

# Coming of Age

## Young Professionals Society Helps Its Members Plant Roots

**Originally conceived roughly two years ago, the Young Professional Society of Greater Springfield has made great strides since a get-together staged to gauge interest in such an organization wildly exceeded expectations and convinced organizers that there was both a need and an important mission to carry out. That mission is broad, but boils down to three prime directives: to engage, involve, and educate a demographic group that is vital to the region's future.**

By **GEORGE O'BRIEN**

**M**ichelle Sade says she has a number of qualitative and quantitative measures for the relative success of the Young Professional Society of Greater Springfield, or YPS, with regard to its mission and various efforts to meet it during its nearly 18 months in existence.

One of her favorites, which falls into both categories, really, is the tally (unofficial, but, in her mind,



*YPS officers, from left, Trevis Wray, Michelle Sade, Jeffrey Fialky, and Alyssa Carvalho.*

impressive) for the number of people who have said, 'I wish there had been something like this when I was your age' — or words to that effect.

Sade, 31, operations manager for United Personnel in Springfield and the society's outgoing president, hears this from the leaders of area companies and nonprofit agencies who address YPS members at the group's regular CEO luncheons (more on those later) and also from co-workers and colleagues at chamber of commerce functions and other business gatherings. Such comments, heard and logged away by just about every member of the society, verifies the notion that this group is doing something right.

Actually, a number of things.

Summing them all up, Alyssa Carvalho, membership manager for the Greater Springfield Convention & Visitors Bureau and YPS's incoming president, says they help young profession-

als (defined as those under 40) "put down roots."

And by that, Carvalho, 25, meant that the society helps people in a wide range of professions gain a real connection to this region, one that might facilitate use of their talents and energy to help improve overall quality of life in the Valley, while also providing some impetus for them to stay here. And that's a major concern among employers wondering how they will fill tens of thousands of vacancies over the next few decades as Baby Boomers retire.

"One of our slogans is '*live, work, play, and stay*,'" said Carvalho, adding that the level of desire to stay is generally a function of the quantity and quality of those first three, and YPS strives to expose members to the region's many assets, thus providing impetus to remain in — and be a part of — the area.

The society now boasts

roughly 200 members and about 900 subscribers — those who have some connection to the group and attend some of its events, for example — and it is increasing its visibility and relevance with seemingly each passing month, said Jeffrey Fialky, an attorney with Bacon Wilson and the society's incoming vice president.

A corporate and banking specialist, Fialky, 39, spent several years working in Boston before returning the Valley, and told *BusinessWest* that in large metropolitan areas such as the Hub, young people have fewer chances — and less need — to make a difference within the community. In the Pioneer Valley, it's a different story, and YPS strives to help position individuals to make important contributions of time and energy. Meanwhile, it also provides a valuable networking component that can help with everything from growing a cus-

tomers base to finding a new employee, to gaining a better understanding of the issues and candidates in this fall's presidential election.

The YPS mission can be summed up with three words: 'engage,' 'involve,' and 'educate,' said Trevis Wray, 38, with the Urban League Young Professionals and the society's incoming co-vice president. By doing all three, the group can enhance the careers of its members, enable them to better balance work and life, and make the Valley a better place in which to live and work.

Citing the group's recent involvement in the Day of Caring staged by the United Way of the Pioneer Valley (society members helped clean up two Springfield parks), Wray said it's one example of how YPS helps convey the importance of volunteerism, while also helping some important causes.

"We stress the importance of people giving back to the community in which they live and work," said Wray, "and we help create ways for them to get involved and show they can make a difference."

In this issue, *BusinessWest* looks at how YPS is continuously shaping its mission statement, while becoming a more visible, more relevant force within the region and its business community.

### Root Causes

Sade vividly remembers the days and weeks leading up to what would be the birth of YPS.

It was the spring of 2007. There was a get-together slated for a Thursday night at the Keg Room on State Street in Springfield. Invitations to the event were mostly of the electronic variety, distributed via a series of E-mail blasts and other attempts at guerilla and viral marketing over the course of several weeks.

There was no specific agenda set down by Sade and other organizers of the event, but the

goal was fairly clear: to use the turnout and subsequent pattern of dialogue to fully gauge the need for — and means to create — a group dedicated to young professionals and their needs, aspirations, and challenges.

"On the day of the event we were *praying* that we would get 30 people," said Sade. "Instead, we got more than 150! There was a line of people going out the Keg Room, down State Street, and around the block. It was unbelievable; we accomplished what we set out to do — bring some

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like-minded people together."

Greatly inspired by what they saw and heard, the event's organizers decided to invite young people from across the Valley to meet again, thus beginning a tradition known as 'Third Thursday Socials' in a nod to the timing of that hugely successful inaugural get-together. Since then, the society has incorporated, crafted a mission statement, grown, and evolved well beyond networking.

Flashing back just a little further, to discussions in late 2006 among a group of eight young professionals, herself included, that led to what became the first of the 'Third Thursdays,' Sade recalls that she and others too young to remember the Carter years in the White House were thinking out loud about their demographic, and wondering "where they were all hiding."

"We were talking about what there is to do in this region, and wondering if there were more people, like us, who are really interested in the region and the revitalization of the Pioneer Valley — and decided to find out," she said. "We knew that

there were people living and working here happily, and we wanted to defuse the notions that this region is boring, there's nothing to do, and young people have to leave it to find happiness and fulfillment.

"We really believed that there were people around who thought the Greater Springfield area was a great place to live," she continued. "And so we set out to bring them together."

Now, of course, the task is much broader, said Carvalho, noting that, if YPS has an unoffi-

members take on the role of ambassadors, said Carvalho, noting, for example, that several of the society's officers were invited to address a group of more than 100 new residents at Baystate Medical Center during orientation ceremonies this past summer.

"They were getting bombarded with a lot of information," she recalled, "and their eyes seemed to light up a little when we talked about some things they could do with what little spare time they're going to have, and some ways they can get involved in the community."

Referrals to YPS come from a number of area companies, chambers of commerce, and other business groups, said Fialky, noting that they recognize the importance of young talent to the current and future success of the region, and want such individuals to flourish — and stay within the 413 area code.

### Young at Heart

Overall, the society is focusing its efforts on business and career development, as well as social and cultural involvement and community activism, said Fialky, in an effort to help shape future leaders.

Elaborating, he said that, once the society had what it calls its social, or networking, component solidified, it quickly moved on to other priorities, or sectors — the community, career development, and the arts — and established committees to focus on these areas.

And a detailed look at some upcoming events — and one recently staged get-together — on the YPS calendar provides an understanding of some of the programming that's been developed around these sectors, and also reveals what this group is all about and how it intends to carry out that mission.

First, there was the September 'Third Thursday,' staged at the recently opened Samuel's Bar and J. Quincy's Restaurant at the Basketball Hall of Fame. YPS partnered with the national

cial mission, it is not merely to take young people out of hiding, but to connect them — to each other, to mentors within the business community, to the arts, and to this region as a whole.

This assignment is undertaken in a number of ways, organized by a board of directors and carried out with the help of several corporate supporters, or sponsors, including Williams Distributing in Chicopee, Bacon Wilson, and Nuvo Bank, the region's newest financial institution, which is trying to plant some roots of its own (see story, page 32).

The society connects with members and the community in a number of ways, but perhaps its most effective vehicle is its Web site — [www.springfielddyps.com](http://www.springfielddyps.com) — which details the group's mission, programming, calendar, and more. Hits have come not only from young people, but also from business owners and managers intrigued by an organization that can help welcome new recruits to the region and make them feel a part of the community.

In that respect, the society's

organization Rock the Vote, the Urban League Young Professionals, and the Black Chamber of Commerce to create a forum at which young people could not only register to vote in the upcoming elections, but also meet area mayors, city councilors, and state legislators.

YPS will likely not venture into politics to the extent that it will endorse candidates or take a stance on specific issues or ballot questions, said Fialky, but, true to its mission, it will work to engage and educate members and potential members on matters such as the presidential election, while also stressing civic involvement.

"Members of this organization are going to be the future CEOs of this area, the future elected officials, the future business leaders, business owners, and service providers," he explained. "So it's important for us to promote civic involvement and civic participation, rather than a specific agenda."

Meanwhile, on Oct. 3, YPS will stage the next in its series of CEO Luncheons. This one will be hosted by Sean Davey, vice president and market manager at Clear Channel Radio, and, like those before it, is structured to allow area business leaders and

nonprofit managers to share their experience, skills, and accomplishments in an informal setting that fosters give and take.

Previous speakers have included Allan Blair, president and CEO of the Economic Development Council of Western Mass.; Cynthia Anzalotti, president of Symphony Hall and CityStage; Keith Kennedy, general manager of Hallmark Cards; and Bruce Landon, president, general manager, and co-owner of the Springfield Falcons hockey club.

Landon's luncheon, which came during the team's drive to increase season-ticket sales in an effort to secure its future in Springfield, generated several new subscriptions, said Sade, noting that one of YPS's many goals is to not only expose the younger demographic to the vast array of arts and culture, but involve it with the institutions in that sector.

To that end, the society has slated events like the one on Oct. 7, called 'Celebrate the Arts.' This is the kickoff performance of *The Rat Pack Is Back* at CityStage, and it will include a YPS exclusive VIP reception that will enable members to network prior to the show.

The event is part of a broad effort to not merely introduce members and potential members to the arts, but make them part of the cultural community, said Fialky. "We want them to do more than buy a ticket to a show," he explained. "We want them to be involved with the arts and the culture of this region and help those institutions like CityStage and the symphony to flourish."

The calendar also includes a New Year's gala, called Springfield Shines in '09, and it has a number of motivations, said Carvalho, noting that it will advance many of those initiatives aimed at helping members plant roots, while also providing some additional visibility for the society and its corporate supporters.

The ball will likely serve as a coming-out party, if one can call it that, for a group that is charting progress in all four realms in that slogan — live, work, play, and stay.

"We're going to cap it at 300 people," she said of the ball, noting that this is the capacity of the space at the downtown Springfield Sheraton at which it will be staged. "And it's going to sell out *fast* —we know that."

## Network News

Such extreme optimism is still another indicator of how much YPS has woven itself into the fabric of the region, said Sade, who, when asked to list other measures of the society's success to date, mentioned several — from that long line that stretched outside the Keg Room back in March 2007 to how YMCA director James O. Morton agreed to find room for the more than 30 individuals who wanted to attend the CEO Luncheon he hosted (attendance is usually capped at 20 or so).

Put them all together, she said, and they indicate that the region's young professionals haven't all left the Valley, and they are no longer in hiding — if they ever were.

More to the point, the track record thus far shows that these same young people want to be involved in the region — and engaged, and informed.

And YPS, the group that a large number of less-young professionals wish was around when they were under 40, is more than ready to accommodate them. ❖

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