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Explorers Club: Less 'Egad' and More 'Wow!'

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Published: December 3, 2004

RICHARD C. WIESE, the president of the Explorers Club, has done something out of the ordinary, once again. He persuades a wary visitor to eat a scorpion on a leaf of endive. Crunchy. There is also the North American farm-raised cricket. And let's not forget the sautéed rattlesnake and the roasted Colombian ants. The cream cheese helps.

Mr. Wiese, at 45 the club's youngest president, stands in the wood-paneled study of the international society's headquarters on East 70th Street. "Trust me," he says solemnly. "There is a direct correlation between someone's passion for food and wine and their passion as a person."

Perhaps his explanation is baloney. The exotic appetizers are a great gimmick, the sort of adventurous fare typically offered at the club's annual black-tie gala in March. But this is not "Fear Factor." And Mr. Wiese will find no sissy with him on this afternoon.

As Mr. Wiese serves up crickets and a lively spiel on the club's history, the sunlight streams through the windows of the brick and limestone town house, which rises six floors. The building is filled with the spirit and artifacts of explorers and club members like Adm. Robert E. Peary, Theodore Roosevelt, Charles A. Lindbergh, Jane Goodall, Neil Armstrong and Roy Chapman Andrews, the naturalist and, to many fans, real-life model for the "Indiana Jones" films.

With the club in its centennial year, Mr. Wiese, a former television journalist who won an Emmy for a 1997 science report on WWOR about germs, is determined to shake off its dusty image. He has his work cut out for him.



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times
"The fabric and mosaic of exploration and science isn't just white males."
Richard C. Wiese

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He bounds up the staircase, pausing in front of a hulking stuffed polar bear on the second-

floor landing. "It's really not what someone would do nowadays," he says. Moving on, Mr. Wiese points to what he says is the world's largest elephant tusk. And what is that in the corner? Why, it's a three-foot whale phallus.

Mr. Wiese shrugs. There are some things, it seems, for which there are no words.

Mr. Wiese sees his mission as breathing life and relevance into the fabled organization, which has 3,000 members and 30 chapters worldwide. "I felt like the Explorers Club was going extinct but no one knew," he says.

One of his ideas was BioBlitz, an expedition with scientists and students in Central Park last year to catalogue as many living organisms as possible in 24 hours. The club teamed up with Microsoft to sponsor it.

The club still consists of mostly older white men, but Mr. Wiese says he is trying to change that. He says the average age of members was 67 when he became president nearly three years ago, and now it is about 62. Women, who were admitted in the early 1980's, make up one-fifth of the members. Applicants must show they have advanced the knowledge of the natural sciences, exploration or conservation.

"The fabric and mosaic of exploration and science isn't just white males and I know that in the past we've had that appearance," he says.

Mr. Wiese (pronounced WEESE) is blond and square-jawed. A former Ford model, he was chosen as one of People magazine's most eligible bachelors last year. On this day, he bicycled to work in an Armani suit but says he is more comfortable in hiking gear and boots, like the pair that burned through the soles last year when he scaled a lava-spewing Tanzanian volcano.

Above his desk is a photograph of him with John F. Kennedy Jr. ice climbing in New Hampshire. They met at Brown University, where Mr. Wiese studied geophysics, and became close friends. There is also a lithograph of Mr. Wiese's father, Richard, who in 1959 was the first aviator to fly solo over the Pacific Ocean.

Mr. Wiese was elected club president in 2001 after returning from London, where he was host of a live science show on television. He also has been an investigative reporter, a weather anchor and a documentary filmmaker.

HE joined the club in 1989, inspired by its Monday night public lectures. A native of eastern Long Island, he grew up cleaning algae from the family swimming pool in his scuba gear. At age 11, he climbed Mount Kilimanjaro with his father, who was a Boeing 747 pilot for Pan Am and United Airlines. His mother was the deputy mayor of his hometown, Head of the Harbor.

In a few days, Mr. Wiese will be dog sledding in Alaska and camping in minus-40-degree weather. In January, he will lead an expedition to Mount Kilimanjaro. Then he heads to India, where he will ride atop an elephant, tracking tigers with conservationists.

Yet few places are as challenging as the alpha-male terrain of the Upper East Side. Mr. Wiese was re-elected club president for a third term at a March board meeting. It did not stop two ex-presidents from attacking his "undignified" character. Among other things, they grumped that he had ridden a white horse onto the stage during the club's anniversary dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria.

The horse had lifted its tail and left a souvenir on the place setting of Sir Edmund Hillary, the

first explorer to climb to the top of Mount Everest, who was seated on the dais. Mr. Wiese had to clean the droppings. Then Mr. Wiese contended with a heckling guest, who he says bit his hand after ranting about the cost of space travel. The astronaut Buzz Aldrin was speaking at the lectern. Mr. Wiese splashed champagne on his bleeding wound to sterilize it. "The show had to go on," the explorer says stoically.

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