

Tom Hughes

Director of Business Development, Colliers | Wisconsin
Member Since 2023

He arrives for an interview right on time on a sage green Vespa. Dressed smartly, down to the helmet. The scooter was an impulse purchase he bought off a neighbor, and he says it's a lot of fun.

Like purchasing a Vespa on a whim, Tom Hughes is a bit unpredictable—in a delightful way. But his involvement in the Rotary Club of Milwaukee was actually quite predictable. Both of his parents were lifelong Rotarians, and he even recalls attending meetings as a kid.

His first trip out of the country was on a Rotary exchange when he was 17 years old. He spent his senior year of high school in a small town in Germany between Munich and the Czech Republic. He didn't speak German before he left, but was able to learn it there and still speaks fluently.

"Time abroad allows you to think differently," Tom said. That mindset propelled several other adventures. Before settling in Milwaukee six years ago, Tom lived all over the country. He even worked on a vineyard, a sheep farm and at an Argentinean tango bar in New Zealand.

While working on a combined masters-doctorate degree at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he had a job as a research assistant that allowed him to work remotely. He took the opportunity to join a friend who was living in New Orleans. To meet new people, Tom applied to work at a New Orleans restaurant and ended up at one of the best in the country—Commander's Palace. Tom enjoyed it so much, he stayed to complete their wine program and seal his fate in the hospitality industry.

He fell in love with wine during his time at the vineyard in New Zealand, so he started studying wine to earn a promotion— what he called an easy and fun way to advance his career.



Tom never returned to Madison to finish his doctorate, but coincidentally, his research in agriculture and applied economics studying governance of cooperative businesses served him well for his next chapter in the private club world.

The Hospitality Business

From New Orleans, Tom moved to Denver to continue his work in restaurants with a consulting firm called Bespoke Concepts. They specialized in opening restaurants with different concepts all over the country. He worked on projects in Key West, Florida, and Hawaii, but there are two he's most proud of: Geist in Nashville, Tennessee, and Salt Wood in Monterey, California.

"Opening new restaurants is extremely challenging," he said.

After two years in Denver, he moved back to Wisconsin to be close to family and worked at the University Country Club for two years when an opportunity came up at the Milwaukee Athletic Club (MAC). He knew it would be an interesting

challenge to reinvigorate a historic club with a unique community, so he joined the team in 2021 as membership director.

During his time at the MAC, membership diversified and grew from 700 to 1,250 members. After three and a half years rebuilding the club and ascending to general manager, Tom took a few months off to transition out of the hospitality industry.

Last week, Tom started a new job with commercial real estate company Colliers | Wisconsin as Director of Business Development—a change of pace from the hospitality industry.

Personal Life

Tom and his two brothers Evan and Ben were raised in Oshkosh, where both of his parents also grew up. A true Irish Catholic, he has 55 first cousins spread out all over Wisconsin.

Tom now lives on the East Side with his girlfriend Bridget and cat Olive. His older brother Evan, who also lives in Milwaukee, owns Central Standard Distillery.

Asked to describe his character, Tom said personality tests reveal him to be highly logical and that he likes to influence people.

“I just try not to take things too seriously and believe that most people don’t have bad intentions,” said Tom, who leads also believes in leading with patience and empathy and empowering those around him.

He credits his grandpa for being a major influence in his life because he was so curious and well-read.

“He taught me to understand something fully before disagreeing or taking a position on an issue, something that ties into the Rotary philosophy.”

In his free time, Tom loves taking long rides on his Trek road bike. He even cycled all the way to Chicago and Madison this summer.

“You get to see all the out-of-the way places when you’re on two wheels. I just love going to small towns and hamming it up with the locals at dive bars.”

Tom loves playing pickleball and dining at Sanford Restaurant, stating that fine dining will always be his favorite restaurant concept due to the care and attention that goes into the preparation of the meal.

He is definitely self-driven, but Tom said he is motivated and inspired by his fellow Rotarians.

“I found my drive at the Rotary Club of Milwaukee. It’s filled with interesting people and the energy is infectious.”



Editor’s Note: *Rotary People of Action* is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Jenna Renno.