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Exploring the Last Frontiers of the 21st Century

Profile: Richard Wiese

 BY MARTIN EDLUND
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Modern-day exploration doesn't stand on the shoulders of giants so much as it stands in their shadows. This is the impression one gets visiting the Explorers Club, which occupies a spacious townhouse on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Among the first things you encounter upon entering the club is a placard that reads:

World Center for Exploration
 First to the North Pole, 1909
 First to the South Pole, 1911
 First to the Summit of Mt. Everest, 1953
 First to the deepest point in the ocean, 1960
 First to the surface of the moon, 1969

As the club celebrates its centennial this year, there would seem to be few such dramatic "firsts" left.

I had come to meet the man who will carry the Explorers Club flag into its second century, Richard Wiese. Two-and-a-half years ago he became the club's youngest-ever president. He's now 45. Bounding down the stairs in a distressed-leather jacket and blue jeans, with sun-bleached hair and a tan deeper than the calendar would seem to permit, Mr. Wiese looks like the Hollywood image of the explorer - a cross between Indiana Jones and the Crocodile Hunter. "I usually wear a suit and tie," he confesses, "but I had to do a talk show this morning, and they wanted me to look a little more 'explorer-ish.'"

At my request to be shown around, he launches into a rapid, well-rehearsed tour. "Charles Lindberg, who soloed the Atlantic, was a member. Teddy Roosevelt. Jane Goodall. Bob Ballard, who discovered the Titanic. In the building here..." he says, ushering me into an interior room, "the beams are from Lord Nelson's ship. That's a globe, which Thor Heyerdahl used for his publicity shots. That sledge was the first sledge to the North Pole, used by Admiral Peary and also the African-American Matthew Hanson, who most people don't know."

Following him up a spiraling central stair, I discover that the club is a trove of such artifacts - both a Museum of Natural History display and big-game hunter's trophy room.



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There is a stuffed cheetah, tusks of elephant and mastodon, mounted gazelle and antelope heads, and a 3-foot whale phallus behind glass. I got the sense the items have as much to do with ego as with science.

If any modern man were ever born into this tradition, it is Mr. Wiese. His father was the first aviator to solo the Pacific Ocean, and a spirit of adventure pervaded Richard's childhood. During hurricanes, his father would take him out swimming in the waves off the south shore of Long Island. He climbed Mount Kilimanjaro at age 11, and used scuba gear to clean the family swimming pool. "You don't think about it as a kid," says Mr. Wiese. "Some people's father's worked on Wall Street, my father knew all about celestial navigation."

After graduating from Brown University, Mr. Wiese worked as a broadcast journalist and producer, where he specialized in nature programming of the extreme-storm-and-erupting-magma variety. He has also worked as weather anchor, a syndicated sports talk show host, and an investigative reporter, a job that once required him to infiltrate white supremacy groups and cults. A trained geologist, physiologist, and meteorologist, he has also conducted field research, and joined the Explorers Club in his late 20s.

As reverent as Mr. Wiese is of the club's storied history, he's unwilling to let it live only in the past. He has brought a new energy and sense of purpose to the office of president, a post traditionally occupied by part-time retirees. "All corporations, unless they keep redefining themselves, they'll go extinct and become irrelevant," he says. "When I became president, I felt [the club] was a little bit in transition. It had maybe lost its place."

One of the first things he did was to commission a Harvard Business School case study to test his theory that philanthropic giving to nonprofits like the Explorers Club was largely a thing of the past. "Corporations now have to go back to their boards and say, 'we're working with the Explorer's Club and we're getting this and this out of it,'" he reasoned. His hunch confirmed by the study, he shifted the club's fund-raising focus away from donations and toward corporate partnerships - a move that has paid early dividends both in terms of support and publicity.

Two years ago, the Explorers Club partnered with Microsoft to do something called the Central Park Bioblitz in which Mr. Wiese and 500 scientists and students catalogued all the living organisms in Central Park in the space of 24 hours using Microsoft technology. "It worked out so well that Bill Gates called us in the middle of the Bioblitz because he was watching on TV and thought it was really neat."

Other partnerships have followed. The morning we met, Mr. Wiese had just finished recording a TV spot for Redwood Creek Wines, which sponsors the club's weekly lecture series. In exchange for plane tickets that the club uses to fly in speakers from around the world, United Airlines gets advertising in *The Explorers Journal* and use of the club space for corporate events. "Certainly the venue is more interesting than some catering hall," Mr. Wiese says.

While he's done a lot to reinvent the administration of the club, Mr. Wiese considers its original mission as vital as ever. In our conversation, I made the mistake of suggesting that perhaps the halcyon days of exploration were behind us - an idea that Mr. Wiese rejects utterly. "Modern exploration-in terms of terra firma - has taken on more of an environmental or biodiversity stand, but there's still a vast portion of the world that hasn't been explored," he says. "Seventy percent of the earth's surface, not even the depth, is water. There's estimates that there are between 10 million and 100 million species of life on earth. We've only identified about a million and a half of them."

And that's just the beginning. "Paleontology and archeology are also entering into a golden era," he continues. "With the advent of DNA, archeology is taking on a whole different direction. We're getting an idea that people were traveling much earlier than we thought and by different methods than we thought. In paleontology, there's a major discovery every month."

Perhaps the difference comes down to the diminished role of the explorer in the popular imagination. For his part, Mr. Wiese plays down the bullwhip-cracking, fedora-wearing

stereotype. "People have the picture of Indiana Jones as what an explorer is, but explorers come in all shapes and sizes," he says. "The key ingredient is curiosity, the willingness to look at something in a new light. A lot of DNA testing of anthropological sites - I don't think that's particularly risky. Or an astronomer looking into outer space - that's not someone hanging off a cliff. There's a distinction between exploration and adventure."

It's that distinction that informs the club's membership rules. In order to join, you have to have done something to advance the knowledge of one of many field sciences. In other words, a treacherous climb up Everest or an ecotourism trip to the Antarctic won't get you in, but studying dragonflies in Central Park may very well.

In keeping with this more mundane image, Mr. Wiese describes his own work as consisting mostly of "PR, administrative, and fund-raising," but the photographs and mementos that crowd his office tell another story. There are pictures of him standing on active volcanoes and scaling sheer walls of ice. Above his desk hangs a picture of himself and college fraternity brother John F. Kennedy Jr. atop Mount Washington in New Hampshire. "It's the windiest place on earth," he says.

In fact, it's a little hard to see where he finds time for his more workaday duties. Consider this partial itinerary of the past year. Mr. Wiese spent Christmas Day 2003 in Antarctica, then went on to South Africa. He led a climb up Kilimanjaro in February, then spent some time studying Ol Doinyo Lengai, an active volcano in Tanzania. ("It's geologically the most unique volcano in the world," he says. "The lava turns white when it hits the air.") In June, he traveled to an archeological dig run by an Explorer's Club member in Cyprus, the site of a temple dedicated to Cesarean, son of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra. ("My role was as much to try to lend publicity or recognition to the work she's doing.") We had to delay our first meeting while he traveled to Morocco at the invitation of King Mohammed VI to take part in the gathering of 45,000 ethnic nomads in the desert.

But Mr. Wiese doesn't have to travel halfway across the globe to find adventure, it finds him. At the Explorer's Club's dinner last March - an annual black-tie gala held at the Waldorf, which this year included 1,600 people - Mr. Wiese and another member rode in on white horses. "As we were going up the ramp, [the other guy] fell off his horse and I turned my horse on stage and it lifted its tail and pooped right on Sir Edmund Hillary's plate," he says with no small wonder at the scene he's describing. "Then when Buzz Aldrin was speaking, a heckler came out of the crowd and rushed the stage. I put out my hand and he bit me."

Come to think of it, maybe we haven't seen the last of the "firsts."

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