

Welcome Relief

By Joe Barks, Editor

Between the time he graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Stout with a degree in Hotel & Restaurant Management and when he embarked on his professional career path in hospitality, Richard Lareau spent two years as a Production Foreman for a meat packing company in suburban Chicago. While this might at first appear to be an irrelevant detour, a look at all that Lareau has accomplished after getting back into his chosen field suggests there might be real value in having all budding club managers put in some assembly-line time as part of their practical training.

Certainly, Lareau's production in the seven years he has been General Manager/COO of The Briar Club in Houston—accomplishments that have earned him recognition from his peers as the 2009 recipient (in the City, Athletic or Specialty/Non-Golf category) of the Excellence in Club Management Award co-sponsored by the McMahon Group and *Club & Resort Business*—has been impressive as much for its quantity and variety as for its quality and innovative creativity. When Lareau arrived in 2003 from Boulder Ridge Country Club in Illinois, where he had been General Manager for 11 years, there was much to be done at The Briar Club, a social, dining and swim club founded in

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While stressing that the success of a club is not just in its facilities but also in its programs, Lareau has directed important physical upgrades that have transformed the overall look of The Briar Club into an upscale "urban hideaway."

PHOTOS COURTESY THE BRIAR CLUB



The recently opened Wellness Center now stands as a showcase icon in the middle of The Briar Club's campus that can be viewed from virtually all of the club's dining areas.

1949 near Houston's western city limits. "Prior to Richard's arrival, our club was not a healthy place," says Bill Wade, the club's President in 2009. "There were few financial controls, leading to fairly direct management of the club by the Board. Membership was in silos, and the majority of our facilities were outdated."

But with Lareau on the scene to help devise and direct productive solutions, The Briar Club quickly became a bustling hub of simultaneous activity to address all of these issues, and more, through initiatives that included:

- A controller with hotel industry experience was hired and the club's control system was rebuilt, to create more precise categorization of costs and tighter

control of cash. Reporting to the Board became more streamlined and annual budgeting became more structured, by instituting bottom-up processes that let managers reclaim ownership of their various departmental operations and defend their wants and needs better at both the GM and Budget Committee levels. "There has been nothing short of wholesale improvement [in the club's financial controls]," says Wade. "And the resulting profitability has led to the ability to make substantial improvements to facilities without the need for member assessments."

- Member satisfaction issues have been addressed by instituting a disciplined, independent annual member

Achievements

AT THE BRIAR CLUB UNDER RICHARD LAREAU'S LEADERSHIP

- Hiring of controller with hotel industry experience led to tighter control of cash, more streamlined and precise reporting of variance and trend information to the Board, and more aggressive property tax postures to recategorize assets, saving well over \$200K annually.
- After Hurricane Ike devastated Houston in September 2008 and left many without power for two weeks, The Briar Club became a vital lifeline and gathering point for members.
- Two percent increase in total dining program and 18% increase in dining margin posted in Fiscal 2009.



survey process that covers a comprehensive scope of operating areas and helps management establish long-term priorities. To provide more instant feedback, a "WOW" initiative was created to coach the club's staff in how to create special experiences for members, and at the same time encourage members to report those experiences so top-performing employees could be properly recognized and rewarded.

• The "health" of The Briar Club was specifically addressed not only through the recent opening of its showcase Wellness Center (see photo, pg. 45) but also changes in its food-and-beverage program that included introduction of a popular new wellness menu. "Even children enjoy healthier options, including edamame in lieu of fries," says Wade.

In the midst of these and many other ongoing changes, Lareau's production skills most notably came to the fore in September 2008, when Houston took a direct hit from Hurricane Ike that left over two million people without power

Ideas IMPLEMENTED SUCCESSFULLY AT THE BRIAR CLUB UNDER RICHARD LAREAU'S LEADERSHIP

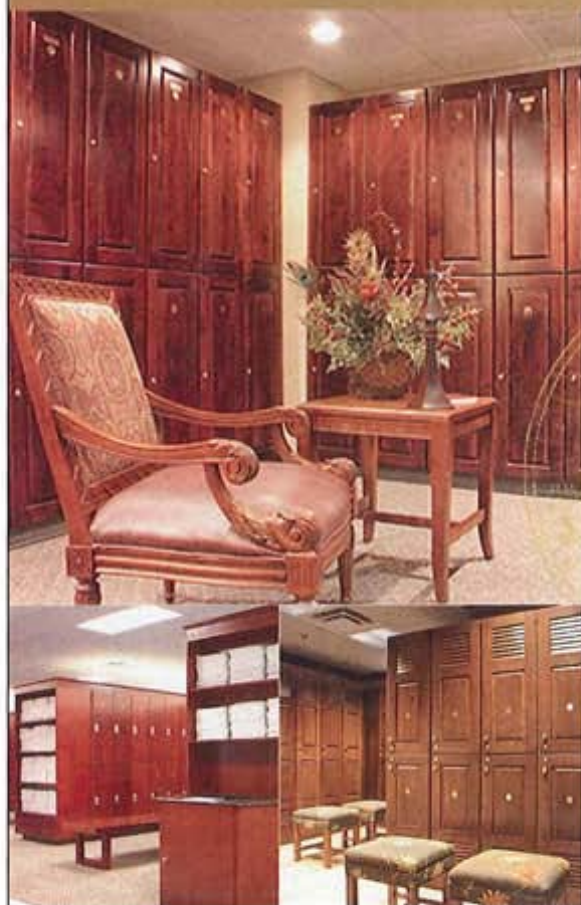
■ "The Loft," a special kids' section within the club's new Wellness Center that features XRKade active gaming equipment (see photos), has prompted 800 kids to register to use the facilities (for full details, see "Lofty Ideas," C&RB, April 2010, pg. 48).

■ "Cost plus \$20" wine pricing program for mid- and high-priced wines has boosted bottle sales by 25% and inspired higher-end wine dinner parties in a la carte dining venues.

■ Sunday Poolside Barbeque buffet with varied entrees off Texas-Style Smoking Pit has drawn 150 per week since inception.



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for more than two weeks. The Briar Club had power within 24 hours, however, and that prompted Lareau to spring into action to direct a recovery effort that included:

- daily service of a "Hurricane buffet";
- delivery of meals, ice and other needed provisions to members' homes;
- setting up pool and tennis programs for children while schools were closed.

"Once the many members like myself who were stuck at home without electricity, entertainment or a capable means of feeding ourselves learned that the club was not only open, but serving a daily buffet dinner, the club became a place where life came back to normal," says Wade. "A sense of camaraderie and triumph was evident throughout the club."

The good feelings generated during this period only accelerated the turnaround set in motion under Lareau's direction. With just over 1,000 full-equity members and a total membership population of 4,300, The Briar Club has now been transformed into an "urban hideaway that's like its own, always-active small town," says Mark Worscheh, the club's President in 2008. "As the Board has gained confidence in the value of [allowing] top-flight managers like Richard Lareau to deliver results, the club continues to flourish."

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