

# A League of His Own

By Joe Barks, Editor



There are Master Plans that never move off the paper they're put on. There are Plans that leap off the page with a burst of energy and good intentions, but then quickly flame out. And there are Plans that get seen through to "completion"—but in the end, bear very little resemblance to what was originally imagined and laid out.

Then there's the Master Plan that Jeffrey McFadden, CCM, CCE, had consultants help him draw up in 1998, as one of his first orders of business upon becoming the new General Manager of The Union League of Philadelphia.

"Sixty-two million dollars...and counting," McFadden said fourteen years later, after reaching for a copy of the plan—which he always keeps within arm's length of his desk—to find how much had been spent to date on its implementation. "Not bad—especially since at the time we drew it up, I wasn't sure we could pay [the consultants] what they charged me for it."

That's because when McFadden, a 1990 Cornell hotel-school grad who cut his club-management teeth at the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C. and The University Club of Denver, came to Philadelphia to take the job, the emphasis at The Union League was clearly not on spending, but on saving—the club. Founded in 1862 as the first Union League among many that were formed in Northern cities to show support for President Lincoln and the fight to abolish slavery, it had become such a house divided by when McFadden arrived there were legitimate concerns it could not remain standing.



**Few clubs are more "city" than The Union League of Philadelphia; its iconic building sits amid skyscrapers just steps from City Hall and provides special access to events like the New Year's Mummers Parade, when an Open House draws over 3,000 who take advantage of heated bleachers and rooftop viewing (see photo, opposite page).**



PHOTOS COURTESY THE UNION LEAGUE OF PHILADELPHIA

## Achievements AT THE UNION LEAGUE OF PHILADELPHIA UNDER JEFF McFADDEN'S LEADERSHIP



- Heritage Center opened in club's lower level, with largest Civil War historical collection outside of the National Archives.
- Purchase of nearby parking garage removed long-standing barrier to member usage.
- Profit-sharing program for employees increased to offer opportunity for 6% salary match; 401(k) balance has tripled in past 10 years.
- New member programs started, including family road rally, pinewood derby, classical music, and sports-team tailgates. Club now has over 50 affinity groups and is described as a place "you can come to on Monday morning and stay until Sunday night, and never lack for something interesting to do."

"We were in a terrible downward spiral, both financially and with membership, and the doors were in danger of being shuttered," says John Zook, a former club President.

Today, The Union League of Philadelphia might as well have no doors at all, given all of the activity from a fully re-engaged membership (which has grown from 1,700 in 1998 to over 3,000 today) that now flows in and out of its iconic, 150-year-old, 300,000-sq. ft. building in the heart of downtown. For how he's redirected the club's fortunes—which has included a complete pullout from the financial tailspin, with "The League" now having posted ten straight years of operational surpluses averaging \$1.6 million, including nearly \$3 million in its last fiscal period—Jeff McFadden is the 2011 winner of The Mel Rex Award for the City, Athletic and Specialty Clubs category of the Excellence in Club Management Awards, co-sponsored by the McMahon Group and *Club & Resort Business*.

### The Best Is Yet to Come

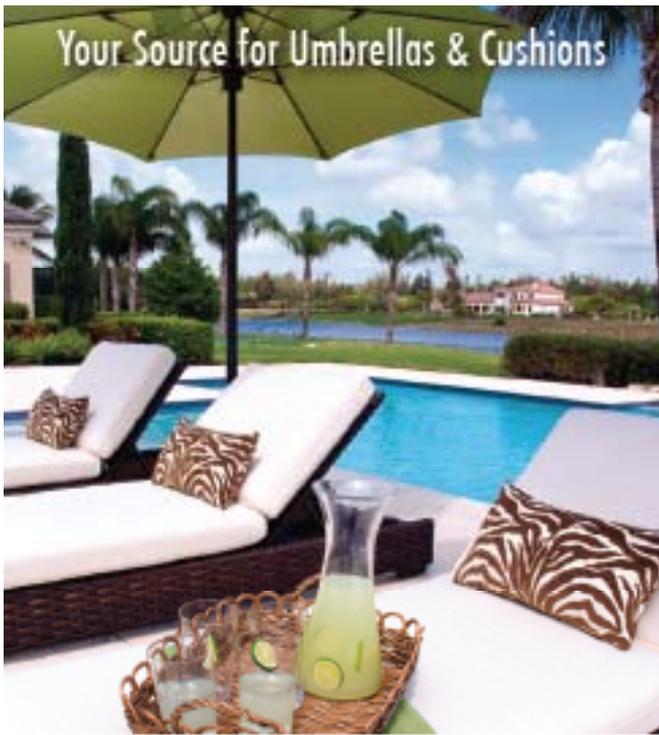
So much has already been done at The Union League under Jeff McFadden's tenure that it would be reasonable to wonder how much more is left to be accomplished. But those who've seen him in action over the past 14 years know that's hardly a concern, especially with the club now having reached its milestone, 150th-anniversary year.

"He's always talking about what's next," says Thomas Lynch, another Past President. "We've come to know that with Jeff,

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## TODAY'S MANAGER

you don't *want* him to be without a plan."

Fat chance of that ever happening. Much of what has been done to date, McFadden says, have been essential steps needed to fix fundamental flaws in what The Union League was trying to offer to its members. The most glaring problem was a lack of parking, which was solved by purchasing a garage located across a side street from the club.

"That was a linchpin that took us overnight from \$10 million [in annual revenues] to \$16 million," McFadden says. "It was the only way we were going to get people thinking about making the city, and the club, a central part of their lives again, beyond when they might have to be downtown to work."

Once that barrier was removed, the next near-doubling of revenues (the club is now a \$30 million operation) quickly followed. Initiation fees, which had been eliminated entirely during the most desperate times, were reinstated—they are now \$7,200, with an incentive to have half refunded by bringing in a new member. "That's proving to be a lot more effective than giving out F&B credits," McFadden says.

Dues have been increased from \$150 to \$355 a month and made all-inclusive—with longevity earning lower rates. The membership has even accepted three assessments, totaling \$8,600 per resident membership, that have been made over the past 10 years.

But by far the biggest mandate-by-member-dollar that's been registered in favor of all that The Union League has done under McFadden's leadership has come through increased food-and-beverage activity. From an underwhelming \$3.5 million level in the late 1990s, F&B is now a \$14.2 million en-

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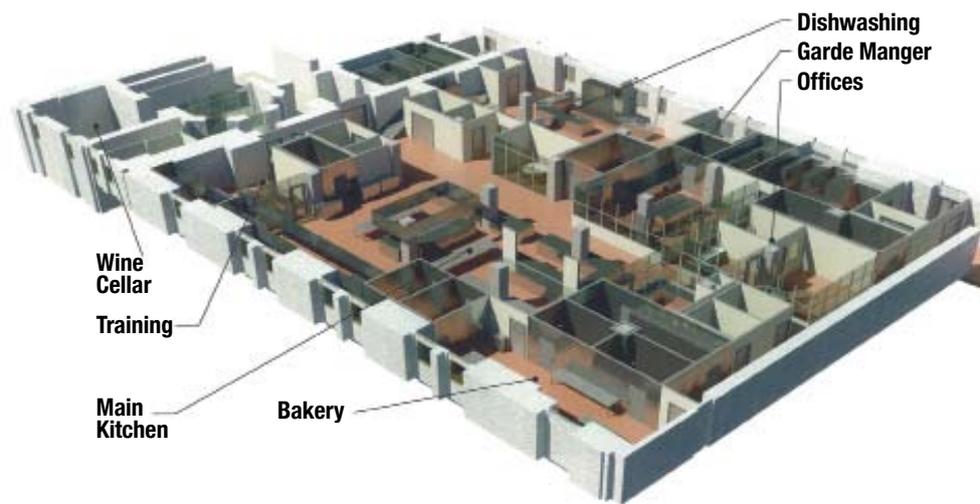
## Ideas IMPLEMENTED SUCCESSFULLY AT THE UNION LEAGUE OF PHILADELPHIA

■ Proved that there is still a place for upscale, formal fine dining, as long as it is truly world-class in food and service as well as dress code. Recruited Executive Chef Martin Hamann from the Four Seasons Philadelphia to open "1862 by Martin Hamann" (below), which has been repeatedly touted by local publications as "the best restaurant you can't get into."

■ Converted a sparsely used front tea room into a popular Cigar Bar with state-of-the-art ventilation.

■ Developed interactive website with downloadable app so members have all features, including reservations, at their fingertips.





terprise. It's also a well-balanced operation—\$4.5 million in a la carte, \$2 million in club events, and \$7.7 in private dining—as well as a profitable one (last year's F&B surplus margin was 4.7%) and, most importantly, one that's overwhelmingly well-received (a quality and satisfaction rating of 9.33).

“What we've done is a great turnaround story, to make a financially unsecure operation become one that's thriving,” McFadden says. “I think we can give ourselves an A-minus for that. But there's still much to do to polish the patina and make the club truly great.”

To start to really make things shine, the club's Lincoln Hall will be given a \$4 million makeover, and a new \$9 million kitchen (see diagram above) will be created next year that will include a two-story wine vault with 12,500 bottles on display and another 30,000 in deep storage; a 24-seat culinary academy and training school kitchen; a full-scale bakery; a chocolate room; and a butcher shop for hand-trimming fish and meats.

At least, those are some of the plans for now. But given all that's been seen at The Union League over the past 14 years, the odds would seem to be pretty good that they're “within reach.”

**C&RB**

**In its 150th year, The Union League will continue to move forward with improvements like its planned state-of-the-art kitchen (above), at the same time it continues to honor and embrace its deep-seated traditions (below).**



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