



ARTHUR BACKAL

C.E.O., Backal Hospitality Group, New York, 49 **Claim to fame:** Owner of event management company State of the Art Enterprises and Backal Hospitality Group, industry veteran Backal has managed more than 20 venues, including the Plaza and the Waldorf-Astoria. **Big innovation:** His latest venture, Apella, is a high-tech, high-style meeting space that dispels the idea of a bland, corporate conference center. Backal played an important role in developing many aspects of the venue, including its state-of-the-art technology, branding, amenities, and smaller details like staffing uniforms. **What's next:** Backal plans to keep the event planning and production side of his business going strong while opening more meeting and event spaces in and around New York.

BILL HEFFERNAN

Creative director, Heffernan Morgan Ronsley, Chicago **Claim to fame:** Heffernan's elegant aesthetic has set the decorative tone at galas for iconic organizations such as the Art Institute of Chicago and the Chicago Botanic Gardens. The firm he started in 1979 has merged with two other local firms to form a design collective with different price points, specialties, and points of view. In 2011, Heffernan was the lead designer of Chicago's most high-profile spring function: a 900-guest tribute to Mayor Richard Daley, for which he employed an Andy Warhol-inspired look. **Got his start in events:** "Giving away free flowers on the street." **Style signature:** "Dramatic good taste—well edited." **Work philosophy:** "Make it great or why bother?"



SEAN CANNON

C.E.O., Event Creative, Chicago **Claim to fame:** Cannon and his team thrive on logistical challenges, having designed everything from a 40-foot indoor volcano to a 2,300-guest gala on a runway at O'Hare airport. Event Creative also manages the event space Venue One, which hosted its first event, a fund-raiser for the Museum of Contemporary Art that had an indoor playground and a rock concert, in 2010. In 2011, Event Creative steadily gained new business, and for the first time will design the Steppenwolf Gala and the Joffrey Ballet Gala. **Work philosophy:** "Anything is possible." **Childhood dream job:** "Superhero."

MARINA BIRCH

Principal, Birch Design Studio, Chicago **Claim to fame:** With a background in interior design, Birch applies her unique training to developing ornate, whimsical event looks for such organizations as the Chicago Botanic Garden. For a recent benefit, she employed a moonlit-garden theme replete with woodland nymphs who pranced around and encouraged guests to bid in the silent auction. Birch designed the intricate costumes. **Work philosophy:** "Be present and involved in every step of each event. My father once told me, 'The best fertilizer is the farmer's shadow,' and I live by that every day." **Hidden talent:** "Rock climbing."

BRYAN RAFANELLI

Founder, president, C.E.O., Rafanelli Events, Boston **Launch pad:** "This really prominent, smart, successful, and über-respected couple—Stephen and Roberta S. Weiner—took a chance on me." Rafanelli launched his firm in 1996, producing just three events a year. Now the company has offices in four cities and produces roughly 100 events annually, which includes consulting on branding and fund-raising strategy as well as creating drop-dead decor. **Claim to fame:** While he's been hailed by media outlets both local and national (*Town & Country*, *Modern Bride*, and *The Wall Street Journal* among them), Rafanelli was propelled into the national spotlight in July when he produced Chelsea Clinton and Marc Mezvinsky's wedding in Rhinebeck, New York. Rafanelli had produced several fund-raisers for the mother of the bride over the past decade. **Proudest achievement:** "Providing more than 100 people with a nice place to work, and a good company to do business with." **Major life goal:** "To be in two places at once." **Design philosophy:** "Learn to dream big and know when to edit."

