Technology And New Ventures Had Top Executives Blazing New Paths In Guiding Their Organizations

BY PAUL CLOERY

It is interesting that each year a trend is clear when the team submits initial ideas for The NPT Power & Influence Top 50 honorees. This is clearly the year of data, artificial intelligence, overall technology and their impact on service delivery.

There has been curiosity, rather than the usual fear and loathing, for an industry where organizations often can’t afford the newest tech. The top leaders were also battling near famine, staffing and how to compensate the team, and developing entrepreneurial ideas that result in funding windfalls.

The wars in Ukraine and Gaza, and hunger due to drought and repression, had executives at international relief organizations wondering how to do even the bare minimum. Somehow, they did better than that. Social justice remains a priority because for some reason Americans can’t find common ground on everything from basic rights to agreeing that we can disagree and still work together.

The past 12 months challenged the nonprofit sector’s most innovative minds. It has also been a year of rapid turnover in sector C-suites with nine of last year’s honorees deciding to move on.

Just as the sector has been influenced by events, so has this 27th edition of The NonProfit Times Power & Influence Top 50. Nearly half (21) of those honored have not previously been inducted into the club. Women outnumber men on the list for the third time, 30 to 20. It also is a remarkably diverse list of honorees.

The honorees have distinguished themselves as initiators, innovators and leaders who can redirect and rebuild vital nonprofits and their operations. An important criterion of the list is that the honoree must be a working day-in, day-out executive.

The 2024 honorees were selected from a group of roughly 300 nominated top executives. A committee of The NPT editorial staff, contributors and a few leaders plugged into executive movement were involved in the selection process. This is not a lifetime achievement award. The executives must have had an impact during the previous 12 months.

The fine china will be rolled out for honorees and their guests as they are feted in Washington, D.C., next month during the annual NPT Power & Influence Top 50 Gala at The National Press Club. The event is sponsored by Bloomerang, Data Axle, JMT Consulting, Momentive Software (MIP/GiveSmart), and Moore.

One of the honorees will receive the NPT Influencer of the Year award. Turn the page and discover why these leaders are exceptional.
Jamie Allison  
Executive Director  
Walter & Elise Haas Fund  
San Francisco, California

Allison is taking a page from MacKenzie Scott and making what, for a moderately sized family foundation, are huge, very long-term grants to a core group of key grantees through the organization’s Endeavor Fund. The foundation has thrown out the playbook of small, one-year or two-year grants. Recipients get $500,000 a year for seven years.

Ramsey Alvin  
President & CEO  
National Council on Aging  
Arlington, Virginia

Alvin is a powerhouse in terms of putting aging issues in the spotlight and forcing policymakers to take note of the disparities regarding how geriatric issues are treated. She is seeking to make aging well a human right. She worked with the University of Massachusetts Gerontology Institute on devising the Elder Index, an up-to-date metric that tracks poverty among older adults.

Alice Ayres  
Chief Executive Officer  
Association For Healthcare Philanthropy  
Arlington, Virginia

Something just short of an automated external defibrillator (the paddles) was needed to revive a storied association. Ayres has done the paddles (top). She challenges members with a simple question: “Why are so many hospitals and health systems still failing to truly prioritize philanthropy?” To Ayres, it’s all about providing care to patients and service to association members.

Claire Babineaux-Fontenot  
Chief Executive Officer  
Feeding America  
Chicago, Illinois

Fontenot backs the status quo, believing in system change. It’s a nice idea but when you have a system of 200 food banks and 60,000 charitable and faith-based partners it must seem insurmountable. She and her team make it happen by listening to those in the system and adapting and then backing it with, among other things, her Food Security Equity Impact Fund.

James Balfanz  
Chief Executive Officer  
City Year  
Boston, Massachusetts

Balfanz proves that promoting from within works, given the four positions he has held there since 1997. He’s led City Year’s strategic shift toward addressing the nation’s urban education challenge as a systems change capital strategy. He also played a leadership role in developing Diplomas Now, which was granted a $56 million “ Investing in Innovation” award by the U.S. Department of Education.

Richard E. Besser  
President & CEO  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation  
Princeton, New Jersey

Besser doesn’t back down from action on tough issues and flexing RWJF’s financial muscle. He rallies action so kids don’t lose Medicaid coverage, for making health a right not a privilege, and championing leaders with lived experience. It’s all about equity, such as when he referenced the RWJF’s financial support of the University of North Carolina in support of tenure for a professor.

Nancy Brown  
Chief Executive Officer  
American Heart Association  
Dallas, Texas

There are more people alive today because of Brown and her unyielding approach to strategic collaboration for heart and brain health. These efforts take cash, which is why she formed Cardiometabolism Capital, the AHA Social Impact Funds, the Bernard J. Voyer Impact Fund and BrightSource Ventures and is involved with the World Economic Forum.

Phil Buchanan  
President  
Center for Effective Philanthropy  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

A lot of impactful, commonsense research has come out of CEP during the two decades Buchanan has been at the helm. It is clear these are not academic works to sit on a shelf. CEP is answering questions and providing solutions and practices leaders need. He won’t allow, in his words, “discourse to over-simplify discussions about practices and approaches.”

Ann Mei Chang  
Chief Executive Officer  
Candid  
New York, New York

Chang is making Candid, the merger of the Foundation Center and GuideStar, a data-first organization. That’s the way it should have been all along. Real data is going to be vital as artificial intelligence takes over business functions. Chang is making sure Candid will lead on digitalized information. She is a former tech executive who knows where to point this important resource.

Cecilia A. Conrad  
Co-Founder & CEO  
GivingTuesday  
Brooklyn, New York

Conrad is chair of the board of Guardian.org, the advisory committee co-chair for the Belfer Center for Innovation & Social Impact, a fellow at Stanford University’s Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society and is involved with both Harvard and Oxford universities. Oh, yeah, there’s also that worldwide generosity phenomenon. GivingTuesday is spinning out baseline data that is changing the definition of giving.

Asha Curran  
President & CEO  
UpTogether  
Brooklyn, New York

New York, New York

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Vilas S. Dhar  
President  
Patrick J. McGovern Foundation  
Boston, Massachusetts

Everyone’s favorite vowels these days are A & I. It must make Dhar laugh on the inside and yet he welcomes everyone — worldwide — to the party. He’s a scholar who reminds world leaders at the United Nations and World Economic Forum that social good is about people and communities and not machines that learn. He’s pushing use of data for a more resilient world.

Cheryl Dorsey  
President  
Echoing Green  
New York, New York

What started as raising money for a mobile health clinic van evolved Dorsey into a social entrepreneur who took the helm of Echoing Green. The data-driven latest idea is the $15.6 million Signal Fund that prioritizes founders with overlooked potential for scalable social impact. She is a thought leader sought by other thought leaders such as the Skoll World Forum and The World Economic Forum.

Jesús Gerena  
Co-Founder & CEO  
UpTogether  
Oakland, California

Gerena was implementing trust philanthropy long before anyone came up with the term. He believes, and his programs have proved, that change comes via direct, community-powered action. He is leading the reimagining of poverty remediation via policy and systems change. His efforts showcase the replicable model of direct impact and the power of community to begin to solve the challenge of poverty.
Lisa M. Hamilton  
President & CEO  
Annie E. Casey Foundation  
Baltimore, Maryland  

As Hamilton shifts the foundation’s focus south, her changing the odds Network has 61 organizations in Atlanta and is deploying data to build community-led solutions to local challenges such as education disparities and gun violence. Hamilton is a board member and deputy chair of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond and is organizing to improve livability via data, analysis, research and policy.

Stephanie J. Hull  
President & CEO  
Girls Inc.  
New York, New York  

For a nonprofit that champions education, it’s good to have an educator at the helm who, like Hull, has a national reputation. She’s expanded from targeting girls only in poor neighborhoods to make Girls Inc. relevant to all girls with the goal of empowering them to thrive. She’s prodding funders to close the generational wealth gap by funding local service delivery groups and their workers.

Heather Infantry  
Chief Executive Officer  
Giving Gap  
Atlanta, Georgia  

It’s unusual for the leader of a relatively new organization (2020) to make this list. Infantry’s leadership, passion and focus in running an organization that aggregates Black-run nonprofits for donors to easily find in a searchable database is replicable and should be an example for any targeted nonprofit trying to break through the fundraising clutter.

Alexis McGill Johnson  
President & CEO  
Planned Parenthood Federation of America  
New York, New York  

Talk about being dropped into the middle of history. Johnson has long been a leader in reproductive health and education for women – and for men. Her perspective now that Roe is gone is to take on what she has called "an opportunity to reimagine and reconstruct something better.” She is a champion for social and racial justice, as well as being an effective political and cultural organizer.

Karen E. Knudsen  
Chief Executive Officer  
American Cancer Society  
Atlanta, Georgia  

ACS was known for not cooperating well with other nonprofits. Enter Knudsen. The deal with the American Society of Clinical Oncology on sharing information services is going to come back. She’s reorganized management into an enterprise-first workforce, saving $5 million that goes straight to care services. Knudsen’s mission is finding a cure and successfully rallying other organizations to the cause.

Sara Lomelin  
Executive Director  
Philanthropy Together  
Grand Rapids, Michigan  

The philanthropic community is finally coming around to Lomelin’s thinking that giving is more than money. In her words, it is time and talent and community ties and testimony. Giving circles are gaining strength and Lomelin is key to a growing movement of people-powered philanthropy to resource grassroots nonprofits and shifting the capacity dynamics to it.

Rebecca Masisak  
Chief Executive Officer  
TechSoup Global  
San Francisco, California  

TechSoup’s expansion under Masisak has created an enterprise working in 236 countries and territories. TechSoup was selected by a consortium as the host organization to create NEDisburse that has distributed $8 billion in unrestricted funds to more than 8,000 groups in 161 countries. It also took Masisak’s vision to get the Securities and Exchange Commission to approve a direct public offering.

Ari Matusiak  
Chief Executive Officer  
Rewiring America  
Washington, D.C.

Matusiak was the architect of a $2 billion funding partnership among Rewiring, Habitat for Humanity, United Way Worldwide, LISC and Enterprise Community Development to decarbonize American homes. It links the environment, housing, and community development sectors. Matusiak’s career is grounded in leading scaled impact ventures across the for-profit, nonprofit and public sectors.

Suzanne McCormick  
President & CEO  
YMCA of the USA  
Chicago, Illinois  

The YM is turning into a worldwide movement, now in 120 countries, but with a narrow focus on the needs of a specific community. McCormick and her team are also working Congress to restore funding to childcare programs since the American Rescue Plan expired. The team is also trying to unblock federal earmark funding for social services programs across the nation.

Shannon McCracken  
Chief Executive Officer  
The Nonprofit Alliance  
Washington, D.C.

McCracken imagined a big tent when she was selected as inaugural CEO at NPA. Many industry people nodded politely, but privately thought it was all about fundraising. Wrong. She has led the charge in beating back regulations that would hurt all elements of nonprofit management and provided a home for a diverse group of leaders who understand the overlapping nature of civil society.

Brian Mittendorf  
Fisher Designated Professor of Accounting  
Fisher College of Business, The Ohio State University  
Columbus, Ohio  

It appears Mittendorf is on the speed dial of every business / consumer reporter and nonprofit podcaster in America. His ability to distill the importance of charitable data and economics while applying the information to a specific organization or incident (like the National Rifle Association trial) makes him a vital voice for sanity in the numbers.

Alison Moore  
Chief Executive Officer  
Comic Relief US  
New York, New York  

Every nonprofit executive is scrambling to get youth (the next donors) involved in their efforts. Although she doesn’t, Moore should rub their noses in what she’s doing with Kids Relief online gaming and a youth advisory council that awards $5,000 and $10,000 grants. She is also a force on the world economic stage.

Michelle Nunn  
President & CEO  
CARE  
Atlanta, Georgia  

It is clear that Nunn’s unofficial motto has to be “from the suites to the streets.” The street part involves helping start 500,000 micro-savings groups across the world. Although she doesn’t, Moore should rub their noses in what she’s doing with Kids Relief online gaming and a youth advisory council that awards $5,000 and $10,000 grants. She is also a force on the world economic stage.

Una Osili  
Associate Dean for Research and International Programs  
Lilly Family School of Philanthropy  
Indianapolis, Indiana  

Osili’s life is a philanthropic research roadshow. She has the answers about disparate data points for members of Congress and anyone else who will listen. Much of her research is first of its kind, such as the “Global Philanthropy Tracker” which measures cross-border donations from individuals and organizations in 47 countries. She is an advocate for international standards for data.
Eboo Patel
Founder & President
Interfaith America
Chicago, Illinois
Patel believes beginning to lead in a diverse democracy might start with a pot-luck dinner, block by block. He believes in the power of the invitation to find common ground, and that everyone has a dish to bring. Patel is pulling together faith-based nonprofits, youth nonprofits and students to evolve to understanding others, as he personally did during his time as a self-described “hair-on-fire activist.”

M. Lee Pelton
President & CEO
The Boston Foundation
Boston, Massachusetts
Pelton has focused on the racial wealth gap in Boston and ending that city’s long history of racial disparities. He backed six local nonprofit leaders with $54 million in the “Shifting Power, Advancing Justice” initiative. His team is seeking to educate and influence donor-advised fund holders to make this a priority. Pelton had huge shoes to fill in replacing the legendary Paul Grogan — and has done so.

Lance Pierce
Chief Executive Officer
NetHope
Fairfax, Virginia
Digital attacks on the data of nonprofits put lives at risk, including both those served and the humanitarian teams. Pierce’s leadership in establishing an Information Sharing and Analysis Center (ISAC) helps fund and build world-class digital protection and cybersecurity for nonprofits in a world where only one in 10 nonprofits has trained cyber staff and only one in five even has a cyber plan.

Susanna Pollack
President
Games for Change
New York, New York
Follow Pollack on LinkedIn and it’s a “where in the world” experience as she champions gaming and virtual reality for good. She’s initiated dozens of G4C’s events, public arcades, design challenges and youth programs in partnership with brand name corporations across the planet. Gaming is raising millions for charities, and Games for Change is mainstreaming participants into philanthropy.

Steven C. Preston
President & CEO
Goodwill Industries International
Rockville, Maryland
Preston’s long experience dealing with size and scope is key to GII and its $5 billion in revenue, 159 affiliated organizations and 3,300 retail stores. He’s a dealmaker who led development of technology systems for network organizations. He’s a big government, big business guy who understands success is found when more risk, quit tinkering and become more equitable and resilient restrictions, philanthropy has few rules and what leaders have held to have no strings attached actions are putting pressure on other billionaires to get in on the impact of the trust-based philanthropy movement.

Carmen Rojas
President & CEO
Marguerite Casey Foundation
Seattle, Washington
Shifting the philanthropic conversation is arduous. Rojas is an outside thinker who is driving the foundation to reshape social justice work and its funding. She’s ensuring a majority of MCF’s endowment is overseen by diverse managers who have granted more than $510 million to nonprofits, shifting power to those people who have long been excluded from it.

Karen Rundlet
Chief Executive Officer
Institute For Nonprofit News
Beverly Hills, California
Rundlet’s focus is on building financially sound, editorially dynamic operations that deliver impactful reporting. The key is developing and sharing viable business models. Her words: “We can’t just do great journalism that nobody consumes, reads, listens to or views.”

Douglas Rutzen
President & CEO
International Center for Not-for-Profit Law
Washington, D.C.
There isn’t a hotspot in the world when civil society is targeted that Rutzen hasn’t been vital — often time quietly behind the scenes — bringing the duct tape. He began working with civil society 10 years ago, serving as a consultant to Heifer International in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Those days: it’s usual for him to be walking into personal danger and helping to tamp things down.

MacKenzie Scott
Philanthropist & Author
Youth Giving
Seattle, Washington
The amount of good Scott’s philanthropic billions has done for charities and education can’t be accurately calculated. What can be measured is how she leverages databases and research for decision making and how her no-strings-attached actions are putting pressure on other billionaires to get in on the impact of the trust-based philanthropy movement.

Barron Segar
President & CEO
World Food Program USA
Washington, D.C.
Segar is leading exponential growth at WFP USA. He believes every human is inherently resilient and in funding investments in targeted, programmatic solutions with the potential for long-term impact. One program combines two climate risk mitigation strategies: strengthened natural resource management and diversification of incomes.

Mark Suzman
Chief Executive Officer
The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Seattle, Washington
Suzman argues that trust philanthropy has its place, but that a general operating grant can’t replace targeted giving, such as the $100 million he’s been leading to tuberculosis. Funders usually need outcomes and metrics. The recent call for proposals for artificial intelligence to advance equity in global health and development shows continued leadership when playing to one’s strengths.

Nicholas A. Tedesco
President & CEO
National Center for Family Philanthropy
Washington, D.C.
Tedesco believes that, in his words, aside from some compliance restrictions, philanthropy has few rules and what leaders have held to are just norms. He is pooling principals of family foundations to absorb more risk, quit tinkering and become more equitable and resilient communities. It’s all about community relationships, this stock-in-trade throughout his career.
Michael Thatcher  
President & CEO  
Charity Navigator  
Saddle Brook, New Jersey

Thatcher has transformed Charity Navigator’s culture to value active listening and continuous improvement, incorporating nonprofits and key sector voices into feedback loops that inform rollouts of new measures and methodologies. His push for consumer-friendly tech better serves donors. The number of rated nonprofits has increased to 229,995, up from 8,000 when he first joined nine years ago.

David L. Thompson  
Vice President of Public Policy  
National Council of Nonprofits  
Washington, D.C.

Nonprofits rely upon good old-fashioned grassroots and partnership campaigns to capture the attention of lawmakers. Thompson has been the best quarterback for coordinated state or federal advocacy campaigns. His patient work has lifted the voice of smaller, local as well as larger, national nonprofits to ensure their voices are included in public policy debates in statehouses and on Capitol Hill.

Fay Twersky  
President & Director  
The Arthur M. Blank Foundation  
Atlanta, Georgia

Twersky doesn’t see issues as intractable problems, just things which haven’t been figured out yet. While the organization has focused on Georgia and Montana, she’s moving the foundation to be more of a visible national force rather than simply an influencer. She’s helping to orient the foundation to be more progressive in its funding, looking at democracy and youth development.

Victoria Vrana  
Chief Executive Officer  
GlobalGiving  
Washington, D.C.

A self-described social sector ecosystem geek, Vrana made the GlobalGiving Atlas (the world’s largest database of charities) available to those falling in the sector. You might think, “oh, another list.” This aggregation updates information from places where national nonprofit databases have been halted due to humanitarian emergencies and authoritarianism and has more than 9 million records.

Darren Walker  
President  
Ford Foundation  
New York, New York

Walker and influencer are synonymous terms. Granted, $16 billion buys access and power, but the creativity he engenders at the organization to fix things and enlist others to do the same is unmatched. His speech as part of the Benjamin Menschel Distinguished Lecture series is brilliant and cements his legacy. Read it here. https://bit.ly/3VIOkog

Angela F. Williams  
President & CEO  
United Way Worldwide  
Alexandria, Virginia

There’s no doubt that Williams is moving United Way Worldwide ahead while her decisions are informed by history. She views uncertainty as an opportunity to change and innovate. She has built a national team that reflects the affiliates on the ground. Her focus is on collaborative community solutions that involve a diversity of initiatives.

Tycely Williams  
Chief Executive Officer  
Liberty Fellowship/Aspen GLN  
Spartanburg, South Carolina

Williams’ inclusive persona inspires and helps develop groundbreaking executives and their positive actions. She is involved with the major fundraising-related boards—nonprofit and for-profit—leads the Association of Fundraising Professionals global Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access Committee and chairs the board of the Nonprofit Alliance Foundation.

Armando Zumaya  
Founder & Executive Director  
Somos El Poder  
Alameda, California

Zumaya is founder of the first fundraising institute specific to Latinx fundraising and the only certificate program in the United States specifically for Latinx fundraisers. His commentary writing on fundraising always opens eyes and gets to the heart of contemporary issues. As he has said: “One good way to create more giving from the 62 million Latinx in the U.S. is to create more Latinx fundraisers.”