

# 40 Under Forty awards honor next-gen business leaders

By **Joe Bebon** - June 25, 2018

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*The winners pose for a group shot. Photo by Sebastian Flores*

Networking, cocktails, jokes, inspiration and even bagpipes – the Fairfield County 40 Under Forty event on June 19 was a fun time not to be missed.

Held at the Italian Center in Stamford, the 14<sup>th</sup> annual awards ceremony honored the county's next generation of young business leaders from a wide variety of sectors. Matt Scott, meteorologist and co-host on Fox 61 Morning News, returned as event emcee for his third year, kicking off the night by cracking jokes about everything from the "*Incredibles 2*" movie to hate mail for misguided weather forecasts.

Scott lauded the 40 "phenomenal" awardees who were sitting in the crowd and who have helped shape Fairfield County into the prosperous region that it is. And after a few more quips, he turned the mike over to the keynote speaker: Justin Charise, a founding partner and wealth management adviser at Westport-based Saugatuck Financial.

Charise, who was also one of last year's 40 Under Forty award winners, called it "humbling to speak in front of such an accomplished group." He briefly discussed his background and provided some advice for the audience.

Raised in Norwalk, Charise attended West Point as an undergrad, deployed to the Middle East twice while serving in the U.S. Army and moved onto business school at Cornell University as a graduate student. Although he ended up with a job at Goldman Sachs, Charise eventually decided to break out on his own and become a founding partner of Saugatuck Financial, a financial planning and wealth management firm.

Charise then shared a story about his ambition to play Division I lacrosse when he was younger and the determination it required to reach his goal. Although Charise was once told he wasn't "quite big enough or quite talented enough to be able to make it," he persisted, having a stick in his hand every day and eating "enough to feed a small village" so he could grow larger.

"As fate would have it," he said, "I was recruited to play Division I lacrosse at West Point." Shortly

afterwards, as Charise and other recruits vied to avoid being cut from the Army lacrosse team, one of the assistant coaches always yelled “no regrets!” during practice sprints.

“That phrase resonated with me and became my life motto,” Charise stated. In the end, he had made the team and gradually moved his way up the ranks to become co-captain during his senior year. He also relied on that “no regrets” principle and hard-work mentality to boost his GPA at West Point from a 2.14 during his first two semesters to reaching an impressive 4.01 in his final semester.

During his keynote speech, Charise explained the bold decision to leave his investment banker position at Goldman Sachs, a job he acknowledged some might think meant he had already “made it” in life. According to him, though, the choice was necessary and reflected a shift in priorities.

“I decided I wanted a career where I felt I could have more of a direct impact on people’s lives and control over my own schedule,” he said. “One day, I wanted to be able to have kids and be a part of their lives. I wanted to be able to coach *their* lacrosse teams.”

Charise pointed out that co-founding Saugatuck Financial helped him reach each of those goals as well as to find business success overall.

“When I started the practice almost 10 years ago now, it was just myself,” he said, noting that the company has grown into a “fantastic team of nine individuals” and was recently ranked as one of the top-10 Northwestern Mutual financial planning firms in the U.S.

Charise told the audience, “Everyone being recognized tonight has been successful. In some cases, that’s led to financial success as well. Money is good. It helps you live your life by design. It can help you do more, give more and have a greater impact on your communities.

“However,” he continued, “every once in a while I think it’s good to step back and make sure we haven’t lost all the things that money can’t buy, which are the things that really matter in life: your relationships, your health, your faith.”

With that, Charise encouraged everyone to “live your life by design, have no regrets and not lose sight of what really matters” and to remember that “ideas and enthusiasm are a dime a dozen – execution is key.”

“Go out and make a difference,” he declared.

Charise stepped off the stage, and it was time to present the awards and meet the winners. In order to keep things moving swiftly – and entertaining – Scott asked every awardee one of four questions instead of having the winners give traditional acceptance speeches. The results were humorous, to say the least, and laughs abound. In fact, Laurie Orem, who accepted the award for Emily Larken, 29, kindly requested that the emcee “be nice” when asking her a question. To which Scott slyly replied, “You can trust me: I’m a weatherman.”

Scott asked some winners about their unknown talents, and the audience learned that Christopher J. Wirth, 39, can tie a cherry stem with his tongue and Nicole Pillazzo, 29, can write with her toes. Rory Farrell, 32, likes building furniture and said, “As a man with so few talents, I try not to keep them hidden.”

When asked which superhero she’d like to be, Erica DePalma, 38, replied, “One that can part traffic.” Scott said, “You’re hired. Get started on I-95 immediately.”

Meanwhile, Christina Scott, 28, and Katie Kasinskas, 36, both want to be Wonder Woman because, as Scott explained, the hero is “compassionate, strong and always sees the good in others.”

When asked which three famous people they’d like to have over for an intimate dinner party, a number of winners mentioned Oprah Winfrey, Michelle Obama or Ellen Degeneres. Karolina Alexandre, 35, said she’d like to talk with the Founding Fathers “to see what they think of how things are right now – they’d be shocked.”

When asked what he’d do if he won a million-dollar lottery jackpot, Nick Rongoe, 33, took a jab at Scott and said, “I’d buy a few things and Fox 61 some new meteorology equipment.” Other winners said they’d spend the money on charity or, in a couple of cases, on their wives’ credit card bills.

Lisa Feinberg, 35, suggested what a few other winners alluded to – that perhaps a million dollars sadly wouldn’t be enough money with which to retire before even turning 40 years old and that Connecticut can get pretty pricey. “I’m a North Florida transplant,” said Feinberg, “and if there’s one thing I’ve learned from moving here, it’s that 1 million would probably not impact my life substantially.” The audience agreed with laughter.

Once the ceremony ended, the winners stood together for a photograph, a group of young go-getters ready to help ensure that the future of Fairfield County business is promising and safe and ultimately in competent hands.

The 14<sup>th</sup> annual Fairfield County 40 Under Forty event was presented by the Fairfield County Business Journal and made possible thanks to the following sponsors: Berchem Moses PC, Deloitte, Santa Energy, UConn School Of Business, Val's Putnam Wines & Liquors, Viking Construction Inc., Webster Bank, and Yale New Haven Health System. Supporters also included Audi of Danbury, Buzz Creators and Nod Hill Brewery.

A full list of this year's winners was included in a supplement mailed out with the Business Journal's June 18 issue. You can also see an online list [here](#).

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