A new generation forging diverse paths

Modern Healthcare’s editors were inundated with entries for the Up & Comers class of 2014. We received more than 150 nominations from a wide variety of healthcare provider, insurer and supplier organizations.

Predicting from among that group who will emerge as healthcare’s household names over the next few years was no easy task. If you read through the resumes of healthcare’s top leaders today, many started running small hospitals in semirural states. Others worked their way from consulting groups to staff jobs to top leadership posts. Our nominees were similarly diverse.

And so are this year’s winners—the ones whose backgrounds, current jobs and future prospects stood out from the pack. They ranged from the chief operating officer at a sprawling rural hospital system in South Dakota, who returned home after spending two years at one of the nation’s most prestigious law firms in Washington, to the daughter of Nigerian immigrants who parlayed stellar academic training at Berkeley, Pepperdine and Harvard into the chief-of-staff role at one of the nation’s largest healthcare systems.

There are three physicians and one nurse among the honorees, testimony to the heightened emphasis that provider and insurance organizations are putting on hands-on healthcare experience when they look for their next generation of leaders. And in a common story for many in our nomination pool, the first encounter for three members of this year’s class began either as a patient or patient advocate—experiences that shaped their career aspirations.

Our deepest thanks go out to all who nominated colleagues for this honor. Your perspicacity never ceases to amaze. One of this year’s winners—shortly after his name was submitted for the honor—found himself sitting across from the president as he sought guidance on the rapidly evolving Ebola crisis.

That’s why I can say with some certainty that you will be hearing much more about the members of Modern Healthcare’s Up & Comers Class of 2014. They join a prestigious fraternity of 27 previous Up & Comer classes, whose ranks include Dr. Don Berwick, Dr. Brent James, Nancy Schlichting, Rulon Stacey, Gov. Bobby Jindal and Glenn Hackbarth.

Not bad company. Now let’s watch them grow. —Merrill Goozner, editor

Youth celebrated, not wasted

We have all been hearing and reading about millennials—that dynamic, upstart generation of young adults who are shaking up the way we live and work. Most millennials are still 20-somethings but, depending on which definition you go by, the oldest members are entering their late 30s.

In healthcare, this means the millennial spirit is creeping up into the ranks of executives. Is this a good thing? I think so.

When painted in a negative light, millennials are described as impatient, entitled, and more in tune with the virtual world than the real one. On the positive side, however, millennials are considered fearless, innovative and civic-minded. They want to make a difference and don’t need to be told by elders when it is time to do so.

The age 40-and-under Up & Comers you will read about in the following pages are on the leading edge of the millennial generation. Whether influenced more by their peers, parents or position in life, they all exhibit these redeeming qualities:

**Fearless.** These young executives seem to have no inhibitions about fast-tracking their careers and championing new initiatives at their organizations and in their communities.

**Innovative.** Infusing their work with creativity, open-mindedness and technological know-how, these leaders are rethinking the way healthcare is delivered, just when it is needed most.

Civic-minded. Healthcare is all about making a difference in people’s lives, and the 2014 Up & Comers wholly embrace this calling. “Youth is wasted on the young” is a proverb often attributed to George Bernard Shaw. That may be true in some instances, but this year’s Up & Comers are living proof that the maxim has plenty of exceptions.

For the 17th year, Witt/Kieffer is proud to sponsor Modern Healthcare’s Up & Comers awards. Our entire industry stands to benefit from the bold and progressive ideas of these honorees.

Andrew Chastain
Managing partner, healthcare practice leader
Witt/Kieffer
Benjamin Anderson, 35
CEO
Kearny County Hospital, Lakin, Kan.

**First Adult Job:** Cashier and other positions at McDonald’s.

**School Spirit:** Cheerleader at Drury University, Springfield, Mo., during his undergraduate years.

**Fraternity Brother:** Is a member of Kappa Alpha Order.

**Known For:** Wearing a Scottish kilt to Boston.

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**Dr. Alastair Bell, 38**

*Chief operating officer*

**Boston Medical Center**

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**First Adult Job:** Working as an English teacher in Tanzania through Students Partnership Worldwide.

**Known For:** Wearing a Scottish kilt to Boston Medical Center’s formal events.

**Another Doctor in the House:** His wife is a dermatologist at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston.

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**Improving the health status of residents in rural Kansas** has been the mission for Benjamin Anderson for more than five years, work that reflects his passion for helping the underserved.

Since June 2013, he has led Kearny County Hospital, a critical-access facility in the small town of Lakin, Kan., in the southwest part of the state. Before that he led Ashland (Kan.) Health Center, which includes a critical-access hospital and a skilled-nursing facility.

Anderson said he is drawn to regions where he can help underserved and struggling populations. He recalled memories of his childhood, when money was tight while growing up in Hayward, Calif., before moving to Springfield, Mo., at age 15.

“I know what it means to be hungry,” he said. “We also used to get medications from the same clinics homeless people would, because we wouldn’t be able to do so otherwise.”

He’s also a veteran of overseas missions, having traveled to rural Zimbabwe five times in the past five years to serve at Eden Children’s Village and Karanda Mission Hospital to help improve local healthcare in partnership with the Via Christi International Family Medicine Fellowship.

Anderson’s missionary spirit also influences how he operates as an administrator, said Kendall Kay, mayor of Ashland, Kan., where Anderson was CEO of the town’s hospital for more than four years before moving to Lakin.

For some time, Ashland Health Center struggled to attract clinicians to the rural setting. Through Anderson’s efforts, the center recruited two doctors with a unique proposition: He would allow them to take up to six weeks’ leave to do mission work internationally or elsewhere in the country.

“Having a doctor for 10 to 11 months out of the year is better than nothing, and it’s coverage we wouldn’t have had otherwise,” Kay said.

Since coming to Kearny, Anderson has led an effort to launch the Pioneer Baby program, which aims to reduce the hospital’s high rate of gestational diabetes, which occurs in 11% of pregnant women being treated at the hospital vs. the national average of 4% to 6%, Anderson said. —Virgil Dickson

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**When Dr. Alastair Bell arrived at Boston Medical Center almost three years ago,** the hospital was dealing with a $175 million deficit and a possible bankruptcy.

Bell was in charge of implementing a strategic plan to turn around the academic medical center. The plan was successful and BMC has since reported financial surpluses as well as significant improvements in clinical quality scores.

“He’s got a brilliant ability to conceptualize and address very tricky problems,” said Joe Camillus, BMC’s vice president of ambulatory operations and professional services.

Bell didn’t start out as an operations guy. He attended the University of Cambridge School of Clinical Medicine and the University of Oxford Medical School in the U.K. and later underwent house officer training—similar to a medical residency path in the U.S.—in Glasgow. It was there that Bell, who is Scottish, first saw the differences in the views of hospital administrators and clinicians.

“There was a communication gap between the two,” he said.

So Bell moved to Boston, earned an MBA at Harvard and joined McKinsey and Co., where he served as an associate principal for about five years. Along the way he and his wife, who is also Scottish, decided to make a home in the U.S.

“There was a lot of interesting work in the U.S., and the healthcare system was going through a lot of change and upheaval,” Bell said. “It’s a fascinating environment to work in at the moment.”

BMC, a 454-bed hospital serving Boston’s South End, is unique. Nearly one in five families in the South End has an income level below the poverty rate. About 40% of the hospital’s patients are covered by Medicaid or Medicare. The hospital is also within three miles of four other academic medical centers.

“The challenges here sometimes feel overwhelming,” Camillus said. “Alastair helped us think through our role in the competitive landscape and the things we do well and capitalize on those things.”

—Jaimy Lee
Gyasi Chisley, 38

**CEO**, Methodist Healthcare North, Memphis, Tenn.;
**senior vice president**, Methodist Healthcare, Memphis

**Gyasi Chisley, the market chief executive for Methodist Healthcare North in Memphis, Tenn.,** understands the importance of building relationships.

It’s the first thing his colleagues and mentors highlight when asked what drives his success.

Many of Chisley’s signature projects as a healthcare administrator have involved partnerships. For instance, he is currently leading a project with the city of Memphis to transform an abandoned mall into a combination retail and health and wellness space, modeled after Vanderbilt Health’s One Hundred Oaks concept in Nashville.

Taxpayers recently voted to infuse $23 million into the project, which is expected to open at the end of 2015. “He’s very keen on partnering with community organizations,” said Michael Ugwuueke, president and COO of healthcare operations at Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare. “He has an impact on people and the ability to connect with people very well.”

A self-described “data geek” focused on improving quality as a way to cut costs, Chisley was involved early on with the CMS’ accountable care organizations, both at Methodist as well as in his previous role as president and site administrator of Mercy Health’s Anderson Hospital in Cincinnati.

“I really want to make sure we elevate healthcare in the minds and hearts of everyone,” Chisley said. “There’s only one subset that we’re affecting on a hospital basis. But now with ACOs, the opportunity for partnership is so relevant.”

Physician integration is another passion. At Methodist, Chisley established the Physician Champions concept, which assigns physician leaders to focus on one of five pillars—people, service, finance, quality and growth—and promote clinical integration.

Kim Byas, a regional executive at the American Hospital Association, said he encouraged Chisley to enter healthcare administration when Chisley was working in business development at Aramark Healthcare Management Services.

Chisley understands relationships and has a strong sense of how to bring out the best in a team, Byas said. “He really does an effective job of creating dialogue across interest groups,” he said. “He’s definitely an up and comer. … I’m looking forward to seeing what he can accomplish in the future.” —**Beth Kutscher**

Mario Garner, 34

**CEO**
New Orleans Hospital East

**Long before Mario Garner decided to pursue a career in healthcare administration,** the Lake Charles, La., native had a childhood experience that helped shape his professional path: Filling the role of patient advocate while his grandfather underwent treatment for lung cancer was a life-changer.

“I had lots of early exposure to interacting with physicians and interpreting medical terminology,” says Garner, who was about 8 years old when his grandfather was diagnosed. Because his grandfather could not read or write, Garner would accompany him to his oncology appointments, take notes and later read the notes back to his family. “It helped me to realize the importance of being an advocate for those who may have difficulty maneuvering the system,” said Garner, now CEO of the recently opened New Orleans East Hospital.

Last year, Garner was selected as the first CEO of the 80-bed public hospital, which opened in July 2014. The new $130 million facility returned healthcare services to eastern New Orleans neighborhoods that had been without a hospital since Pendleton Memorial Methodist Hospital closed on the same site in 2005, an outcome of Hurricane Katrina floods. Garner, who evacuated to Houston during the disaster, says being selected to head the hospital is a great responsibility with high stakes.

“The eyes of the entire city have been on this project,” he said.

Though he initially pursued a clinical path, Garner said he realized in medical school that his true passion was hospital leadership. He switched gears and obtained a master’s of healthcare administration from Tulane University, and later a doctorate of education from the University of Houston. He also completed an HCA executive development program, designed to prepare future C-suite leaders.

Carolyn Caldwell, CEO of Desert Regional Medical Center in Palm Springs, Calif., served as a mentor for Garner and nominated him for the award. She says his passion for healthcare and commitment to mentoring others are commendable.

“You can always find people with great skill,” Caldwell said. But when one finds leaders like Garner who are passionate about what they do, “it’s more than a job. He gets so much joy from the work he’s doing,” she said. —**Sabriya Rice**
**Dr. Bryce Gartland, 39**  
*Vice president of operations*  
Emory University Hospital, Atlanta

**Though not the ideal way to spend a birthday weekend,** a bout with appendicitis in the seventh grade spurred Dr. Bryce Gartland’s interest in the healthcare profession.

“I had a surgeon who really made a point of sitting down on my bed and spending time with me while I was in the hospital for an extended period,” the Dunwoody, Ga., native said. “His bedside care made a real impression on me in terms of the ability to help people.”

As vice president of operations for Atlanta-based Emory University Hospital, Gartland sees his role as a connecting link between the clinical and business sides of healthcare, a career path he decided on before earning his medical degree from Medical College of Georgia in 2001.

“I had a real passion in being the integrating connector between the clinical practice and systems engineering and business aspects of medicine,” Gartland said.

Last year, Gartland took on the additional role of interim director for the Emory Clinic Division of Hospital Medicine, where he oversees the country’s largest academic hospital medicine group with more than 100 physician faculty members and an annual operating budget of more than $30 million.

Gartland was a part of the hospital-care team that treated two American aid workers who contracted the Ebola virus while in West Africa.

Both patients, Dr. Kent Brantly and Nancy Writebol, were brought to Emory in early August, where the two recovered and were released several weeks later.

“We had a phenomenal team of individuals,” Gartland said about the experience. “Good teams prepare, but great teams respond, and this is one of those instances where we demonstrated what a great team we have in terms of everybody’s ability to respond when we received the call about caring for the first two patients with Ebola virus on U.S. soil.”

Emory University Hospital CEO Robert Bachman said Gartland’s rare ability to understand the clinical and business sides of healthcare made him a natural choice for an executive leadership position at the hospital.

“Bryce is bilingual,” Bachman said. “He speaks the language of medicine and the language of business very fluently and is able to move back and forth in both worlds very easily. His strategic-thinking abilities are remarkable.”

—Steven Ross Johnson

**Carolyn Jackson, 40**  
*CEO*  
St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children, Philadelphia

**In 2010, Carolyn Jackson was CEO of Lake Pointe Health Network,** a 112-bed hospital in Rowlett, Texas. During her tenure, neonatal admissions increased by more than 60% and the facility opened a pediatric-care program.

Those experiences helped Jackson realize that she wanted to focus her career on children’s healthcare. So when there was an opening for the top job at St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children in Philadelphia, another Tenet Healthcare Corp. facility, she jumped at the opportunity. As an added bonus, it was near her home state of Delaware.

“The stars aligned,” Jackson said.

St. Christopher’s is now in the midst of some major changes under Jackson’s guidance. Last month, the hospital opened its new 30,000-square-foot Center for the Urban Child facility. The program is designed to meet the health challenges of kids in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the country by centralizing services—from domestic violence counseling to dental care—at one location.

Previously, hospital staff worried that families wouldn’t follow up on necessary care because of transportation problems or other hurdles that frequently confront poor households. “We want to make it as easy as possible for these kids to have a better life,” Jackson said.

St. Christopher’s is also in the midst of building a 110-bed critical-care unit, slated to open in 2016. That will include 60 beds for neonatal admissions and 50 beds for pediatric patients.

Jackson earns plaudits for her stewardship of St. Christopher’s from other local healthcare leaders she has worked with. “She is confident, but humble,” said Barry Freeman, CEO of the Einstein Health Network in Philadelphia. “I also think she’s a first-class citizen.”

Jackson has an undergraduate degree in chemical engineering from the University of Delaware and an MBA from Harvard Business School. Her first healthcare job was working as an assistant manager at a pharmaceutical production facility in Florence, S.C. After completing a management training program run by Tenet, she joined Lake Point Health as its chief operating officer in 2003.

Jackson serves on the boards of the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce and Health Partners Plans. —Paul Demko
Dr. Arby Nahapetian, 39  
*Vice president of medical affairs and quality*

Glendale (Calif.) Adventist Medical Center  

**Dr. Arby Nahapetian took a circuitous route into healthcare** and quality management.  
He began his studies as an economics major at UCLA, graduating in 1995. While his initial interest was in macroeconomics, he found himself drawn to public health because of one class—virology and vaccine development.  
From there, Nahapetian pursued a master’s in public health at Yale, focusing on epidemiology.  
That prompted him to seek an internship with the World Health Organization, where he worked with Dr. David Heymann of the U.K., a pioneer in studies of treatments for Ebola.  
At the WHO, Nahapetian focused on emerging infectious diseases in sub-Saharan Africa and South America, and in particular meningococcal meningitis. That experience pushed him deeper into healthcare.  
Nahapetian recalls Heymann telling him, “Arby, if you want to take this thing seriously, you have to get a medical degree.” “That was the impetus,” he said. Nahapetian chose cardiology/electrophysiology because he felt it was a field rich with data, where he could be involved in evidence-driven outcomes and research.  
Seven years into his career, however, he wanted to return to do more work on his original passions—population health and public health. That led him to Glendale Adventist, where he became vice president of medical affairs and quality in August 2012.  
Kevin Roberts, CEO at Glendale Adventist, said his original conception of the job changed as a result of hiring Nahapetian. Previously, the role did not include a quality-management component, but Roberts felt that Nahapetian, given his background, would be a good fit for the extra duties. Roberts credits Nahapetian’s efforts with a number of quality improvements, including reducing the sepsis mortality rate at the 515-bed hospital, from a high of 25% to 13.8% now.  
Roberts believes the improvements come from Nahapetian’s ability to interact with physicians, nurses and other clinicians, though Nahapetian attributes the hospital’s success to diligence throughout the organization.  
Quality, he said, needs to “remain on everyone’s priority list. It’s not a one-off project you do for a year.” —Darius Tahir

Jonathan Nalli, 39  
*CEO*

St. Vincent Health, Indianapolis  

**At age 12, Jonathan Nalli started a lawn-mowing and landscaping business** with his 10-year-old brother.  
Quality control was enforced by mom and dad.  
“My parents used to go on walks through the neighborhood and critiqued our work,” Nalli recalled. “It was instilled in us by our parents that we had to provide people with value.”  
The boys expanded the business—to nearly $350,000 in revenue by the time Nalli turned 20—selling it when he applied to the University of Kentucky.  
In an eighth-grade English class, on a survey of career interests, Nalli checked a box for hospital administration and, as a result, his career path changed. “I felt I could have an impact in being a hospital administrator,” he said. “It just stuck and I never let go.”  
Again, his parents had indirect influence. “Their mentoring and their guidance was that you have to contribute and have an impact that is selfless.” Nalli also said his older cousin chose medicine because he felt it was a field rich with data, where he could be involved in evidence-driven outcomes and research.  
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Hugh Lavery, a senior vice president at Thomas Jefferson University Hospitals in Philadelphia, has been a career-long mentor.  
Nalli was appointed in February to be CEO of Indianapolis-based St. Vincent Health, a system with 22 hospitals and scores of clinics in 47 of Indiana’s 92 counties, part of Ascension Health. He previously spent seven years as CEO of the two-hospital Porter Health System, a Valparaiso, Ind., affiliate of for-profit Community Health Systems, Franklin, Tenn.  
During his tenure at Porter, Nalli oversaw the construction of a $210 million, 238-bed regional hospital that opened in 2012, replacing an aging and formerly county-owned hospital building in Valparaiso.  
He also “syndicated the system with its physicians, developed a multispecialty physician group of primary-care and surgical providers, and led the hospital to its recognition as a Best Place to Work from 2011 to 2013 by Northwest Indiana Business Quarterly, said Dr. Mike Schatzlein, market leader for the Indiana and Tennessee ministries at Ascension, who nominated Nalli.  
“Given his credentials,” Schatzlein said, “we know St. Vincent Health has chosen the right person to lead it forward.” —Joseph Conn
Sarah Pacini, 39  
**Vice president of risk management and insurance**  
Advocate Health Care, Downers Grove, Ill.

Sarah Pacini began her healthcare career as a nurse, and it fit well with her upbringing. She grew up on a farm with her family in Lowell, Ind. Pacini developed an affinity for the outdoors and the cows, chickens and ducks that roamed around. She preferred to care for animals and neighbors instead of watching TV, which her family didn’t have.

“I’m not a person you’d want to play Trivial Pursuit with,” Pacini said, laughing.

After working for a couple years as an emergency department nurse, she began to think more broadly about the healthcare delivery system. Pacini became a nurse consultant for a medical malpractice firm, enjoying the work of poring through medical records, finding if the highest standards of care had been met. And then it hit her.

“I wanted to be a nurse-attorney,” Pacini said.

After receiving a law degree from DePaul University College of Law, Chicago, she set her sights on melding her clinician training with a future of educating hospital staff about pertinent regulatory, liability and quality issues.

Pacini serves as vice president of risk management and insurance at Advocate Health Care, the largest system in Illinois. She has been with Advocate for more than a decade, helping to instill a culture that says putting patients first will result in better care and fewer legal risks.

And it’s paid off so far. Since Pacini started at Advocate, the number of medical liability lawsuits and the average payments of lawsuits have dropped by 50%.

For Dr. Lee Sacks, Advocate’s chief medical officer and Pacini’s direct supervisor, Pacini’s success has been grounded in her ability to communicate the importance of reducing legal risk and how it’s linked with patient safety and cost-effective care. Pacini formed Advocate’s risk purchasing group, which gives physicians the ability to negotiate lower medical liability premiums.

“The glue behind all of this is building personal relationships,” Sacks said. “She’s built relationships inside the organization so there’s better communication and trust, and so risk is not looked upon as the gotcha police.”

Pacini believes her impact within Advocate is augmented by her clinical credentials.

“With the dual background, sometimes it’s easier to deliver a message,” she said.

—Bob Herman

Jeff Patterson, 35  
**Chief operating officer**  
Desert Regional Medical Center, Palm Springs, Calif.

Jeff Patterson recalls the fear he felt as a child undergoing treatment of a hereditary pancreatic disorder, and the comfort of his mother’s support through blood draws, diagnostic tests and procedures.

The experience was formative for Patterson, who has had a rapid career ascent at one of the largest U.S. health systems. “It’s these memories that emphasized the importance of personally understanding each patient’s specific needs, and as organizations, working to exceed their expectations,” he said.

Patterson arrived at Desert Regional, one of the 10 largest hospitals operated by Tenet Healthcare Corp., in October 2013 after about two years as Tenet’s senior director of business development for 14 of the system’s hospitals across five states. His career with the company began after he earned a master’s in healthcare administration in 2004.

His work at Desert Regional has been to oversee operations of the 387-bed hospital and its half-dozen outpatient centers and to help transform services to meet the challenges of reform. To do so, the hospital will begin a family practice residency with doctors from the University of California at Riverside, which Patterson said will help increase primary-care access. Care-coordination efforts have helped to reduce readmissions for congestive heart failure by helping patients connect with physicians and pharmacies after they leave the hospital.

His work has also been personal. Patterson led the renovation of Desert Regional’s pediatric unit after his arrival. His 4-year-old daughter, Avery, inherited his family’s pancreatic disorder. This year, Avery has been admitted to children’s hospitals three times.

“It looks like a totally new unit,” said Carolyn Caldwell, CEO of Desert Regional. Patterson worked to renovate the unit as he oversaw the hospital’s seven-year plan to expand and upgrade to meet California’s seismic standards.

Caldwell said Patterson’s experience grappling with an inherited disorder as a patient and parent is clear in the compassion he shows to employees and patients. “The thing we do that they remember is how we treat them and how we make them feel. Because Jeff has the quality of compassion, that has gone a long way to augmenting the entire team,” she said.

—Melanie Evans
**Up&Comers**

**Ije-Enu Udezê, 40**
*Chief of staff, office of the CEO, Kaiser Permanente, Oakland, Calif.*

When Ije-Enu Udezê says “I want to push you a bit,” Kaiser Permanente executives in the room start to sweat.

“...That’s a precursor for saying, ‘Get ready, I’m going to say something that might make you uncomfortable,’” said Bernard Tyson, CEO of the $55 billion integrated healthcare system Kaiser Permanente.

When Udezê “pushes a bit,” it’s to ask, “Does this really meet your objectives?” Or, “Is this what you want to be remembered for?”

Tyson nominated Udezê, his chief of staff, for Modern Healthcare’s Up & Comer recognition and described her as a passionate individual trying to make a difference.

“That’s how she rolls,” Tyson said. “In conversations with Ije (pronounced ‘E.J.’), she describes things from a member’s perspective. She’s very good at bringing the human voice into the room.”

Udezê said she knows that perspective because she grew up in the system and her mother worked for Kaiser for more than 20 years.

“I have tons of friends and family who get their care from Kaiser Permanente, so I hear stories,” she said. “I hear the good, the bad and the ugly. So I began to think about what are the root causes for some of these things.”

A first-generation American whose parents emigrated from Nigeria and met at the University of Minnesota, Udezê studied economics at the University of California at Berkeley, earned an MBA from Pepperdine University and graduated from Harvard Business School’s executive leadership program. She originally didn’t see herself in healthcare.

“I don’t do blood,” Udezê said. “But healthcare always turned out to be the focus of all our conversations—everything came back to health and wellness.”

Outside of Kaiser, Udezê serves on the board and chairs the mental health committee for Girls Inc. of Alameda County, a not-for-profit organization aimed at inspiring girls “to be strong, smart and bold.” She has also started Utuh USA, an organization building infrastructure, fostering education and developing sustainable healthcare for a village in eastern Nigeria.

Tyson predicted Udezê’s passion, empathy and people skills will take her far.

“I think she can continue to progress wherever she wants to go,” he said. “She’s respected because she respects.” —Andis Robeznieks

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**Nathan White, 37**
*Chief operating officer, Sanford Health, Sioux Falls, S.D.*

Nate White is no stranger to high-pressure situations.

But these days, it’s not about hitting critical free throws during a basketball game for the former Augustana College team captain. It’s about overseeing operations at a $3 billion rural, not-for-profit health system, where he has spent nearly a decade of his career.

White, chief operating officer of Sanford Health, first joined the Sioux Falls, S.D.-based system in 2000 as an executive intern after CEO Kelby Krabbenhoff persuaded him to consider healthcare administration.

Krabbenhoff first met White during the basketball player’s late teens and said he knew about his leadership skills in the locker room and in the classroom. Recognizing his potential, Krabbenhoff offered White the opportunity to shadow him for a year at Sanford Health. “I told him, ‘If you’re successful, we’ll scholarship you,’” Krabbenhoff said. And he was.

“In very short order, you figured out that this was a very sharp young man, very intuitive,” said Cindy Morrison, Sanford Health’s executive vice president of marketing and public policy, who first met White during his internship.

The next year, White began law school at the University of Kansas. Three years later, he was an attorney with Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr in Washington. He practiced there for just under two years before he returned to Sanford.

Since his return, White, who rejoined the system as associate general counsel before advancing to COO, has led efforts to improve care delivery and financial performance. That included a cost transformation program that resulted in $115 million in savings and a 3.3% net operating margin across the 45-hospital system. White is also leading a $500 million project to build Sanford Fargo Medical Center.

But it’s not just what White has done from a strategic or operational perspective that makes him stand out. Community engagement and service, Krabbenhoff said, is in White’s DNA.

“It’s part of his persona.”

For example, White has been instrumental in the development of a 160-acre sports complex in the region that houses athletic facilities and hosts fitness activities for local youth, something that is close to his heart.

“A lot of the lessons I learned through athletics I impart every day—building a team, motivating a team, repetition, holding people accountable,” White said. —Rachel Landen
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