event for innovative and entrepreneurial locals to talk shop, and Seed Coworking, a convivial, slick-looking downtown office space that nomadic workers can pay a monthly fee to access. They’re just two of the ways Powell hopes to make Toledo a more brain drain-proof environment. “I have two pet peeves,” says Powell. “I hate seeing talent wasted, and I hate seeing talent leave.” www.seedcoworking.com

*Nominated by Bruce Yunker,
Co-Owner Tandem Creative*

VANGUARD

DR. JOHN PIGOTT

VASCULAR SURGEON AND
MEDICAL DIRECTOR OF
PROMEDICA INNOVATIONS

Dr. John Pigott was a 31 year old fresh off a fellowship at the Mayo Clinic when he patented his first invention, an aortic endograft. It went on to become the model for a device used in surgeries today, and more importantly, confirmed the power of innovation. “It hit me that in the office, I can only see one patient at a time,” Pigott says. “But [with medical invention] I could be helping, theoretically, a thousand patients a day.”

Pigott believes that creativity and entrepreneurial spirit are vital to the medical field, and he saw the potential of collaborating and its impact on patient care. It was with that in mind that he approached ProMedica CEO Randy Oostra and Chief Medical Officer Lee Hammerling with the idea for ProMedica Innovations (P.I.), a new partnership with the Cleveland Clinic that allows physicians and employees the opportunity to commercialize prospective healthcare innovations. Pigott had hoped ProMedica top brass would free up “\$5 or \$10 million” for the project; they were so committed they allotted \$50 million. “Putting the money behind it puts us way out front,” Pigott says. “I think it’s a gutsy move.”

*Nominated by Randy Oostra,
ProMedica CEO*

Everyone from physicians to employees responsible for laundry have approached him with ideas. “[Innovation] is a spark,” Pigott says. “And we’ve got a lot of people around here with that spark.” www.promedica.org/innovations



GAMECHANGER

DR. ROMULUS DURANT

TOLEDO PUBLIC SCHOOLS ASSISTANT
SUPERINTENDENT AND LEADER
OF MENTORSHIP ORGANIZATIONS SAAB
AND YWOF

Growing up the son of a reformed New York City gang member has made Romulus Durant more than just a believer in mentorship — he is wholly committed to its power. “Mentorship is not an act of kindness. It’s not an act of just coming to read to a child. Mentorship is an intervention; it’s meant to include yourself in someone’s life and change someone’s life,” he says.

And so, one of the first things on his to-do list as an assistant superintendent was to provide students with adult role models by re-establishing the Toledo Public School district’s Student African American Brotherhood group — a formerly faltering chapter of the national organization that had lost funding — turning it into the largest SAAB group in the country, with 400 student members and 20 adult advisors, and earning it the 2012 SAAB Chapter of the Year award. He became the only SAAB leader in the U.S. to establish the group at the elementary, and not just high school, level, resulting in “huge changes” in suspension and referral rates, and will present his experiences at a national SAAB conference in April. Based on the success of SAAB, he established YWOF (Young Women of Excellence), a mentorship group for women in a similar vein. Durant’s hope is that by establishing leaders for young kids to look up to, he can break the “schoolhouse to jailhouse pipeline.” “I’ve become passionate about seeing kids excel.” www.saabnational.org

*Nominated by Jerome Pecko,
Toledo Public Schools superintendent*



TECH VISIONARY

WILL LUCAS

ENTREPRENEUR AND INVENTOR OF CLASSANA
AND CREADIO, ORGANIZER OF TEDx

Will Lucas beams with the kind of polished business success that makes it hard to imagine it wasn't long ago he was living on the streets. The Toledo native was pursuing his dream of becoming a music producer in Atlanta by day, but spending nights sleeping at the city's airport. He wasn't homeless, per se — he could have returned to the comforts of Toledo anytime — just doggedly determined. "I think I'm just not afraid to fail," he says.

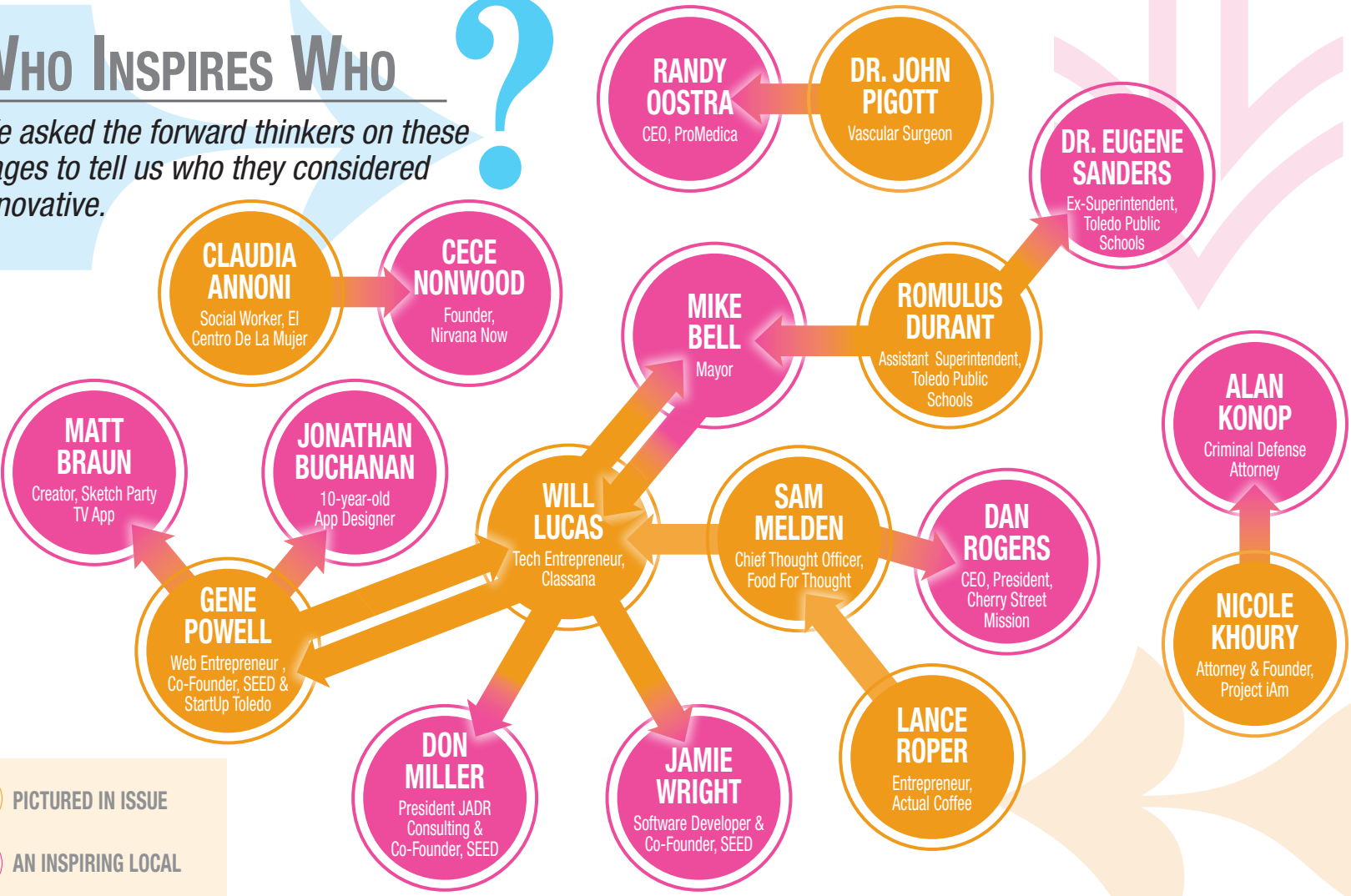
It's the kind of thinking that led him from that bout with disappointment to a string of successes: in 2007, his just-launched brand marketing technology business Creadio commissioned the first customer for its unique live-streaming Internet radio — McDonald's. From there, he's gone on to develop the web application Classana, whose mission is to "organize the world's learning resources," a promising invention with the potential to help

Nominated by Mayor Mike Bell

solidify the trend towards online education. And he's an entrepreneur with an outward focus, arranging Toledo's first TEDx, a gathering of progressive thinkers in the community, and leading the mentorship organization King's Kids Academy in an effort to show children that a career in the sciences can be as promising (and cool) as being "a rapper or an athlete. We don't see enough Jack Dorseys or Mark Zuckerbergs." He believes Toledo has the potential to become a hub for a technology-based economy. "Instead of just thinking about 'where can we work,' I think we should think more about what kind of businesses we can create." *classana.com*

WHO INSPIRES WHO

We asked the forward thinkers on these pages to tell us who they considered innovative.



EMPOWERER

CLAUDIA ANNONI

FOUNDER OF WOMEN'S ADVOCACY GROUP EL CENTRO DE LA MUJER AND ASSOCIATE EDITOR AT LA PRENSA

As an 18-year-old celebrating the end of dictatorship in her native Argentina, Claudia Annoni developed her calling: to give a voice to those who were voiceless. "We were young people trying to recover all those years," she says. "You want to save the world." She began college and became a social worker. After arriving in the U.S. in 1989, she learned the role she had chosen became more complicated in the melting pot that is America. But rather than retreat, she pressed on, learning to speak English fluently and developing a cultural knowledge that enabled her to work effectively with people across other Latin cultures.

In keeping with her original mission, Annoni built her

Nominated by Rico Neller, La Prensa editor

reputation around a group of people who struggle to be heard: victims of domestic violence. In 2011 she started El Centro De La Mujer, a bilingual women's empowerment, advocacy and education organization devoted to area Latinas. Every Monday she leads a support group for the women who seek her out, and while they have little funding now, Annoni says there are plans for a computer lab and hopes for a women's shelter that's culturally conscious. "I'm going to be that person that is going to open the door for them to feel they have a voice," Annoni says. "And if nothing else, if nowhere else, that voice is going to be heard at El Centro."

Facebook page: *El Centro De La Mujer*



POWER PLAYER

MARTHA VETTER

PRESIDENT R/P MARKETING PUBLIC RELATIONS, FOUNDER OF CHICKS FOR CHARITY

Martha Vetter is no stranger to girl power. At 33, she made the gutsy move of joining two other women in starting their own public relations agency. Not that Vetter was worried. "So many people lack confidence [and think], 'what if we fail?'" Vetter says. "It wasn't going to be the end of the world if this half-cocked idea of three

women starting an agency didn't work." Not only was it not the end of the world; within R/P Marketing Public Relations' first year, the Toledo firm snagged then-national book retailer Borders as one of their clients.

Nearly a decade into her work, Vetter heard about a group that raised money by getting 100 women to each donate \$100. That estrogen-fueled idea inspired her to found Chicks For Charity in Toledo, which devotes two years to the cause of their choice with the one goal of raising as much money as possible to support it. Her 1,900 'chicks' range from a four-year-old with a lemonade stand to local female power players who want to give back; they raised \$170,000 for their most recent pick, the International Boxing Club. And the idea has spread — there is even a Chicks For Charity in Melbourne, Australia. "In and of itself, it's not that big or impressive," Vetter says. "But you put it all together and look what a difference it makes." www.chicksforcharity.net

Nominated by Toledo City Paper Facebook fans



Portrait of a gentleman

The guy who keeps us creatively inspired, photographer Nick Amrhein, shot the portraits you see on these pages.

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