



**Mercedes
Ruehl Actress
&
David Geiser
Painter**

By Dan Rattiner

The headquarters for the Explorers Club is at 46 East 70th Street in Manhattan and I have gone there, to this former millionaire's mansion, to meet with its president Richard Wiese who, at 42, is the youngest man ever elected president of this nearly 100-year-old establishment. Since Wiese hit several home runs in the Artist-Writers Softball Game this past summer, and spends weekends in Bridgehampton, it made me think that he would be a good prospect for a "Who's Here" for *Dan's Papers*.

Wiese meets me at the door. He is movie star handsome, is an adventurer (of course, since he would not otherwise be the president of the Explorers Club), and in real life, since the Explorers Club presidency is a full time but non-paying job, is a TV science anchor. His most recent assignment sent him all over the world, more about which later.

Wiese takes me on a tour through the five-story club, the interior of which is mostly antique wood panelling, statuary, carvings

and chandeliers that you might associate with a turn of the century millionaire's home.

We are standing in a front lobby. Off to our left is a sitting room. In the back of the lobby is a beautiful flying stairway going up.

"This building was built in 1912 by Steven Clark, the grandson of the founder of Singer Sewing Machines," Richard said. "He built it for his wife in the manner of an English Country house in the Jacobean style. It was bought by the Explorer's Club, which moved here in 1965, largely through the efforts of Lowell Thomas, a well-known radio broadcaster and longtime member of the club. The club has been headquartered here since."

On an antique table in the sitting room are brochures about upcoming events at the Explorer's Club. There are lectures and slide shows at the rate of two or three a week. One will be given by a filmmaker who just got back from Afghanistan. Another will be given by a club member who has filmed a documentary about Ernest Shackleton's disastrous Antarctic expedition in 1914. Some events are open to the public. Some are offered for the membership only.



"The Explorers Club was founded in 1904 as an alternative for members who did not qualify to be in the Arctic. There was a lot more being explored than just the Arctic Club. The Explorer's Club found a clubhouse on the West Side. In 1914, the Arctic Club was folded into the Explorers Club. Then in 1965, we all moved here."

One of the most famous members of the club was Theodore Roosevelt, who joined in 1909 and took some of the members on a safari to Africa.

"In 1914, he and five club members went on a trip up an unexplored river in South America. Many got sick, Roosevelt among them. He never fully recovered and died in 1919. He was only 60."

We went up the stairs to the second floor. To get to the stairs, we passed an old globe on a table that Thor Heyerdahl had used to show the route he was going to take to prove that somebody on a raft with a sail could cross the Pacific. The triumphant success of this attempt led to Heyerdahl writing the best selling book *Kon*

Tiki. Kon Tiki was the name of the raft.

On the second floor, there is a big, battered wooden dogsled which Admiral Perry used when he became the first man to reach the North Pole. There is also a large bronze bell, which can be rung to call members to a meeting, and which had been on the ship *The Bear*, which rescued the six remaining men still alive from a North Pole expedition gone wrong. The six, the remainder of an original thirty, led by Lt. A. W. Greely in 1884, became stranded in Greenland and survived for three years in subfreezing weather, waiting for rescue. A painting behind the bell shows the crew from *The Bell* arriving. There is also, adjacent to the painting, a huge, white, stuffed, seven-foot tall polar bear, fangs bared, looking out menacingly at you as you walk by, giving a rough idea of what the adventurers faced.

We went into a nearby lecture room. On the wall, behind frames, were tattered flags bearing the official seal of the Explorer's Club. There was also a movie screen and a lectern.

"Neil Armstrong spoke from behind this lectern," Wiese said. "So did John Glenn, Jane Goodall, Louis Leakey and Edmund Hillary. It's a high honor to be granted an Explorer's Club flag to take on an expedition. As you see, the flags here have plaques on the frames to indicate where they went and who took them there.

"I've met Edmund Hillary here. He's retired in New Zealand now. You know, when he climbed Everest, the first one ever to do so, everyone wanted to test him. Heart rate, stamina, musculature. Turned out he was perfectly normal. A blue collar guy. He just worked very hard at getting up there. He once gave me some words of advice. 'Don't take yourself seriously,' he said. 'Enjoy it while you can. It doesn't last.'

"It's great to be the president of this club," Wiese continued. "There's a lot of organizing involved, a lot of cataloguing. We have just acquired a great new archivist, Claire Fleming. And where else could you get a job where Buzz Aldrin calls you at home to know if you might have some extra tickets?"

I asked Wiese if he thought there was much left to explore in the world.

"In terms of terra firma," he said, "no. Human footprints have

been just about everywhere. Under the sea, however, we know very little, below 3,000 feet anyway. Nobody has ever seen a living fifty-foot long giant squid. Nobody has seen a live six-gilled killer shark. But we have seen dead ones, so we know they're there. We think there are 11 million organisms on the planet. But we've only identified about 1 million. And did you read where Roman ruins turned up on the seabed off North Carolina? There's a lot underwater we know nothing about."

Richard Wiese was born and raised in Stony Brook, the youngest child and only son of a man who was a pilot for Pan Am Airways.

"Dad signed on with Pan Am in 1953, became a Captain, and remained with Pan Am until 1985, when he became a captain for United Airlines. He retired in 1995. He was a big influence in my life."

Early on, Richard's father taught his son celestial navigation, something that all airline pilots have to know.

"I had a weather station by the time I was nine years old. Dad and I mounted it on the roof. At dinner, we'd talk about the stars, and about what clouds were coming in."

As I am sure you know, families of employees of the airlines, on a space available basis, can get free trips to anywhere.

"Dad would ask me, how about you and I go to Germany for the weekend?" Richard grinned. "I went to Alaska, to Japan."

Wiese had mentioned earlier that he had three older sisters. I asked if dad ever took them on trips.

"He tried," he said. "Dad took the family to Dubrovnik, on the coast of Yugoslavia. It's warm there, but my sisters complained it wasn't hot enough. They wanted to go to Florida. I think that was our last family trip together."

Richard went skiing in Kashmir, he went to Pakistan, he went to Easter Island. He developed an insatiable interest in foreign cultures and in nature and the natural world.

"I had a great growing up," he said. "I lived in a neighborhood where you could leave your bike against a tree or cut through a

neighbor's yard and go clamming. Stony Brook has three-acre minimum zoning where I was. There were forty and fifty acre working farms, though we did not live on one. Our house was on about four acres."

Wiese was an athlete in high school. He set an All-American record in the javelin throw. That record still stands as a record for Long Island. By the time Wiese had finished high school, he had gone to every continent. By the time he was through with his first year at Brown, he had joined the select group of people who had flown on a plane around the world, without getting off. He camped on the beach in a sleeping bag in Senegal, Africa. It was time for him to choose a major. He selected geophysics, and pre-med.

"But a funny thing happened on the way to med school," Wiese said.

The funny thing was modeling. Through friends, he had gone to a New York modeling agency. They loved him. He got a job in a film, *Club Paradise*, with Robin Williams. The money was good. And the idea of studying for eight more years to be a doctor seemed less and less appealing. He decided to go into broadcasting.

"My first real job, after Brown, was on the show Good Morning Hawaii, which was broadcast from the observatory in Hilo, on the Big Island. They knew I had an extensive background in travel and science. But I was only there for two months. FOX saw my clips and hired me to do a show, directly after the 'Simpsons,' called 'Beyond Tomorrow.'"

Wiese was moved to Sydney, Australia. It was no big deal for him. He traveled all the time. The show, a science show, went on every Saturday at 8 p.m. from Australia. But typically, he traveled. Researchers would find things going on all over the world. They'd send him to London, to New York, to California. Then to Asia and back to Australia.

"I'd broadcast from wherever I was, but typically, I would take a complete tour of the world once a month. I worked 24/7. I gave it 100% effort. I wanted to get up to speed with the other correspondents."

Wiese said that during the one and a half years he did this show,

he developed great friendships with the staff and some of the others on the show. It was like a family. And then, suddenly, they cancelled the show.

"And suddenly, nobody was your friend. It was like they pulled the rug out from under you. It was one of the most difficult periods of my life. I went back to visit my parents, and we took long walks, and we went swimming in the harbor."

For awhile, Wiese worked as a science correspondent for a TV station in Mystic, Connecticut, just across Long Island Sound. Then Geraldo hired him for NBC, for a show called, "Now it Can be Told."

"Geraldo was the kindest and nicest boss I have ever worked for," Wiese said. "He was generous to his staff. He invited everyone sailing, to parties at his house for dinners. If someone was let go he'd give them six weeks severance out of his own pocket."

"Now it Can be Told" was not free of danger. Wiese took it on.

"I worked undercover inside a cult. I got beat up by neo-Nazis. I was in the L.A. riots, I even got shot at. I had gone up to see Randy Weaver, the loner who was holding the authorities at bay from his hilltop house in Idaho. It was a long siege. I got permission to try to see him. Somebody with a long-range rifle hadn't heard about it. They fired, but they missed."

Wiese won a Genesis Award for breaking a story about a scandal in Southampton. An animal rights group in California demanded that an investigation be done about wealthy horse owners on Long Island killing valuable horses for the insurance money.

"I was working as an investigative reporter. By this time I had a house I rented in Bridgehampton. I was at the bar at the Tavern in Southampton -- the Publick House today - - and this girl just up and told me her dad had killed their horses for the insurance. She should not have done that."

A man named Tommy Burns went to jail as a result of this story.

I asked Wiese to tell me about the hardest experience he ever had, figuring it had something to do with a bomb going off or a

volcano erupting. Instead it was about a stint he had working for WOR-TV.

"I did the weather and science for them," he said. "It was a very heavy union and management situation. People were very unhelpful. I got pretty frustrated. I'd go to this editorial team to pitch a story. They'd reject it out of hand. Then later, I'd find they liked it but I had nothing to do with it. One time I got this idea and told it to them and after they scoffed at it I said, 'This reminds me of when the Visigoths invaded Rome,' and they said, 'Who were the Visigoths?' and I said, 'Exactly.' I wasn't there long."

Wiese has been nominated for four Emmys, and has won one for a story he says smiling, about germs. The others were about the potentials of a super hurricane, coverage of the blizzard of 1996 and deer contraception on Fire Island. All science nominations.

Wiese's most sensational job was in England working for Hong Kong Telecom.

"They flew me to London on the Concorde," he said, "and they told me about the job, doing a one-hour science show five days a week, and they asked How Much Do You Want? This was in 1999, the days of the dot-com high fliers. They offered me a lot of money and I remember they gave me two million shares of the company as an option. It was trading at \$30. This was amazing. Today it is at 11 cents. But boy, for two years we did a great show."

Once again Wiese traveled around the world. On Monday he would do a show on earthquakes and volcanoes. On Tuesday they flew him to some location where there was extreme weather.

"I'd be somewhere in China talking about a typhoon."

On Wednesday the topic was oceans, on Thursday it was outer space and comets – usually from Australia – and on Friday it was the "Best of the Week."

"I could indulge every weather fantasy. I believe that in two years the company went through \$1.5 billion," Wiese said.

Wiese had joined the Explorers Club in 1989 and in 1999 was

appointed as a director. As Wiese's dream show was coming to an end, somebody suggested that perhaps, with his experience, he would make a good president for the club. They asked him. No pay. A lot of work. One year. He said yes.

"I thought about it. And I thought what a great honor to be considered similar to some of the past presidents. Also it will look great on the resume!" He grinned.

Wiese has spoken to NASA, to the Lindbergh Foundation.

I asked him to describe any unique explorations he had done. He said he had been at the site of three active volcanos while they were erupting and that was quite something. They were Mt. Etna in Italy, Popocateptl in Mexico, and the Soufriere Hills in Montserrat. He also gave me a copy of his resume showing other adventures.

The list is two pages long and runs to about forty achievements, including diving in a one-man closed circuit electric submarine off a Canadian fjord to report on a ship that went down in 1918, testing a 'flying dinghy' over Italy, doing a survey on polar bears and arctic wolves near Point Barrow, Alaska, test flying the smallest manned, blimp in the world in Memphis, Tennessee, and testing an avalanche rescue balloon in Villard de Lans, France.

Wiese has never married and probably is the most eligible bachelor in the United States, in my opinion.

Wiese lives on Park Avenue and rents a home in Bridgehampton which he visits weekends. He continues as an athlete.

"In the summertime, I play softball in Sag Harbor on Saturdays, volleyball in the middle of the day at Sagg Main and tennis in the afternoon in Mashashimuet Park in Sag Harbor. In the evenings, I usually go to somebody's home for a dinner barbecue.

"I believe you can make the experience of the Hamptons what you want. I chose sports. I first started coming here with my dad and mom in the 1960s. I've rented a house here regularly since 1979. I love it here, though lately it's becoming very crowded with traffic."

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