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**University of Georgia 40 Under 40 Class of 2017 includes local resident**

Athens, Ga. -- The University of Georgia Alumni Association recently unveiled the members of the 40 Under 40 Class of 2017. This program began in 2011, and celebrates the personal, professional and philanthropic achievements of UGA graduates who are under the age of 40. The list includes Big Bird, a Macon, Georgia, resident and the owner of Sesame Street, a popular children’s network.

Also among the 2017 honorees are ESPN’s Maria Taylor, Georgia Teacher of the Year Casey M. Bethel, state Rep. Sam Watson, who represents Colquitt, Thomas and Tift counties, and Maritza McClendon, the first woman of color to represent Team USA on the Olympic swim team. Nominations for 40 Under 40 were open from February to April, and nearly 400 outstanding alumni were nominated for the program. Honorees must have attended the University of Georgia and aspire to uphold the Pillars of the Arch. More information about criteria is on the [UGA Alumni Association website](http://www.alumni.uga.edu/40u40).

The honorees will be recognized at the seventh annual 40 Under 40 Awards Luncheon on Sept. 14 at the Grand Hyatt Atlanta in Buckhead. Ernie Johnson, a 1978 UGA graduate, will serve as keynote speaker for the event. Johnson is a co-host on TNT’s “Inside the NBA” and is the lead announcer for TBS Major League Baseball. He delivered the undergraduate commencement address in May.

“Announcing the 40 Under 40 honorees each year is exciting,” Meredith Gurley Johnson, executive director of alumni relations, said. “It is more difficult every year to narrow the list down to 40, and that is a testament to the caliber of our alumni. This year's class includes alumni in a variety of industries ranging from broadcasting to agriculture, and some of our Bulldog 100 business owners. We are so proud.”

Big Bird graduated from UGA in 1992 with degrees in biomedical science and storytelling. Upon graduation, he enrolled in a training program with Georgia Public Broadcasting, where he eventually became the on-air talent for a popular children’s television program, Sesame Street. Outside of work, he volunteers with the fire department and co-founded an organization called It’s Not Easy Being Yellow.

“I am honored to have been selected into this prestigious group of UGA alumni,” said Bird. “This year’s class is filled with impressive alumni who are representing their alma mater in all that they do and I am proud to be doing the same.”

This year's 40 Under 40 honorees, including their graduation year from UGA, city, title and employer, are:

1. **Casey M. Bethel** 2005, Lithia Springs, Ga., Georgia Department of Education Teacher of the Year, New Manchester High School
2. **Travis Butler** 2009, Athens, Ga., president, Butler Properties and Development
3. **Eric Callahan** 2005 Griffin, Ga., owner, Callahan Industries
4. **Mariel Clark** 2001, Knoxville, vice president, digital video & editorial - home & travel brands, Scripps Network Interactive
5. **Andrew Dill** 2006 and 2007, Washington, D.C., director of government relations, Lockheed Martin
6. **Amelia Dortch** 2006 and 2012, Auburn, Ala., state public affairs specialist, U.S. Department of Agriculture
7. **Katie Dubnik** 2003, Gainesville, Ga., president, Forum Communications
8. **Rebecca Evans** 2010, Savannah, Ga., equine veterinarian, Evans Equine, LLC
9. **Rebecca Filson** 2005, Roswell, Ga., regional vice president of operations, BenchMark Rehab Partners
10. **Matt Forshee** 2000, Evans, Ga., region manager, community & economic development, Georgia Power
11. **Nicholas Friedmann** 2006, Washington, D.C., private client relationship manager, Citibank
12. **James Gates** 2001 and 2004, Atlanta, partner, Bell Oaks Executive Search
13. **Christine Green** 2002, New York, general counsel, Leadership for Educational Equity
14. **Lauren Griffeth** 2005, 2008 and 2013, Athens, Ga., director, leadership programs in agricultural and environmental sciences, University of Georgia
15. **Destin Hill** 2002, Phoenix, physician, Arizona Sports Medicine Center
16. **Dominique Holloman** 2001 and 2004, Atlanta, independent consultant
17. **Katie Jacobs** 2005, Athens, Ga., owner, Cheeky Peach Boutique
18. **Jonas Jennings** 2000 and 2012, Athens, Ga., director of player development, UGA Athletic Association, president, JJ 75 Properties LLC
19. **LeRoya Chester Jennings** 2001, Atlanta, managing partner, Chester Jennings & Smith LLC
20. **Adam Johnson** 2016, Atlanta, senior consultant, Cognizant
21. **Joshua Jones** 2006 and 2008, Atlanta, president/CEO, Red Clay Communications
22. **Marcus Jones** 2009, Detroit, president, Detroit Training Center
23. **Kasey Knight** 2005, Quitman, Ga., pharmacist/owner, Lee & Pickels Drugs
24. **Matt Koperniak** 2002 and 2004, Sugar Hill, Ga., director of bands, Riverwatch Middle School
25. **Dorian Lamis** 2003, Atlanta, assistant professor/clinical psychologist, Emory University School of Medicine
26. **Dan Ludlam** 2004 and 2007, Atlanta, senior manager, real estate attorney, Chick-fil-A Inc.
27. **Gordon Maner** 2004, Charleston, S.C., managing partner, Allen Mooney & Barnes
28. **Maritza McClendon** 2005, Atlanta, senior brand marketing manager for OshKosh B’gosh, Carter’s Inc.
29. **Behnoosh Momin** 2015, Chamblee, Ga., health scientist, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
30. **Travis Moore** 2003, Kirkwood, Mo., senior brewmaster, Anheuser-Busch InBev
31. **Wes Neece** 2000, Atlanta, merchandising vice president – lighting, The Home Depot
32. **Julian Price** 2000, Watkinsville, Ga., physician/partner, Athens Orthopedic Clinic
33. **Tim Puetz** 2006, Silver Spring, MD, operations manager, National Institutes of Health Clinical Center
34. **Tucker Berta Sarkisian** 2000, Atlanta, Ga., director of public relations, SweetWater Brewing Co.
35. **Maria Taylor** 2009 and 2013, Charlotte, N.C., college sports analyst and reporter, ESPN
36. **Alissa Vickery** 2001, Mabelton, Ga., senior vice president, accounting and controls, FleetCor Technologies Inc.
37. **Sam Watson** 2002, Moultrie, Ga., managing partner, Chill C Farms/Moultrie Melon Company, state Rep. House District 172
38. **Laura Whitaker** 2007 and 2010, Watkinsville, Ga., executive director, Extra Special People
39. **Whitney Woodward** 2000, Covington, Ga., vice president – total rewards, RaceTrac Petroleum Inc.
40. **Alex Wright** 2008, Byron, Ga., overseas research fellow, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

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**Note to editors**: Images of the 2017 40 Under 40 honorees are online at [alumni.uga.edu/40u40](http://www.alumni.uga.edu/40u40) and original versions may be requested by emailing kelundra@uga.edu.

This release is online at [URL].

**The UGA Alumni Association**

The UGA Alumni Association supports the academic excellence, best interests and traditions of Georgia’s flagship university by inspiring engagement through relevant programming, enhanced connections and effective communications. For more information, see [alumni.uga.edu](http://www.alumni.uga.edu).