

GENERATION
NEXT
2016 AWARDS

MEET THE CLASS OF **2016**

Two Canadians, a music lover, and a numbers guy. A small-town cook with big dreams, a Kentucky event queen who loves her job, and a driven manager of multiple venues. This year's *Venues Today* Generation Next award winners bring an eclectic mix of solid work ethic, leadership skills, and never-say-no attitude. But most of all, their love of the sports, meeting, and entertainment industry inspires us all. They are the hosts with the most.

Kelli Ireland, Canalta Centre, Medicine Hat, Alberta



Living the Dream

Kelli Ireland brings her passion to Medicine Hat at Canalta Centre

by REBECCA NAKASHIMA

It all started with the music. 80s music especially and Billy Idol in particular. When Kelli Ireland, director of Marketing and Sales at the Canalta Centre in Medicine Hat, Alberta, was young, she and her dad would listen to vinyl records together. Thanks to the musical stylings of Led Zeppelin, Journey and Pink Floyd Ireland decided she wanted to be in rock and roll.

"I always dreamed of being in the rock and roll business, but I had no idea what that meant," said Ireland. "I wasn't talented musically in any way other than having a huge vinyl collection and a huge CD collection."

That love for music spurred Ireland on in her career, led her back home to Medicine Hat and made her a 2016 *Venues Today* Generation Next winner.

After finishing high school, Ireland moved to Vancouver to enroll in the Art Institute's Entertainment Business and Management program. In 2004, about a year in, she got an email from House of Blues about an internship opportunity.

"At that time I had no idea what House of Blues was. I'm now embarrassed to say that, since they're one of the biggest promoters in the world," said Ireland. "I did a little research and saw they worked with all of my favorite bands, so I took the internship."

The internship eventually turned into a fulltime marketing manager position and held a lot of firsts for Ireland. Her first marketing gig was sorting piles of Warp Tour posters and handbills and sending them to all the cities on the tour. Her first mistake in the industry was

putting the wrong venue on a poster, which led to her receiving her first angry email from the agent who happened to live in town.

Her boss there was Geoff Robins, senior vice president of Marketing and Digital for Live Nation Canada. Even though he hired her 12 years ago, he said he still remembers Ireland coming into his office for her first interview. Her energy and smile stuck with him.

"When you see potential you then see whether they can step up into each role," said Robins. "She did that each time. I think people have that drive and that maturity in them to get to those points, and she naturally had it in her. And obviously that has followed her the whole way through. Kelli has been able to establish herself in any market she's gone to."

Ireland stayed with House of Blues through the merger with Live Nation and for about a year after that before hitting a plateau. She was seeking something more, so she decided to get her degree in public relations in Calgary while working as a marketing consultant at the same time.

"While I was trying to finish my degree, I had a newborn baby at home, I was working as a marketing consultant and I was also waitressing to make some extra money," said Ireland. "When I finally finished my degree I just broke down. I was so happy, because for four years I had been working on this, always still trying to follow my dream while making money so I could live in Calgary and trying to build a great life for my family and still try to be a great mom. I was wearing a lot of different hats, and trying to successfully do them all.

It was very challenging, and I lacked sleep every single day, but I tried to keep a positive attitude and my head on straight. I think that's been the biggest accomplishment in my life, being able to do so many things at once, and never let my dream go."

Geoff Tanizawa, general manager, Sakamoto Entertainment, worked with Ireland during this time and was very impressed by her resolve and persistence.

"She never wavered or broke down," said Tanizawa. "Most people would crack, and she never did. She always rose to the challenge. She's always been pleasant to work with and gave it 110 percent. From agents to artists to managers, they all love her."

When Ireland left for Vancouver right out of high school, she didn't think she would ever get back to the small town she grew up in, but a call from an old colleague changed that. He wanted to bring her on board for a new building SMG Canada was opening in Medicine Hat.

"When I was younger, I wanted so much more, and I wanted to be in this big business and the concert world and it just didn't exist in Medicine Hat," said Ireland. "It's really cool how my past has led me back home. Now I've been able to take my passion and continue it and now bring it home and take everything I've learned on the road and share it with this town."

A little over a year into the job at Canalta Centre, and Ireland is still working to not only sell the new building to promoters and tours, but also educate the people of Medicine Hat

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The Memory Maker

Matt Chapman cooks up the wow-factor at Swiftel Center

by GREG LEHMAN

“Keep working hard, it will pay off. Don’t get frustrated. You’re headed in the right direction; you just have to keep the faith that you’re going to get there.” — Matt Chapman

It’s not often that a new graduate from culinary school is offered a job as an executive chef at a hotel. Even so, Matt Chapman, currently working as executive chef and food and beverage director of the Swiftel Center in Brookings, S.D., found himself in exactly that position upon completing his studies at the Le Cordon Bleu Academy of Culinary Arts in Portland, Ore.

For Dan Wilde, who was working as the assistant general manager at the Ramkota Hotel and Convention Center in Sioux Falls, Chapman’s knack for surpassing expectations and leaving lasting impressions on his customers made him an obvious choice for the position. And made him a 2016 *Venues Today* Generation Next recipient.

After working with him at other establishments in Brookings, Wilde said that Chapman would always “not just do the best for the customer, but give them a wow-factor as well, so that they’re going to have a memorable evening.”

Wilde said that when working in an industry that covers everything from weddings to conventions, growing this sort of reputation for a venue is essential. “You want to have

something where someone is going to walk away and say, ‘If I’m going to do something, I’m going to do it here.’” Chapman, according to Wilde, “does that.”

Swiftel Center’s location in Brookings is an ideal fit for Chapman since he was born in town and attended high school there. Brookings is also where he learned how to cook.

When Chapman decided on the culinary arts as a profession in high school, the direction surprised everyone, but was quickly appreciated by anyone who tasted what he made. After choosing cooking as a job when he was young, Chapman said, “It didn’t feel like a job, it felt like it came naturally.”

After graduating and getting Wilde’s offer, Chapman described an “upward path” ever since when he “rose to the challenge” of executive responsibilities.

Chapman came to his current position at Swiftel Center when Tom Richter, GM there for VenuWorks, discovered his cooking.

The product, said Richter, has exceeded expectations. Chapman has grown the business “substantially,” Richter said, increasing sales by 10% for each of the two and a half years he has

worked at Swiftel, as well as bringing revenues for food and beverages to over \$1 million in 2015.

"As soon as I got here I hit the ground running," Chapman said of his time at the venue, "and we've just been building and growing ever since. It's been at a break-neck pace." Richter said that customer service has improved as well, thanks in large part to Chapman's efforts, not to mention what he creates in the kitchen.

"What he produces in the kitchen is phenomenal," said Richter. "Every meal that we have people attend, be it a breakfast, a sandwich for lunch, or a fancy dinner, every event I hear comments that it was the best meal they've ever had. You just can't make that up."

In the short two-and-half years he has worked at Swiftel Center, Chapman's output is impressive. From serving 1,700 people at a Catholic Youth Rally in 27 minutes to holding the Sanford Hospital Gala (an event requiring building kitchens outside, putting out 10 lines, and serving food worthy of the \$150 per plate price tag to 2,000 guests), Chapman has delivered on all fronts.

"That wowed me working with him," Wilde said of the Gala. "By the end of the night you're all hugs and glad it's over, but I couldn't have done it without him. And we didn't just do it once."

Aside from his talents for large-scale organization and execution, Chapman still keeps a sharp eye on the small picture as well. Tara Krause, food and beverage manager at Swiftel Center, shared a story from 2015 in which a customer, sight unseen, came to the kitchen with special dietary needs that kept them from enjoying the meal with their party.

Undaunted, Chapman went to the kitchen and whipped up a meal for the individual that met his requirements of abstaining from dairy, gluten and shellfish. Even though the situation was a complete surprise, the customer was so impressed by Chapman's generosity and attitude that they nominated him for an Able Award, recognizing people who make efforts to help those with special needs. Chapman won the award, and Krause

applauded the recognition.

"It's great to see that people recognize his willingness to cater," Krause said, "and we want everyone to have the best possible experience they can have here. If that means helping someone with special needs then he's the first one to jump in and help."

Besides Chapman, no one is surprised to see him add the Generation Next Award for 2016 to his list of accomplishments. Nevertheless, he said that it is "actually a little overwhelming" to receive the award.

"We are such a small town and such a small staff here," Chapman said. "To be recognized for something like this is great, it's nice to know that small buildings can do big things. Looking at some of the other award recipients it seems like they are well deserving and run these big operations, where I feel like we are just making our mark just in individual relationships and individual events where we can do everything we can. It just means so much to be recognized on a national level like that."

Chapman went on to describe his staff as a family, and made it clear that the win belongs to every one of its members.

"When we tackle these big events it's because of the dedication of everybody that works here," said Chapman. "Any award that is received individually I believe is a team award. There is no way that any individual award could happen without the rest of your team."

Given the perspective and accomplishments he has obtained at this point in his career, and all at the young age of 33, Chapman said that he would tell a younger version of himself to remain strong through bouts of indecision.

"I'm very happy with where I am now," Chapman said, "so I guess I would say keep at it. Keep working hard, it will pay off. Don't get frustrated, you're headed in the right direction, you just have to keep the faith that you're going to get there."

Interviewed for this story: **Matt Chapman**, (605) 692-7539; **Tara Krause**, (605) 692-7539 x226; **Tom Richter**, (605) 697-8867; **Dan Wilde**, (605) 695-3284

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The Queen of Events

Laura Alexander is making a name for Owensboro Convention Center

by REBECCA NAKASHIMA

Laura Alexander, director of Sales & Marketing for the Owensboro (Ky.) Convention Center, began her career in one of the most basic sales positions you can have. During summer breaks from college—where she was working toward a sales degree—she was employed as a cashier at the Executive Inn Rivermont in town, a 600-room hotel with about 100,000 sq. ft. of meeting space and an upscale restaurant. After graduating, they offered her a sales job, and she was brought on full time.

The hotel was eventually demolished in 2008 to make way for the convention center, where Alexander now works, giving her a certain sense of ownership of that particular site.

"This spot on the river is my home," said Alexander, who was also married on the same spot and was voted as *Venues Today's* 2016 Generation Next Readers' Choice award winner.

During the six-year gap between the demolition of the hotel and the opening of the

convention center, Owensboro was completely off the radar for conventions and meetings. That meant a big job was in store for Alexander once Spectra Venue Management hired her in 2012.

"Owensboro didn't have anything to really drive businesses and conventions to come here," said Alexander. "No meeting space, no nothing. We really had to get back into the rotation and go after those businesses."

And because there is no CVB sales arm in Owensboro, the brunt of the work fell on Alexander's shoulders.

"She's selling the destination, she's selling the building and really markets the entire community as she's out selling conventions," said Dean Dennis, general manager of Owensboro Convention Center. "She's a person who really owned the market and brought it back from nothing."

She was the first person Dennis hired, and the craziness of opening a building hit Alexander almost immediately.

"Dean had gone out of town, because he was trying to move here," said Alexander. "Within three days of me being hired, I had to get a proposal together for the International Bluegrass Music Association, for their big thing they do in Nashville. All I had was blueprints. I had to go up there and measure to find the square footage and see how many people could fit in those rooms, and I had like two days to do that."

One of the biggest challenges was getting the building ready for the grand opening gala with only a day to flip the entire convention center.

"We literally got the keys to this building, and all of our furniture and everything couldn't get in until two or three days before," said Alexander. "We had to completely flip it from a different event. Our grand opening was scheduled for a week after another event that was coming in right before that. From that event we had about a day to completely flip the entire building and move into the building,

“I love to learn, and I’m a geek when it comes to podcasts. When I go on a work trip that’s a couple hours away, I’m listening to leadership podcasts. I love continuing that knowledge. If I don’t know the answer or I don’t know how to do something, I’m going to watch someone and learn how to do it.” — Laura Alexander

we’re talking the kitchen, plates, everything. We had 2,200 people here for our grand opening gala. It had a dinner, it had a concert component and different set ups for the rooms. The craziness of that was memorable, but seeing everyone in the community come support it, and in one location, was just amazing.”

Part of Alexander’s work ethic is her eagerness to learn. She recently shadowed Dennis after a concert to learn about settlement sheets. She’ll often go to the director or operations or food and beverage to learn about those processes as well. She said everything she learns informs her on the front end of sales.

“I love to learn, and I’m a geek when it comes to podcasts,” said Alexander. “When I go on a work trip that’s a couple hours away, I’m listening to leadership podcasts. I love continuing that knowledge. If I don’t know the answer or I don’t know how to do something,

I’m going to watch someone and learn how to do it.”

That passion and enthusiasm is what Bob Schwartz, vice president of Marketing with Spectra Venue Management, first noticed about Alexander, even through the phone. He said she’s proof that leadership can come from any level of an organization.

“Her passion and attention to detail was really remarkable through a convention marketing and sales conference call,” said Schwartz. “Soon enough she was leading the conference call, she was the moderator and leading people to participate and discuss new initiatives. It happened over time, but she was always a participant on the call and, as importantly, had something to contribute to the call. Being in Owensboro it was inspirational because she was doing a lot of innovative

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Laura Alexander
Director of Sales and Marketing
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The Born Leader

Trent Merritt surrounds himself with high performers to make things happen

by GREG LEHMAN

Even at the young age of 31, Trent Merritt's career with Spectra Venue Management has left a lasting impression of cooperation and whip-smart strategy spanning the United States and Canada. After cutting his teeth in the venue industry at Liacouras Center at Temple University in Philadelphia, where he studied sport recreation management, Merritt has worked for Spectra in both countries before coming to his current roles as regional vice president for Spectra and general manager of Sun Dome Arena at the University of South Florida, Tampa.

Merritt's talents did not take long to be recognized by those around him, many of whom helped elect him as a 2016 *Venues Today* Generation Nexter. Tim Murphy, regional vice president for Spectra Venue Management, first met Merritt when the latter was working on the part-time staff at Liacouras Center. The impact he left was easy for Murphy to recall even today.

"You can always tell, in our business, not only bright people, but people who really like the business," said Murphy, "and you can tell they're excited to work in a place like an arena and do the job. You could tell he really liked the business right off the bat."

After working at so many different locations, Merritt has found much to value about the expansive experience he has obtained through taking responsibilities with different venues, accounts and co-workers. Becoming well-rounded has been one of the major take-aways, he said, as well as the chance to find his particular strengths.

"From a personal or professional development side, it gives you an opportunity to figure out what you enjoy doing," Merritt said of the different positions he has moved into, "and it gives you an opportunity where you appreciate the good opportunities that you have and you don't take them for granted."

One of these specific lessons has been a need to be "aggressive" on the booking side.

"If you're going to come in and run a

place, and you're not the 20,000 seat NBA or NHL arena, or you're not the LiveNation or AEG theater, you're going to have to be aggressive," Merritt said. He shared that this approach can lead to finding some unexpected partners, in which, "a lot of times you end up working with your competitors, and that can be a tough balance to strike at times," Merritt said. "But, I think as long as you treat people right and you develop the key relationships the rest will take care of itself."

The fruits of these labors have been obvious to those around him. When Merritt was sent by Spectra to WFCU Centre in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, Brian Ohl, regional vice president at Spectra Venue Management and food services and hospitality and general manager at Budweiser Gardens, said the change was significant.

"He turned that thing around," said Ohl. Where the facility had struggled before in terms of attracting events and promoters, Ohl said that Merritt, "came in and made great strides at bringing that venue up to the level

we expect out of our venues.” He attributed Merritt’s success to not just his ability to build relationships, but also “roll up the sleeves and get after” deals that makes sense for everybody.

At the Sun Dome, Merritt used these abilities to handle everything from consulting on renovations to the stadium to keeping costs at a fiscally responsible level. Merritt said that the University of South Florida has been an ideal partner in giving Spectra the freedom it needs to excel in their space.

Merritt also shared that the business model is not one looking to cash in on quick gains, but a long-term relationship that he hopes will last long into the future.

“We hope we are here for the next 25 years,” Merritt said, “when we are hopefully going to build another arena.”

Handling the responsibilities of a regional vice president and general manager presents

myriad challenges, and Merritt said that prioritizing and organizing himself is by far the biggest challenge for him. Even so, Merritt attributed much of his success to the people around him, from those he has hired to his mentors.

“If you’ve got good people it makes your job a lot easier,” Merritt said. “You have to hire good people, you have to set the expectation level, and then you’ve got to let them do their job.”

With the special requirements that the venue industry demands of its members, Merritt made it clear that appreciation and respect are critical to this “people business.”

“We’re not asking people to work nine to five,” Merritt said, “we’re asking people to work crazy hours for a lot of the entry level and some mid-level positions.... So you have to treat people right, whether they’re your partners, employees, clients, whatever it is.”

Merritt said that he found the Generation

Next Award itself to be representative of Spectra’s culture in how it fosters future leaders by giving people new opportunities to grow with the venue industry.

“Just a big congratulations to everyone,” Merritt said to his fellow winners, “because there are a lot of people who work really hard in this industry and don’t get recognized like this. I think this really does recognize a lot of those people that have worked just as hard and just as long and just as many hours.”

Hank Abate, senior vice president at Spectra Venue Management, said that Merritt’s future looks more than bright, saying that he, “will be among the industry leaders, if he’s not there already.”

Interviewed for this story: **Trent Merritt**, (813) 974-8922;
Brian Ohl, (519) 667-5732; **Hank Abate**, (215) 389-9468;
Tim Murphy, (215) 952-5466



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Master of Analysis

Mike Warkentin quickly rises through the ranks at Rexall Place, Edmonton, Alberta

by REBECCA NAKASHIMA

“Growing up, I never wanted to be the athlete or the entertainer. I grew up wanting to be the guy behind the scenes.” — Mike Warkentin

Numbers don't lie, and they play a big part in Mike Warkentin's management method, which the venue manager of Rexall Place in Edmonton, Alberta, said has been described as “perplexing but in a good way.”

“I bring a different approach than a lot of people are used to,” said Warkentin. “I'm very quantitative. I heavily analyze the numbers, and I think probably one of the biggest places in the industry for an opportunity to grow is the use of predictive analytics and actually seeing before an event comes how it's going to perform. Knowing how those numbers are going to interact, knowing what your sales are going to do, knowing how many hot dogs you're going to sell.”

The votes for the *Venues Today* 2016 Generation Next Social Butterfly award have also been tallied, finding Warkentin the clear

winner for this year. He has quickly climbed the ranks at Rexall Place, coming in as an intern only in 2013, then being brought on full time, before taking over the helm when Adam Cook left to be general manager at Rose Quarter in Portland, Ore.

“It quickly became apparent that he was incredibly talented and skilled and incredibly intelligent about what he was doing and that he was going to be an impact player in the industry and in Edmonton, whether we picked him up or not,” said Cook. “It just became a situation where we had to find a role for him and had to find a way to get him involved.”

Warkentin, an Alberta native, had moved to San Diego to complete an MBA sports program at San Diego State University, with the original intention of becoming an agent to professional athletes after having worked with some National Hockey League agents himself.

"I liked the way they were able to leverage the industry," said Warkentin. "They were kind of the guys behind the guy. Growing up, I never wanted to be the athlete or the entertainer. I grew up wanting to be the guy behind the scenes."

Warkentin said the program opened up his eyes to other areas of the sports business and, through the school, became connected with Northlands.

"Mike is one of those guys who is incredibly driven and has known what he wants to do and where he wants to go but has learned to adapt that as he's gone along that path for his changing circumstances," said Cook. "Whether it's working for a sports team versus working for a venue, working for an arena or working within the new concept Northlands is starting to roll out, but always being driven to do well at whatever that role

is, which has allowed him to advance very quickly for somebody with a limited background within the industry."

At Northlands, he was able to get his feet wet with trade shows and the 10-day K Days fair. He took over stage management for that event one summer before taking over the entire entertainment portfolio and management of Rexall Place.

"It's been a pretty quick road," said Warkentin. "Probably one of the biggest accomplishments in my career is just how quickly it unfolded. It's been a natural progression, but at times it can be challenging. A lot of times I learn on the fly, because I didn't grow up around entertainment."

Before enrolling in the MBA program, Warkentin was in agriculture, doing genetic-purity testing for a canola company. Though unconventional, Warkentin feels it prepared

him for this industry.

"I was doing a lot of quality-assurance testing of genetic crops," said Warkentin, "but at the same time, I was doing a lot of logistics and international shipping. The attention to detail that's required when you're shipping 25 containers of canola seed across the world is the exact same attention to detail required when you're putting on a major concert. It's going through line by line and seeing who needs what and making sure your chains of communication are open. So it actually did prepare me very well for this industry."

But it was a particular concert that really solidified it for Warkentin.

"It was the moment when I knew this was where I wanted to be," said Warkentin. "I still remember it to this day. It was May 22, 2013. It was the first time I had seen

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WE TAKE GREAT PRIDE IN CONGRATULATING **MIKE WARKENTIN**

2016 GENERATION NEXT AWARD WINNER

From spearheading the end of an era to being an important part of a brand new future, Mike's hard work and enthusiasm is not only award-worthy, it inspires all of us who are fortunate to work with him.

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LIVING THE DREAM CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

about the business and the potential it brings to the city. She's also able to use her time on the promoting side to know what promoters are looking for and offer a little something more for them in the local marketing of a show.

"It is truly the most challenging job I've ever been in, however, it is so exciting, because that's what keeps me going, those challenges that come up every single day," said Ireland. "It's a totally new industry in this market, so you're constantly educating the public while trying to get new bands and sell yourself as a city and as a building. Most of our group here is young, so at the same time you're trying to make sure everyone takes you seriously and trusts what you're saying."

If Ireland worked in a job where she never got to see the end result, she wouldn't be satisfied. Working through the challenges and struggles leading up to a show day and then seeing it all come together and pay off is what makes it all worthwhile for her.

"When it comes to show day and you watch the stage get set up and walk through the venue and see all the people who are doing this for the same reasons you are, for the passion and the love for it, and then the crowds start walking through the doors and they start cheering, that makes it all worth it," said Ireland. "Every stress or challenge you faced to get to that show day is completely lost and forgotten, because of what's happening right in front of you."

It was her love for music, the draw of rock and roll and her inner fan that got Ireland into this business in the first place. And today, as she tries to convert her young daughter into a fellow 80s music lover, she's proud to say she never gave up on her dream but always followed her passion.

"Don't quit. You're going to have your rough days, but in the end, if it is truly what you love, don't let go of that feeling of seeing your favorite band," said Ireland. "Don't let that fan in you disappear. Keep that passion going." 🌐

Interviewed for this story: **Kelli Ireland**, (403) 905-0057; **Geoff Tanizawa**, (604) 332-0315; **Geoff Robins**, (604) 683-4233

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things in that market that other venues could replicate."

Both Schwartz and Dennis said they wouldn't be surprised to see her as general manager of a building one day.

"She is one of those people you don't have to worry about getting the job done," said Dennis. "You can say this is what needs to happen, and it happens. That's important to our next generation, having those people you can rely on and know they're going to see it through. She was a great hire for us as a company, and we know she's going to do good things in the industry moving forward."

For Alexander, the saying, "choose a job you love, and you'll never work a day in your life" has always stuck out in her mind and has now become a reality.

"I will be doing this even after retirement," said Alexander. "If I won the lottery tomorrow and had millions of dollars, I would still be at work, because I love doing this. It doesn't even feel like work. Even on those days when I'm having a bad day and nothing is going right, I still enjoy my job."

Part of that appeal is the variety and opportunity to be creative that the job provides.

"It's not the same thing every day," said Alexander. "No group is exactly the same. It doesn't become monotonous. You're able to change things up year after year, even if you have the same group, a lot of times you can add a different component and it will completely change it. I love being creative in this sense."

Even with the challenges of working with groups that aren't used to event or meeting planning, Alexander said she wouldn't want to move out of this industry for anything.

"I really enjoy working in the events industry. You either love it or hate it, and you're going to know that within the first few months," said Alexander. "There are great sales people out there that don't like this industry because they prefer a tangible product. I love it." 🌐

Interviewed for this story: **Laura Alexander**, (270) 687-8926; **Dean Dennis**, (270) 687-8921; **Bob Schwartz**, (215) 389-9477

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everything unfold. I was a part of the on sale, building, scaling, being there for the load in. I was the guy at the venue that day. Being there for that first show, it clicked as this is where I want to be and this is the path I want to be on."

Though he only worked with him for a couple years at Northlands, Cook said he hopes to do so again in the future and expects big things from Warkentin, because of his servant leadership style and his use of a predictive model for analyzing data.

"As Richard Anderson once phrased to me in a similar conversation, it's what's called the lifetime no-cut contract, which is a Major League Baseball term for basically you're on my team as long as you want to be," said Cook. "For me, Mike's one of those guys."

With his career in mind, Warkentin advises others to take every opportunity you get, whether you think it's beneath you or you think it's too big or too small. Never say no to anything and take on as much as you can.

"Know the difference between a yes attitude and a never-say-no attitude. A never-say-no attitude is the approach I take to this. It's not always going to be a yes, because there are times when you need to push back. A never-say-no attitude is trying to figure out a new path."

The analytics piece has always been a part of Warkentin's work and is something he sees as the next step in venue and event management. As his portfolio has grown, it's become harder to run for every event, but that's a place he hopes to get to. But the unique people, challenges and opportunities are still his favorite part of the job.

"I kind of take it for granted sometimes," said Warkentin. "When I tell people what I do, they have an instant reaction like it's the coolest thing on earth. Or when I give someone a tour or I'm at a show, I see the reaction on people's faces, not only to what I do, but to being in the building and the show you're putting on. Just that reaction is pretty special." 🌐

Interviewed for this story: **Mike Warkentin**, (780) 471-7220; **Adam Cook**, (503) 797-9868