

MCMAHON GROUP / CLUB & RESORT BUSINESS  
**2009 Excellence in Club  
 Management Award Winner**



# Zen Master

By Joe Barks, Editor

It was demolished as the new millennium began and is now the site of a 24-screen cinemplex that's no different than what's in any of the hundreds of traffic-choked suburban shopping and social centers found throughout the U.S.

But there was a time—less than 40 years ago, in fact—when the Cherry Hill Inn, in Cherry Hill, N.J., just over the Ben Franklin Bridge from downtown Philadelphia, was a unique hospitality venue that hosted high rollers from New York and throughout the East Coast, all drawn to surrounding attractions that included one of America's first shopping malls, a racetrack, and a nightclub that routinely featured headliners like Frank Sinatra, Tom Jones, and the Supremes.

And for a young Philadelphian fresh out of the State University of New York's Hotel and Restaurant Management program, being a Resident Manager at the Cherry Hill Inn was the best possible way to start his professional career.

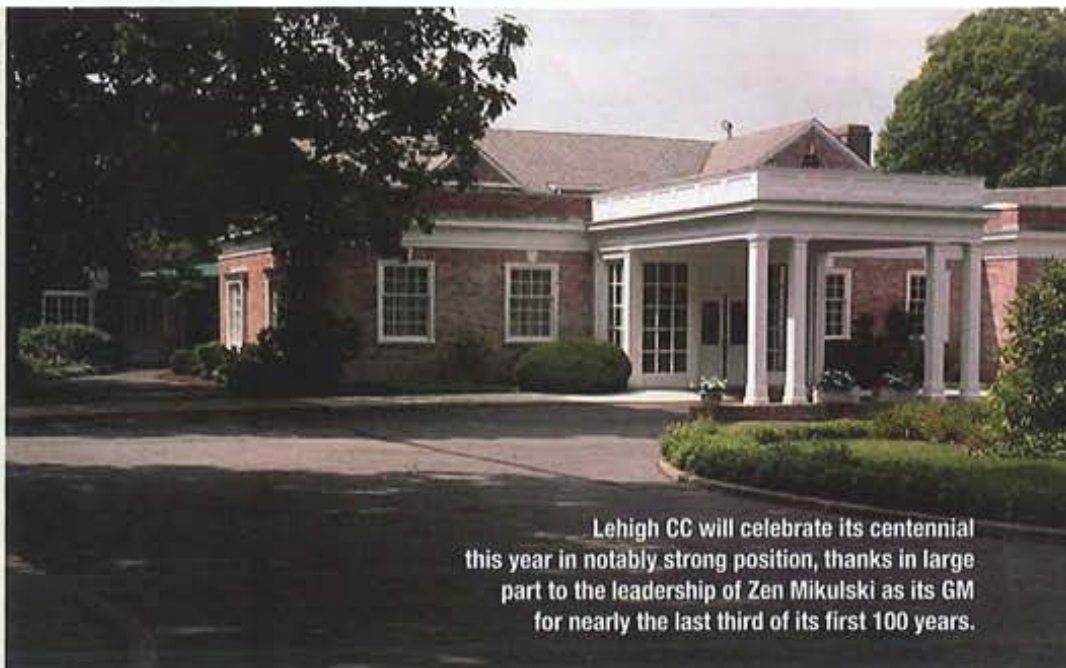
"We had 310 lodging rooms and 17 banquet rooms, and could hold 1,000 people in the main ballroom," recalls Zenard (Zen) Mikulski, Jr. "Being an inner-city kid, I had gone into the hospitality



## Achievements

AT LEHIGH COUNTRY CLUB UNDER ZEN MIKULSKI'S LEADERSHIP

- Club's restaurant operations have made positive financial contributions to overall bottom line in all 31 years of Mikulski's tenure as General Manager—without a food minimum charge. Club ranked highest for dollar volume spent per member in restaurants, according to Midwest Symposium.
- Budgeted overall operating profits met in 30 of 31 years.
- New membership initiative yielded nearly 200 new candidates in first month.



Lehigh CC will celebrate its centennial this year in notably strong position, thanks in large part to the leadership of Zen Mikulski as its GM for nearly the last third of its first 100 years.

## TODAY'S MANAGER

Lehigh CC's centennial celebration began with a reception where all members received complimentary copies of a commemorative club history that could be signed by the author (below).



PHOTO BY JOE BARKS, CARE EDITOR



## Ideas

### IMPLEMENTED SUCCESSFULLY AT LEHIGH COUNTRY CLUB

■ "Ladies' Night Out," held one Wednesday each month, offers 45-minute presentation on topics such as entertainment, life improvement or education, followed by cocktails and light buffet.



■ "Fun Fridays," held on first Friday of each month, with theme and elaborate hors d'oeuvres followed by dinner, cocktails and occasionally entertainment, regularly attract over 100 people.

■ Outdoor dining space steadily expanded to over 100 seats, and new Court Pavilion (pictured) offers added flexibility with louvered doors on three sides.

PHOTOS COURTESY LEHIGH CC

Carefully planned and executed renovations and expansions of Lehigh CC's 80-year-old clubhouse under Mikulski's direction have kept rooms like The Great Hall (above) relevant and functional.

field because being around people was part of my nature. And when I got out of school, [the Cherry Hill Inn] gave me a great opportunity to get immersed right away in running one of the most exciting and demanding properties in the business."

When casino gambling came to Atlantic City in the mid-'70s, Cherry Hill quickly became just another suburb, and the Cherry Hill Inn soon became an oversized and unprofitable hotel. But by then, Zen Mikulski had redirected his career into the club business, on a path that included three years as General Manager at The Philadelphia Club and three years as Director of Food and Beverage at Philadelphia Country Club.

Then, in 1978, Mikulski moved 60 miles north to become the new General Manager at Lehigh Country Club in Allentown, Pa., a private club with a rich history and a classic, William Flynn-designed golf course. His steady leadership in directing the club through a series of major challenges over the next 30-plus years is a major reason why Lehigh CC, originally founded in 1910, will start its second century this year in a notably strong position for a 100-year-old private club, with a solid balance sheet (primarily from meeting budgeted operating profits in 30 of the 31 years Mikulski has been GM), and renewed momentum from a successful recent membership drive that netted nearly 200 candidates in its first month.

That leadership is also why Mikulski has earned recognition from his peers as the 2009 recipient (in the Fewer Than 600 Full-Privilege Members category) of the Excellence in Club Management Award co-sponsored by the McMahon Group and *Club & Resort Business*.

And while the glory days of the Cherry Hill Inn may be long gone, Mikulski says the lessons he learned there at the start of his career have proved to be invaluable in helping him to ensure that Lehigh CC has not only survived, but prospered, through three turbulent decades for the club industry.

"When you start out working in a place as busy as [the Cherry Hill Inn] was in its heyday, financial controls become second nature," Mikulski says. "We had 360 employees and constantly had meetings to keep overhead and costs under control. If anything was off by even half a percent, it had to be addressed and corrected immediately."

The same approach can work in the club industry, Mikulski has proved, if care is taken to "start with realistic budgets, and then make sure you don't change them just to make people

happy. And you have to work with your departments and committees to constantly monitor where things are. It's really no mystery, if you get everyone's involvement and buy-in."

That same vigilance to the realities of the business has also enabled Mikulski and his staff to direct Lehigh CC's F&B operations to positive bottom-line contributions in all 31 years of his tenure as General Manager, without ever instituting a food minimum charge.

"You just have to do what's needed to make people want to come and eat at the club, rather than forcing them to do so," Mikulski says, in explaining how minimums have been avoided—and how the club has ranked highest for dollar volume spent per member on F&B, according to the Midwest Symposium. "That means good food, cutting-edge menus and presentations, and great service."

Mikulski also stresses the importance of "always marketing the value of your services and amenities as much to existing members as to potential ones." But he did recognize the need for paying special attention to new membership needs in the last decade of the club's first 100 years, after the events of September 11, 2001 "changed Lehigh Country Club dramatically, and made the outlook for our success much more uneasy."

"Our bylaws permit up to 400 [full-privilege] members," Mikulski reports. "Prior to 9/11, we had always been at full capacity with a wait list of 15 to 20, and had enough members in other categories to push our total number as high as 620."

"But 9/11 started a quick decline that took us under our cap by over 50 members [by the end of the decade]. With expenses escalating, we couldn't continue to put strain on existing members through dues increases; we had to do something different to attract new members and stabilize our dues structure."

"It was clear there was a significant group of people still interested in joining our club, but that the number-one deterrent was our initiation fee [\$35,000]," he says. "To get over that hurdle, we decided to offer a limited one-time opportunity for a reduced fee [\$5,000], with the provision that accepted candidates would need to sign a promissory note and agree to remain in the club for five years in good standing. All other aspects of our application process remained the same."

"We started the opportunity in the second week of March; within a month, we had 140 candidates for proprietary membership and another 45 for social categories. It now appears this strategy will not only help take us back to our highest membership totals, but also restore our waiting list, while stabilizing dues."

"Yes, 10 to 15 years ago, I might have been one to say this is not something a private club should ever have to do," Mikulski says. "But things change for the club industry as much as for any other, and you have to be prepared to find creative and effective new approaches when they do."

**C&RB**



On the final page of "Lehigh Country Club: The First 100 Years," Mikulski is pictured with Grounds Superintendent John Chassard (far left), Golf Professional Wayne Phillips (second from left) and Executive Chef George Hardy (far right).