

Tom Luljak

Vice Chancellor Emeritus University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Member Since 2025

Tom Luljak's childhood began like many other children on Milwaukee's Southside. His father Tony was an immigrant from Slovakia, who along with his wife Ann, raised Tom and his two brothers and sister in Cudahy. There they found community at St. Joseph, a Slovak Catholic parish. Tom still fondly recalls the sounds and smells of industry in the neighborhood he grew up in during the late '60s.

"Cudahy was a very blue-collar town, but I loved every minute of it. We had thousands of people working at Ladish, Patrick Cudahy and a tannery right up the street. They were good people who worked hard to make a living for their families."

Tom went to the University of Wisconsin-Lacrosse but felt unsettled without the thundering sounds of planes touching down at "Mitchell Field" and the sound of forge hammers reverberating through the streets. He then attended UW-Oshkosh, where he earned a bachelor's degree in radio/television/film and secondary education. Later, he received a master's degree in mass communications from UW-Milwaukee.

Professional Career

Tom calls his career an hors d'oeuvres tray of academia, corporate communications and broadcast journalism. But rather than a sampling, he has been able to dig in deeply on a broad range of disciplines in both the private and public sector.

He started his career as a TV and radio reporter and producer, rising through the ranks to news director at WTMJ-TV and WTMJ-AM. He also spent eight years as director of corporate communications at Blue Cross Blue Shield. Tom never expected to go into investor relations, but admits it was a thrill to be on the trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange the day his company was listed.

Tom then spent more than two decades as vice chancellor at UWM, where he oversaw university relations, including government relations and community partnerships. He retired from UWM in June 2021 but never stopped working. He was immediately tapped to serve as interim director of Wisconsin Public Radio, where he led the 150-member staff through an extensive strategic planning process to create new programming for the WPR networks.

"As a former journalist, I love meeting people and telling stories. While I may have left journalism, that aspect of the profession has never left me. It also aligns with my personal values, which are Rotarian values: be fair and honest and seek the truth."

Tom never taught high school as he originally planned but spent more than 30 years as a lecturer in the journalism and mass communication departments at Marquette University and UWM. For him, teaching was an extension of his desire to serve.



One might think that interviewing presidential candidates would be a career highlight, but Tom was most proud of the marketing team he led at UWM when enrollment spiked to more than 30,000. He's also proud that he made a point to call every one of his 60 team members to sing happy birthday.

"I always say you should respect people in the workplace as you would your family."

Community

Although he's only been a Rotary member for a year, Tom has been active on the marketing committee and co-hosts the "Connections" podcast with Dave Murphy (coincidentally a former student). Tom and Dave are expanding the podcast by partnering with the Milwaukee Press Club to interview people who are in the business of creating news.

"It's such an essential element of a strong community to have a strong press."

He loves Tuesday meetings for the opportunity to meet new people.

"You can have a conversation with someone who doesn't share your opinions, but it doesn't get in the way of respect and genuine interest because they are all good, tolerant people."

Throughout his career Tom has been actively involved with the Milwaukee Press Club, Wisconsin Academy of Sciences Arts & Letters, Church of the Gesu parish and St. Vincent de Paul Society.

Tom said volunteering with St. Vincent de Paul for 25 years has been the most profound experience of his life. He meets with people living in the Near West Side and helps them meet their basic needs.

"It's a way to put your faith in action and remember that we all have the same needs and desires; we just have different financial circumstances. No one can change the big world, but they can change the little world they live in. If we can give someone a little compassion and an opportunity, that's a triumph."

Family Life

Tom and his wife Wendy raised two children, Megan and JT, and still live in the same Whitefish Bay neighborhood. He loves time spent with his five grandchildren, ages 1 through 13 who are spread between Eau Claire and Milwaukee.

The running joke in the Luljak family is that a Slovak goodbye usually takes about an hour after everyone has their coats on. After an additional hour of swapping stories, Tom finally leaves an interview with these words of wisdom:

"You can do a lot more than you think you can if you apply yourself and use the many blessings you receive to help others."



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.