A look at the Cleveland Smart Business Dealmaker Award winners and 2026 Dealmakers Hall of Fame class

The Smart Business Dealmakers Dealmaker of the Year Awards recognize exceptional individuals who are shaping the landscape of business and innovation in Cleveland.

In addition, The Cleveland Dealmakers Hall of Fame recognizes a class of dealmakers that has made an often-groundbreaking impact on their organizations, industries and the region over the course of decades in business.

We celebrated the accomplishments of the 2026 class of winners on May 13 at the Cleveland Smart Business Dealmakers Conference. Together, they provide a strong picture of the Cleveland business community.

DEALMAKER OF THE YEAR HONOREES

Joe Conley, President & CEO of Royce-U.S. Protection Service and Tenable Event Services. Joe Conley has spent the past two years doing what disciplined operators do best — finding the right targets, closing the deals and making them work. Three strategic acquisitions across Royce-U.S. Protection Service and Tenable Event Services have expanded both companies' capabilities and market reach, not through speed, but through execution. In security and event services, where integration is everything, Conley's track record reflects exactly the kind of focused, incremental dealmaking that builds lasting value.

Mike Crislip, President, and Carole Sanderson, CFO, Onyx Creative. Mike Crislip and Carole Sanderson have been methodical about growing Onyx Creative the right way — by bringing in the right talent and the right capabilities at the right time. In 2025, they executed two architectural acquisitions: RSA Architects in Cleveland and CDA Architects in Houston — extending the firm's geographic footprint and its capacity to take on larger, more complex work. The result is a national presence built deal by deal, without sacrificing the culture that makes the firm tick.

Larry Fulton, Managing Principal of Fulton Equity LLC. Larry Fulton builds businesses for the long run. A serial operator with roots in manufacturing and specialty products, he has acquired and scaled multiple Cleveland-area companies — most recently Fish Furniture, a century-old brand he is actively repositioning for its next chapter. Through Fulton Equity, he combines financial discipline with an operator's instincts and a genuine commitment to mentoring the next generation of entrepreneurs in Northeast Ohio.

Carey Jaros, Marcella Kanfer Rolnick, and Michael Moran. Few transactions define a market the way this one did. Carey Jaros, Marcella Kanfer Rolnick, and Michael Moran led the $2.25 billion sale of GOJO Industries — maker of Purell — to The Clorox Company, one of the most consequential deals in the global hygiene sector in years. The transaction positioned Purell and GOJO's professional platform inside a broader health and wellness ecosystem, creating a formidable integrated offering. It took aligned leadership, strategic clarity, and the discipline to see it through.

SMART BUSINESS
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Smart Business Dealmakers Cleveland features some of the top business leaders in the Northeast Ohio M&A scene. Visit **www.smartbusinessdealmakers.com/cleveland** for more.

Patrick Leimkuehler, President & COO, and Steven Muszynski, Founder & CEO, Splash Financial. Steven Muszynski and Patrick Leimkuehler have been building Splash Financial into one of the most compelling fintech platforms in the country — and the capital markets are paying attention. In 2025, they closed a $70 million Series C, bringing total equity raised to more than $135 million. Splash has now processed over $6 billion in loans through its AI-enabled marketplace connecting borrowers with credit unions and banks. A new home equity line of credit product signals the next phase of an already significant growth story.

Stephen McHale, Founder & CEO of Graici! Stephen McHale founded Graici in 2021 with a clear focus: deploy AI where it can improve real outcomes in health, education and social services. His Data Is Power platform is gaining traction — and investor confidence. A $7.5 million Series A2 round meaningfully increased the company's valuation while supporting the next phase of platform development. McHale is building what he calls purpose-driven agentic AI, and Graici is emerging as one of the more interesting companies in Cleveland's tech ecosystem.

Vin Zachariah, CEO of Ampica Energy Solutions. Vin Zachariah didn't just make acquisitions — he made them cohere. In 2026, he led the integration of four companies — TPI Efficiency, The Utilities Group, Community Energy Advisors, and Viridi — into a single platform under the Ampica brand, purpose-built for the underserved industrial and manufacturing middle market. The thesis is straightforward: energy shouldn't be a volatile cost center. Ampica delivers capital-free efficiency and sustainability services that turn it into a strategic advantage — and Zachariah is the operator making that case stick.

SOCIAL IMPACT HONOREE

Lorne Novick, CEO, JumpStart Inc. With nearly three decades of experience across entrepreneurship, law and business operations, Lorne Novick has helped expand access to capital, expertise and networks for entrepreneurs throughout Ohio. At JumpStart, he has guided strategic initiatives that support underserved founders and strengthen the region's innovation economy. Since 2010, companies supported by JumpStart and its collaborators have contributed more than $1.5 billion in economic impact to the region.

His work is a reminder that the most durable economic development happens when you invest in the people other systems overlook.

SMART BUSINESS **Dealmakers** CONFERENCE

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DEALMAKERS HALL OF FAME HONOREES

Chris Adams, President & CEO, Park Place Technologies. Chris has spent 15 years at Park Place Technologies — and the last six transforming it. Since becoming President and CEO in 2019, he has driven more than 30 acquisitions, expanding the company's reach to customers in 180 countries and evolving it into a billion-dollar global leader in IT data center services.

Joe Kanfer. Joe Kanfer's career spans more than five decades, and at its center is one of the most consequential product innovations in modern public health. As Chairman and CEO of GOJO Industries from 1976 to 2018, he oversaw the invention and commercialization of PURELL® Hand Sanitizer — introduced in 1988 and brought to the consumer market in 1997 — fundamentally changing how the world thinks about hand hygiene. He passed the company to his daughter Marcella in 2018, bringing GOJO into its third generation of family leadership.

But Kanfer's impact extends well beyond GOJO. As Chairman of Startvest Partners, he has supported the development of biotech startups in Israel. As a Founding Partner of Walnut Ridge, he continues to channel decades of operational and strategic experience into venture investment. Add to that a lifetime of civic, educational and philanthropic engagement, and you have a career that is, by any measure, extraordinary.

Marc Morgenstern, Founder & Managing Partner, Blue Mesa Partners. Marc Morgenstern's career defies a single label. As Chairman, C-suite executive, director and strategic adviser, he has been at the table for hundreds of M&A and venture transactions involving billions of dollars — buying, selling and financing innovative businesses from Silicon Valley to Shanghai. He wrote the first outside check into category creators like Divergent 3D, OfficeMax, Within3, and LoungeBuddy, and guided exits to American Express, Visa, and Insight Partners. At Blue Mesa Partners, he continues to back early-stage companies at the frontier of what's next.

What makes Morgenstern's legacy distinct is the breadth of his influence beyond the deals themselves. As creator of Street Smart Startups at UC Berkeley and Mentor-at-Large for The House Fund — a venture vehicle focused on AI, robotics and emerging tech — he has helped shape innovation ecosystems across the country. His book, "The Soul of the Deal," has become a touchstone for entrepreneurs and investors who understand that great transactions are built as much on creativity and relationships as on capital. His vocabulary, his perspective and his generosity with both have left a mark on an entire generation of dealmakers. ●