



# The Ten People You Don't Know Now, But Soon Will (And Who May Change Providence)

By John Taraborelli

Photography by Jonathan Beller

**T**his is our eighth annual list of up-and-comers from various fields, and this year we think it's more important than ever. It's no secret that our state had its struggles last year, and sometimes it seemed like there was nothing to talk about but bad news. That is why we're excited to start the new year with ten fresh reasons to believe in the talent and resources of Rhode Island.

Of these ten talented individuals, eight are not native Rhode Islanders, and the two that are left and came back. All of them continue to live and work here because they see a unique, creative place with as many opportunities as it has challenges, with as much to offer them as they do it. Read on and see how these people, and countless others like them, can change Providence for the better.



**Christine West  
Green Building**

**Age: 39**  
**Title: Principal, William Kite Architects**  
**Website: [kitearchitects.com](http://kitearchitects.com)**

“Thermostats just aren’t sexy. People’s eyes glaze over when you talk about insulation,” says Christine West of some of the simple but unglamorous fixes to make buildings more efficient. She should know: as a Principal at Kite Architects, she is at the forefront of energy-efficient design, working on the East Side to build the state’s first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) home targeting platinum status, the highest certification level for green design. She’s also working with Crossroads RI on a multi-family project in North Kingstown that will be the first LEED certified affordable housing in the state, and another project with the West Broadway Neighborhood Association and Spurwink RI on a future home for the Urban Greens food co-op.

For West, green building is the way to repair crumbling urban landscapes and leverage the tremendous level of talent that is one of the state’s latent resources. She believes that Rhode Island’s industrial design and manufacturing infrastructure doesn’t get enough credit for innovating and adapting its business model accordingly. “That’s not typical,” she says. “People take it for granted here.”

To that end, West is working with Matt Grigsby (also on this list) to design customizable, affordable, multifamily and mixed-use housing that can fill in the cityscape. “Using existing infrastructure is one of the greenest things you can do,” she notes. They plan to launch the project this year. By late spring, her LEED Platinum house should be complete, which will serve as a model for environmentally responsible building. Also in 2010, she will continue working on a Wellness and Fitness Center at URI and live-work lofts in the West Side’s old Lawton Storage building.

In addition, West is President-Elect of the American Institute of Architects, Rhode Island chapter, and on the board of the Providence Revolving Fund, an organization that helps transform neighborhoods while still preserving their architectural heritage. With West firmly in a leadership role in the city’s architecture community, we can count on more forward thinking, environmentally-friendly building – and better thermostats.



**Jason Yoon**  
Art/Education

**Age: 31**  
**Title: Executive Director, New Urban Arts**  
**Website: [newurbanarts.org](http://newurbanarts.org)**

On a late afternoon, the Westminster Street studio of New Urban Arts is abuzz with activity. Presiding over it is Jason Yoon, Executive Director of an after-school arts program that the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities recognized last November as one of the 15 best in the country. The second year under Yoon's direction was truly a very good year.

"We're a much bigger organization than we were three years ago," explains the RISD grad and native New Yorker of the organization - and its growing ranks of artist/mentors - he inherited from founder (and one of our "10 People" in 2004) Tyler Denmead. "I think there are a lot of creative practitioners who aren't satisfied just making art in their studio and not connecting with real people. That's what we're providing."

The organization's mission is to foster connections between students and practicing artists who volunteer as mentors. It's a three-pronged approach to succeed as an after-school program, a community-based nonprofit and a studio producing compelling, vital art. It seems to be working. NUA received two other national accolades last year: it was chosen as one of 20 programs to be studied for a report by the US Department of Education on best practices in after-school programs, and one of nine organizations selected by Artography, a nationwide documentation project highlighting artists whose work reflects changing demographics in America.

After a banner year, Yoon knows the spotlight is on NUA to respond to what he calls "good pressure," both from within the organization and from national observers, to establish solid alumni programs and training opportunities for artists and educators, like the professional development workshops it ran for art teachers in Providence schools last year. "If we can inspire art teachers to connect with their own practices, their classrooms will be more vibrant," he notes. "It's a way to expand our outreach outside our studio and into classrooms."

**John Jacobson**  
**Green Development**

**Age: 39**  
**Title: President, JTJ Investments**  
**Website: [jtjinvestments.com](http://jtjinvestments.com)**

"Because Providence is the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, it's sort of the birthplace of the greenhouse effect," postulates John Jacobson, an artist and recording studio owner in a former life who made the transition into development. "This is ground zero. I really see energy as our Industrial Revolution this century. It's going to be the biggest economic driver."

The principal of JTJ Investments is out to prove that energy-smart development can transform Providence's economy. After purchasing a more than century old jewelry factory at 28 Wolcott Street, he turned it into a high performance building that minimizes energy use through a combination of solar power and high-efficiency design. Jacobson lives and works in the building, and in August of last year, Alteris Renewables, the largest design-build renewable energy company in the Northeast, moved roughly 25% of its workforce there, an important victory: Jacobson gained a tenant, JTJ Investments saw a return on investment, jobs came to Rhode Island, and the green movement gained a powerful talking point. "I saw that it wasn't pie in the sky," Jacobson reflects. "We could do development, fix up these old buildings, and at the same time make them efficient."

Reusing old buildings is generally more efficient than constructing new ones, and with an abundance of those in Providence, fixing them up can transform the economy. In the spring, Jacobson will co-teach a class on energy use in buildings at RISD, in addition to the energy auditing class he already co-taught at the Apeiron Institute for Sustainable Living. He sees teaching and consulting as the next logical steps, going hand-in-hand with development. "I like the idea of teaching. I like the idea of doing buildings," he says. "If it was up to me, I'd do one building at a time and my legacy would be 30 or 40 highly efficient buildings. That would be a really good change for one person to bring to the community."



## **Matt Grigsby** **Industrial Design**

**Age: 26**

**Title: CEO, Ecolect**

**Website: [ecolect.net](http://ecolect.net)**

“Since we are a small state and city, our competitive advantage will come from being adaptable, nimble and full of new energy,” claims Matt Grigsby. The former upstate New Yorker has proven to be adaptable himself, starting as an illustrator attending school in Baltimore, then transferring to RISD, where he discovered industrial design. He stayed in Providence after graduation to start his own company, designing electronics for international clients.

Grigsby eventually became frustrated with the lack of environmental awareness in manufacturing, particularly in the choice of materials. That prompted him to found Ecolect, an online clearinghouse of information about eco-friendly materials, along with a business partner based in San Francisco about three-and-a-half years ago. He is now the guru to whom designers turn for advice on how to build truly green products, something he sees not just in terms of altruism, but its potential as an economic driver.

“If you want to create something that’s longer lasting, that’s going to not only be profitable but also valuable for people, there’s a huge competitive advantage,” he notes. That advantage will come into play as he embarks on a project to develop customizable housing that is both eco-friendly and price-competitive.

Grigsby will also launch an Ecolect online store this year, making not just information, but actual materials, more accessible.

More ambitious, however, is his work to create a nationally adopted “nutrition label” that will account for all of a material’s environmental impact factors – life cycle analysis, extraction, processing, manufacturing, distribution, water and energy use, carbon impact, etc. – in an easy-to-understand system. With this in place, manufacturers will know the true impact of materials they’re using, and consumers will be able to avoid “greenwashing,” the misleading labeling of some products as environmentally friendly. It’s another step towards educating people – and that’s just as important as design. “Education is about 50% of what we do,” estimates Grigsby. “There’s a lot of confusion about sustainability, so education is important.”



**Adeola Oredola**  
**Youth Empowerment/Education**

**Age: 29**

**Title: Executive Director, Youth In Action**

**Website: [youthinactionri.org](http://youthinactionri.org)**

“I was angry that when I went to college, I had to do three times as much as everyone else in order to be good at writing papers. I was bitter about the quality of my education,” recalls Adeola Oredola, Executive Director of Youth In Action, of her public schooling in the city of Providence. Far from letting that experience limit her, Oredola went on to graduate from Brown University. Rather than convincing her to leave her hometown behind, it strengthened her resolve to stay and help change those circumstances – or, perhaps more accurately, help other young people change their own circumstances.

Youth In Action is a nonprofit dedicated to youth empowerment, providing academic mentoring, health education, leadership training, violence prevention and much more. Most importantly, however, it treats students as stakeholders in the issues that affect them directly. “For young people, it’s a place where they have the power to make change in the community,” explains Oredola. “In most other places in their lives, they’re someone’s child, but here, they’re actually the powerful ones.”

From 2003-2006, Oredola served on the Providence School Board. The Leadership Rhode Island grad took over the director’s job at YIA in 2007. Last year, it became one of the five citywide organizations in the new Youth 4 Change Alliance, which is working on a Youth Bill of Rights. The first draft was presented at a December 10 event. Now the real work begins: allowing young people to dig into the issues it addresses, fine tune it, and seek support from local political leaders for its youth defined solutions.

Oredola believes that fostering this sort of collaboration is one of her most important functions at YIA. “People don’t realize the quality of work that happens in youth organizations across the city,” she says. “We have common values around youth empowerment and social change, and we could really make a big impact if we work together.”



## **Junior Jabbe Business**

**Age: 25**

**Title: Sales and Marketing Manager, Banneker Industries**

**Website: [banneker.com](http://banneker.com)**

Rhode Island is used to bad economic news, but Junior Jabbe, Sales and Marketing Manager at Banneker Industries, refuses to succumb to cynicism.

"We've been hiring a lot lately," says the Bryant grad, a Maryland native. "That's key to us. We've got to keep driving growth so we can be one of the companies to help get Rhode Island out of this damn recession."

Banneker is a world-class provider of supply chain solutions - meaning it helps move materials from suppliers to manufacturers to customers, providing warehousing, transportation and assembly along the way. The company has been one of the state's quiet success stories, expanding its operations into Indiana and California and working with a growing roster of international clients.

Jabbe, who started at Banneker as an intern, is a big part of that, taking the lead role in driving new business across the country, and traveling in a supporting position to expand international operations. However, it's not just his business acumen, but his notion of corporate citizenship that makes him someone to watch. "We definitely have a culture of responsibility," he says of his company. "That includes monetary donations as well as time and energy." Providing a model of the young, emerging business leader as public servant, Jabbe himself works with Big Brothers of Rhode Island, the Amos House and the Rhode Island Community Food Bank, among others.

"I think we all have a responsibility to help benefit the community that we live in," Jabbe reflects. "I look to be a leader - both professionally as a businessperson trying to be pro-Rhode Island, and from a civic standpoint to be one of the leaders in the community that people know they can rely on." As he enters the next Leadership Rhode Island class and takes office as the new Vice President of Rhode Island Young Professionals, he'll have plenty of opportunity to achieve that.



**Andy Cutler**  
**Branding/Communications**

**Age: 43**

**Title: Partner, Cutler & Company**

**Website: [cutlerandcompany.com](http://cutlerandcompany.com)**

"If we limited our practice to just going where the money is, we'd be missing out on a lot of great work," claims Andy Cutler, founder of Cutler & Company, a communications design firm that specializes in the role of connectivity in building successful ventures. He means it, too: 30% of his work is pro bono, lending advice and support to endeavors like New Urban Arts, A Better World By Design (a now annual conference for innovators) and the Global Alliance to Immunize Against AIDS.

Cutler & Company is a virtual firm that remains lean and mean in terms of full-time staff, instead contracting out much of its work on a freelance basis. "My job really is to connect the dots in a way that allows people to progress in their endeavor," he explains. One of his goals for 2010 is to re-brand Cutler & Company as a new firm called Connectivity, an important word for Cutler. That ability to connect people and opportunities is what landed him on this list – and seemingly has him involved in or cheerleading for every worthwhile project in Providence.

He is on the advisory board of the new Providence Career and Technical Academy, the Providence After-School Alliance's Hub initiative, Social Enterprise RI and the Rhode Island Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship. He will also teach a class called "The Brand of You" at RISD Continuing Education and co-teach a course at Babson College's Center for Entrepreneurship entitled "The Creative City: Providence." As if 2010 is not enough, Cutler is already looking ahead to 2011, our city's 375th birthday, and is developing a proposal to celebrate the milestone.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the connections Cutler continues to make throughout – and on behalf of – the city. "I find it's an accessible community," he notes. "If you're interested in something, chances are at least one other person is, too."



**Kim Ahern**  
**Politics/Public Service**

**Age: 26**  
**Title: Attorney; Judicial Law Clerk,**  
**Rhode Island Supreme Court**

"It's a great place for a young, professional community to start building," recent Roger Williams Law School grad Kim Ahern says of Providence. "I would love to see more students that go to school here stay here and keep impacting their communities."

Ahern has done just that, originally coming from her native Virginia to attend Providence College. ("It's the only place in the U.S. where you can major in public and community service," she claims.) She stayed in Rhode Island for law school, and then for a clerkship under Supreme Court Justice Maureen McKenna Goldberg that runs through September of this year. It was a stint as a Mayoral Fellow at City Hall during her undergrad years, however, that initially caused her to think about staying here. "That was one of the things that really hooked me on Providence," she recalls, "actually getting off the campus, getting into the city and seeing what was happening here."

The 2008 election first brought Ahern to our attention in a big way as one of the state's top organizers for the Obama campaign and an elected delegate at the Democratic National Convention. She is also Vice President of the RI Young Democrats, a recently elected board member of the Women's Fund of RI, and one of the founders of Drinking Liberally, a monthly social event for progressives. In the spring she'll be organizing a fundraiser for the Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence. She is considered one of the rising stars of public service, and one source called her the "most promising female political star out there."

What are Ahern's plans now that she's decided to stick around? "I want to be a good resident of Providence and contribute to the city in whatever way I can," she says. "I think I'm off to a good start." If all this is only the beginning, we can't wait to see what lies ahead.

**Deb Dormody**  
**Arts and Culture**

**Age: 37**  
**Title: "Boss Lady," Craftland; Program Manager, Greater Kennedy Plaza**  
**Website: [craftlandshow.com](http://craftlandshow.com); [kennedyplaza.org](http://kennedyplaza.org); [ifnbooks.com](http://ifnbooks.com)**

Revitalizing downtown Providence is an important goal for most residents. For Deb Dormody, it's a full-time job – well, two actually. As "boss lady" at Craftland, she took the marketplace for local arts and crafts from a seasonal pop-up store to a permanent, year-round operation on Westminster Street. As Program Manager for Greater Kennedy Plaza (including the skating center), she brought things like Roller Derby, the Indie Arts/RI Festival, a weekly concert series/beer garden and a farmers' market to the city center.

In her second year at Kennedy Plaza, Dormody saw a lot of new programming, but more importantly, changing perceptions. No longer just a bus station or a place to loiter, the plaza started to become a thriving urban hub. "This past year there was a different event every single day," she reflects. "That's a big achievement, but for me, it's more simple things – like seeing somebody walk their dog through there or a dad and a kid playing Frisbee – that is kind of a dramatic change."

As for Craftland, next August will mark its first full year, and Dormody hopes to maintain the excitement, "to constantly be fresh and changing, so that we seem like the new kid on the block the whole time." That means a rotating series of exhibits in the Craftland Gallery, and an interesting class schedule for the store's School of Craft. This month, the filmmaker of the documentary *Handmade Nation*, which spotlights local craft movements around the country, including ours, comes to Craftland to screen her film and curate a show that runs through February.

In her "spare" time, which seems like it couldn't possibly exist, Dormody continues to run her own bookbindery, IfN Books, which she started in 2000. It's possibilities like these – for creative people to do surprising things and actually succeed – that first attracted her to Providence from Maine, and kept her here. "What I like about Providence," she explains, "is that you don't see a lot of things coming."



**Melissa Withers**  
**Business/Innovation**

**Age: 35**

**Title: Executive Director, Business Innovation Factory**

**Website: [businessinnovationfactory.com](http://businessinnovationfactory.com)**

In December of 2008, Melissa Withers and Saul Kaplan, both formerly of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, started working full time on the Business Innovation Factory, a nonprofit project they co-founded in 2004 while still at EDC. Withers is now the Executive Director. "We focus on creating real world labs where collaborators from different backgrounds can focus on designing and developing new solutions for the big problems of our day," she explains.

What this means is bringing together partners from industries and companies around the country and the world to experiment with better ways to solve the problems of the people they serve. BIF fosters this experimentation through a number of projects, including its three experience labs. Its Elder Experience Lab, for example, worked with partners like Swedish personal care products manufacturer SCA to understand and improve the elder care experience. Their Student Experience and Code Green Energy Innovation Labs provide similar resources to innovators in those respective fields.

Withers is focused on working with national and international players in order to get Rhode Island "to think about playing out of its league a little bit." The Factory hosts an annual summit, heading into its sixth year, that brings top-tier talent to Rhode Island to give presentations on how they've managed to innovate their fields. They don't get paid to come; they show up because they see opportunity here.

In addition to her work at the BIF, Withers is an active board member with Young Voices, a youth empowerment organization, and one of the founding trustees of the Providence Awesome Foundation, which awards \$1000 each month to make an "awesome" idea happen. "There is a community of people that are very, very invested in helping Providence succeed," says Withers. "My commitment this year is to do everything I can personally and professionally to keep that network motivated and looking forward."



## A Look Back At Last Year's 10

**Mike Ritz** is now the Executive Director at Leadership RI. He also founded I Heart Providence, a celebration of the city now going into its second year, and Rhody Food Tours, offering culinary explorations of the state.

**Holly Jensen's** short play, *Class Act: Version 379*, was produced at the Boston Theatre Marathon and Playwrights' Platform Summer Festival, where it won runner-up for Best Play. She was selected to write a one-act play for the Infinite Story Festival in Boston last September and will have another one performed at Turtle Lane Playhouse's teen festival in Newton, MA this month.

**Jill Davidson's** book, *Small Schools, Big Ideas: The Essential Guide to Successful School Transformation*, was published last November. She is still co-president of the Martin Luther King Elementary School PTO and Publication Director at the Coalition for Essential Schools. She is now a consultant for the Rhode Island After-School Plus Alliance.

**Kyla Coburn** and her firm bought and renovated a 9000 square foot mill in Central Falls to serve as their headquarters. Their design studio, office and wood shop are now located there. They also built five live/work lofts in the mill and filled them with working artists. Kyla designed the new restaurant Ama's off Broadway, and the nautical-themed interior has been drawing rave reviews. She has been doing more residential work, including tile, furniture and mural projects. Her biggest accomplishment, however, was the birth of her second child, a daughter, Alya.

**Peter Lee** is still President of the John Hope Settlement House. As the lead agency for the Providence Earned Income Tax Credit Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Coalition, John Hope helped net \$3.3 million in refunds for low income tax payers. In November, the Champlin Foundations pledge a grant of \$205,000 to renovate the Settlement House's NCAA-regulation gymnasium. John Hope was also named as a 2010-2012 Community Impact Grant Recipient by the United Way of Rhode Island for its proposed collaboration with Community Works Rhode Island, Olneyville Housing Corporation and West Elmwood Housing Development to provide financial literacy coaching and classes for the children and families it serves.

**Jorge Elorza** helped launch the Rhode Island Latino Policy Institute at Roger Williams University, where he remains an associate professor of law. He is co-chairman of the LPI's board of directors. In September, the LPI concluded its national search for an executive director, hiring Assistant Superintendent of New Bedford Public Schools, Fred Fuentes. Elorza and the LPI were also a part of the research team behind a Brown University report on the political attitudes and civic engagement of Latinos in Rhode Island, entitled *Myths vs. Reality: Results From the New England Latino Survey*.

**Kipp Bradford**, along with Brian Jepson, organized Maker Faire Rhode Island. The event, which celebrates "arts, crafts, engineering, science projects and the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) mindset," was launched by *Make* magazine in 2006 in San Mateo, California. This was the first Maker Faire in Rhode Island, running from September 15-19. It included hands-on workshops, robot demonstrations, art and technology competitions and a lighting of WaterFire.

**Julian Dash** remains the director of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation's Renewable Energy Fund. The EDC approved \$1.2 million for the Renewable Energy Fund for eight projects, estimated to create 21 full-time and 100 part-time jobs. In November, it voted to partially fund three more projects. The Renewable Energy Fund also awarded grants for 14 feasibility studies, one municipal project and two affordable housing projects.

**Joe O'Connor** is still the General Manager at WRNI. Under his leadership, the station continues to meet its funding goals. This year WRNI hired two political reporters: Ian Donniss, formerly of the *Providence Phoenix*, and Scott MacKay, formerly of the *Providence Journal*. The station increased the scope of its local reporting, like its successful "One Square Mile" series, which provided in-depth coverage of communities like Central Falls and Newport from a variety of angles. **PM**

## 10 More to Watch

**Ashley Holt:** President of Providence Roller Derby; got the organization heavily involved in community work

**Chris Blazejewski:** Co-founder of Drinking Liberally, a monthly social event for progressives; got all three gubernatorial candidates to make appearances

**Simon Moore:** Founder and Executive Director of College Visions, a nonprofit to help low income and first-generation students enroll in college

**Elizabeth Perry:** Business Development Account Manager for RIEDC's Every Company Counts Initiative; owner of Gracie's Gourmet pet treats; founder of Danny Perry Memorial Softball Tournament to raise money for leukemia research

**Branden Lewis:** Chef/Instructor for the Genesis Center's culinary program; trains students from immigrant and refugee communities for careers in the restaurant industry; plans to open Providence's first Indonesian restaurant

**Jeshua Zapata:** President of Xzito, a web development company and RI's Hispanic Business of the Year in 2007; in the next Leadership RI class

**Megan Hall:** Health care reporter for WRNI

**David Beauchesne:** Director of Education for the RI Philharmonic and Music School

**Tony Simon:** Deputy District Director for Senator Whitehouse; field organizer for Obama in New Hampshire

**Ben Jones:** Founder of Left Brain, an internet marketing firm; political chair of RI Sierra Club

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