ROBERT ST. FRANCIS, JR. – THE MEL REX AWARD

Long-Running Hit

After ending his hope of making it in Hollywood, Robert St. Francis, Jr. redirected his career, leading to a star turn at the Sulgrave Club worthy of Excellence in Club Management® recognition.

Through his affable personality alone, Robert (Bob) St. Francis, Jr., CCM, CCE, has always been a natural fit with hospitality. Some bartending gigs while in school offered early exposure to the service business he found enjoyable and rewarding, but after graduating college with a communications degree, another interest pulled him in a different direction.

A fascination with television talk and game shows led St. Francis to Los Angeles to see if he could make it either on-screen as a host or behind the scenes as a scriptwriter. After plugging away to try to break into the big time for nearly a decade, however, he realized it was time to give up chasing that part of what he now calls the "backpack dreams" of his youth.

St. Francis returned to his native Washington, D.C. area and reimmersed himself successfully in hospitality positions, eventually advancing to become general manager of the Old Dominion Boat Club in Alexandria, Va. After four years there, he moved to another segment of the club business, as clubhouse manager of Washington Golf & Country Club in Arlington, Va. At both of those properties,

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Implemented at the Sulgrave Club under Robert St. Francis, Jr.'s Leadership

FACILITIES

- $4.3 million "Whole House Re-Plumbing Project" was undertaken this year during the 150-day closure of Sulgrave Club's historic 38,000-sq. ft. Wadsworth Mansion for its usual summer closing. The project included replacing all supply and drain pipes and renovating all bathrooms with new fixtures and finishes. Employee spaces were also completely renovated.
- An entire new wine room was built in 2024 featuring individual bins for wine storage, a custom marbletop table in center of room, and new recessed lighting. The new space accommodates 25% more bottles safely and can be used to host member events and serve cocktails prior to dinners in the Dining Room. A wine-by-the-glass system was implemented and beverage offerings were increased to include non-alcoholic options and mocktails. The new room has helped increase overall beverage sales by 25%.
- Revitalized the Great Hall, the club's primary reception area, with new wall coverings, furniture, carpet and fabrics. The project took over three years to complete due to the attention to detail that was required for the specifics of the fabric and the carpet details.
- Upgraded and modernized building's original 1902 elevator.
- Three-year, $1.7 million exterior façade project involved repointing the house and restoring its historic balustrades.
- The building's small English garden-style terrace was repurposed during the pandemic into a unique oasis in the heart of an urban landscape. In addition to portable heaters and café lights, faux green walls were added to existing iron fencing for privacy. Herbs now grown in the garden not only provide natural pest management but can be plucked for cocktail garnishes. After serving as a venue that allowed for proper safety while COVID restrictions were in place, the space has now proved popular for intimate wedding ceremonies and other gatherings.
- Beehive apiary added to rooftop; the club's culinary team now incorporates Sulgrave Honey into cheese plates, desserts and cocktails.
- Enhanced building and cyber security, working with third parties to identify needed physical improvements for the building and protections against penetration of the club's managed IT services. The club's software system was also migrated to the cloud to further increase network security.

St. Francis showed he was not only an especially effective and engaging manager when providing member-facing services, but that he also brought special operational skills and abilities to the club business he had acquired while on the West Coast.

Building a Resume

Like many who try to make their fortunes in Hollywood but need to stay afloat financially as they seek their big breaks, St. Francis had to find an alternate source of income to help him get by as he made his pitches to broadcasting honchos. In his case, though, he didn't just wait tables—he worked for a commercial real-estate firm that developed nightclubs, comedy clubs, billiards centers and other enterprises.

"I got involved with a lot of different types of concept-to-creation projects that were very entrepreneurial in nature," St. Francis says. "They all had some aspects that were very similar to what you do when managing clubs, both with the customer service and team-building parts on one side and also behind the scenes with the facilities and production parts."

Drawing on those experiences served St. Francis well after he returned to club management. It also gave him confidence when the opportunity arose in 2003 to take on an especially unique challenge, as general manager/chief operating officer of the Sulgrave Club, a women's club housed in the heart of Washington, D.C., in a 123-year-old, Beaux Arts-style Wadsworth Mansion that is a registered landmark with the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Over the next 22 years, St. Francis' leadership guided the Sulgrave Club to a host of new accomplishments and benefits for its membership (see "Ideas and Achievements" sidebars throughout this article). And while his efforts to break into television never led to his winning an Emmy, his star turn at Sulgrave has earned recognition through one of the club industry's highest honors, as the 2025 recipient of The Mel Rex Award through the Excellence in Club Management® (ECM) awards (see box, pg. 19).

"Through the years, numerous members have expressed how [Bob St. Francis] makes them feel both welcome and confident in the club's future," said JoAnn Leigh Zuercher, a former Sulgrave Club president and one of several members who has served on its board and submitted supporting statements for St. Francis' ECM nomination. "Bob knows how to set goals and strategies for finances, programs and capital projects. He has the trust, respect and admiration of our membership [and] without his leadership, we would be in a vastly different position."

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GOVERNANCE

- Recognizing that Committee service is a fast track to member engagement, the club began a policy of one-year terms for most committee memberships. While members may be asked to serve another term, the policy has made it easier to rotate members off committees and give others an opportunity to serve (over 270 members now sit on Sulgrave Club's 22 committees).
- Membership categories were revamped to encourage younger women to join and ensure the club's long-term sustainability. New categories were created that include reduced initiation and dues for those under 40. The program helped to bring in many more younger members, including legacies, and the club now has nearly 50 resident members under 36 years of age.
- Annual House & Grounds Sleepover event invites current House & Grounds Committee members to enjoy dinner, spend the night in an overnight room, and then have room-service breakfast. The Committee then meets to share feedback with the management team.
- Sulgrave Club presidents serve two-year terms; after many indicated that they wanted to remain engaged after their terms expired, regular Zoom meetings (every two to three months) are held with Bob St. Francis and the current president to keep them informed while also continuing to gain the benefit of their experience.

Robert St. Francis, Jr.'s 2025 Mel Rex Award marked the second Excellence in Club Management® recognition for the Sulgrave Club in three years, following the Rising Star honors earned by assistant general manager Margaux Beuscher in 2023.

From (Pipe) Nightmare to Dream

All of the improvement projects that Bob St. Francis has overseen in his years at the Sulgrave Club have required an especially delicate touch, given the age, history, landmark status and location (just off central D.C.'s busy Dupont Circle) of the Wadsworth Mansion, which was purchased for the club's founding in 1932.

By far the most ambitious of those projects—one that the current club president, Emily King, termed "equally as challenging as the pandemic"—was undertaken this year. Unlike many capital projects, it wasn't labeled with a special name to try to position it more appealingly for members' acceptance. Instead, what it was called—the Whole House Re-Plumbing Project—reflected exactly what it involved: replacement of all of the supply and drain pipes in the 38,000-sq. ft. mansion and renovation of every bathroom (including in the club's four standard guest

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MEMBER EVENTS & SERVICES

■ Dine Arounds, twice-yearly themed dining events, often take over the first and second floors of the clubhouse, with staff working in concert along with member volunteers helping to decorate. Often sold out, the walk-around format allows for enhanced member-to-member engagement, including introducing potential members to the club.

■ Dining Room Club Conversation tables offer a variety of engaging monthly gatherings, including:

- ⁕ French and Spanish Conversation Tables, where members speak exclusively in the dedicated language and enjoy themed menus curated by the club's chef.
- ⁕ Travel Lunch, where members exchange insights, tips and experiences on travel destinations and adventures
- ⁕ Club Conversation Table, with intimate dinners for 14 guests, featuring expert speakers brought in by a dedicated committee
- ⁕ Two book groups, All That is Beautiful and Salon 21, that meet regularly to discuss literature in a dynamic setting

■ Worked with Reciprocal Clubs Committee to develop Sulgrave Travels trips that have taken members to locations including California and London, England. Sulgrave's ongoing reciprocal arrangements have also been expanded to now include 50 domestic and 30 international clubs; when the club's website was redesigned, an interactive map was added showing the reciprocal clubs' locations. A Guest Accommodations brochure was created to highlight the refreshing of guest rooms and is now shared with reciprocal clubs, and a Reciprocal Club brochure is created and sent annually, both electronically and digitally, that outlines Sulgrave Club's dress code, location, features and hours of operation. The focus on reciprocity outreach has helped Sulgrave Club's revenue from non-member parties grow to over $250,000 annually.

■ A concerted effort to establish and build connections with new members includes twice-yearly orientations where they are introduced to staff and given back-of-the-house tours. A "Mix and Mingle" lunch randomly assigns seating between new and long-time members, and for full-time working members, an annual evening wine event is held on the terrace in the spring.

■ High membership engagement is reflected in utilization of the club by 82% of all (1,165) members and 91% of (892) resident members.

■ Sulgrave Club was first named a Platinum Club of America in 2021, ranked as #50 and as the only women's club on the list. It has since advanced to be ranked #42.

After years of planning and arranging funding for the $4.5 million re-plumbing project in the Sulgrave Club's historic clubhouse, Bob St. Francis was more than ready to help get it started.

rooms and two guest suites).

After recognizing over the years (and dealing with more than a few plumbing emergencies) that the club's utility infrastructure was under increasing strain that could no longer be ignored or simply dealt with through patchwork solutions, St. Francis began to plan for the project several years in advance. With the Sulgrave Club closing each year from the end of June until after Labor Day, the window for the projected 150 days needed to complete a full re-plumbing would be provided. But there was also the need to raise $4.5 million for the project (Sulgrave's largest ever) without compromising the club's tradition of not assessing members.

Undaunted, St. Francis plunged in to collaborate with the club's leadership to successfully accumulate needed funds through two key steps:

- Working in tandem with the Wadsworth-Sulgrave Club Historic Preservation Foundation, an application was submitted to the National Trust for Historic Preservation that ultimately led to approval for funding for the Wadsworth Foundation to cover 75% of the construction costs.
- A member-fundraising effort was conducted to raise additional needed funds and forego any assessment. "That only works if the leadership banks significant social capital," Emily King noted in introducing St. Francis for his ECM award. "Bob is the key to that equation."

With the timeline identified and financing arranged, St. Francis then drew on his project-management experience to work with assistant general manager Margaux Beuscher, CCM, ECM (the ECM Awards' Rising Star winner in 2023) and others on the Sulgrave Club management team to finalize preparations for the re-plumbing that called for a number of special arrangements:

- Before construction could begin, club furnishings and other items would be moved and stored off-site in temperature-controlled storage.
- All kitchen equipment would also be moved and stored off-site, because 70% of the flooring would be trenched.
- To accommodate the work-from-home transition for the staff, all operating systems were moved to the cloud.
- A studio apartment across the street from the club was retained to provide management with a functional base (and running water) throughout the project.

In addition to the upgrades that all members would benefit from, St. Francis also ensured that the

Honored by Their Peers

The Excellence in Club Management® (ECM) Awards were established by the McMahon Group, Inc., the St. Louis-based consulting firm, in 1997 and have been co-sponsored by the National Club Association since 2018.

The annual awards are selected through nominations submitted on behalf of qualified candidates by other parties. Award recipients are selected solely on the basis of their achievements at the club they currently manage.

Awards in these categories are given each year:

- The James H. Brewer Award, for a manager of a Country/Golf Club with 600 or more full-privilege members
- The Mead Grady Award, for a manager of a Country/Golf Club with fewer than 600 full-privilege members
- The Mel Rex Award, for a manager of a City, Athletic or Specialty (Non-Golf) Club
- The John Furlong Award, for excellence in management of a club property in Canada
- The "Rising Star" Award for an assistant club manager

Lifetime Achievement Awards for a retiring club manager are also included as part of some years' ECM honors.

A Selection Committee comprised of a peer group of leading club managers conducts the judging for the ECM Awards. A full listing of the judges, in addition to information on past winners and on how to nominate candidates for the 2026 awards, can be found at *www.clubmanageraward.com*.

The 2025 recipients of ECM Awards were honored at a special ceremony and dinner, sponsored by KOPPLIN KUEBLER & WALLACE, that was held during the National Club Conference at The University Club of New York in April 2025. Individual presentations are also made throughout the year at the winners' clubs.

In addition to the profiles of 2025 honorees that appear in this issue, additional profiles will appear in the Fall 2025 issue of Club Trends.

The 2026 ECM winners will be honored during the National Club Conference that will be held April 19-21, 2026 at the Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo, Fla.

re-plumbing project would renovate and upgrade employee locker rooms and restrooms, by replacing all finishes and fixtures and reconfiguring areas used by the staff to provide improved efficiencies and privacy.

Ready to Serve Again

With the water turned back on and flowing smoothly (and reliably), the Sulgrave Club will pick right back up to not only continue, but further enhance, the steady momentum its dining and events programs have gained in the post-pandemic era. Cover counts (up 10%) and program offerings have experienced consistent growth over the past six years, leading to a surge of over $100,000 in sales. In addition to the appeal generated by the special dining events that the management team continues to develop (see "Ideas and Achievements: Member Events and Services," pg. 18) a notable area of consistent growth has been the club's afternoon tea offering, which continues to gain popularity.

Having a great menu of dining programs and events is only half the equation, however. The Sulgrave Club's growth, as well as its ascent in Platinum Club listings, is equally attributable to the exemplary service culture established and sustained by St. Francis and his management team. The foundation of that culture is built around extensive hiring and training practices to find and develop people who are the right fit for Sulgrave, and tangible demonstrations of appreciation for their contributions (see "Ideas and Achievements: Staff Development and Appreciation," opposite page). An equally important building block, notes Beuscher, is the "environment that [Bob's] presence creates, where employees feel empowered, supported and valued."

"Whether guiding his team through a challenge or celebrating successes, Bob is always there with a steady hand and a kind word," Beuscher wrote in

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STAFF DEVELOPMENT & APPRECIATION

■ A Summer Continuation Bonus, equivalent to three weeks of pay, is distributed to all employees in June to recognize their contributions to the recently concluded season and serve as an incentive to return when the club reopens in the fall. In December, all team members receive an additional three-week holiday bonus. Both bonus programs are fully funded by member donations.

■ Food Service Employee Training Programs include collaborative lineups with both the culinary and front-of-house teams, to promote synergy and alignment in daily operations; welcome-back training at the reopening of each season; tastings for new menus; and weekly operations meetings for discussion and problem-solving that foster a culture of continuous improvement and open communication.

■ Proceeds from Sulgrave Signature items sold in the club's store contribute to the Sulgrave Club Employee Scholarship Fund that supports the pursuit of higher education or professional development opportunities for employees and/or their children and grandchildren.

■ Joint networking and training sessions are arranged for Sulgrave's management team with their counterparts from two other Washington, D.C. city clubs (Cosmos Club and The Metropolitan Club). A broad range of personal and professional-development areas are covered, including leadership, time management, health and wellness and industry-specific topics.

■ All managers and staff are presented to the club's leadership and members at Sulgrave's annual meeting, with Bob St. Francis doing personal introductions of each member of the team. The Pablo Morales Award, named for a beloved Sulgrave Club doorman who passed away suddenly, is awarded to recognize an employee who demonstrates outstanding commitment and service to the club and embodies Morales' spirit of excellence.

■ To build team confidence and security, an outside security company was engaged to offer onsite safety and security training for the staff, and all employees were given an alert monitor with a flashlight to add to their keychains.

■ During a busy month of holiday events, two chair masseuses were hired and all staff were allotted a 10-minute window within their shifts to be refreshed before the final member event of the season.

■ To encourage participation in monthly "All Hands on Deck" staff meetings, each attendee receives a raffle ticket and prizes are awarded at the end of the meeting. Some meetings also include surprise visits from an ice cream or cookie truck. For meetings such as presentations on the club's 401(k) retirement plan, a food truck is brought in.

Praise from His Peers

In addition to the testimonials provided by member leadership and staff that delineated Bob St. Francis' many contributions to the Sulgrave Club's success, his Excellence in Club Management® nomination included these supporting endorsements from colleagues that attest to his influence in advancing the club-management profession:

- "Bob is a passionate and seasoned professional who is always willing to be a champion and resource for others and assist them in their success."

—Carol A. Bliss, CCM, CCE, ECM, General Manager/COO, Chilton Club, Boston, Mass.

- "Bob has a profound impact on those around him. He is a mentor, a guide and a source of inspiration for countless individuals in the club industry. His ability to uplift his colleagues, foster talent and create an environment of learning and innovation is nothing short of remarkable. He inspires not just through his words, but through his actions, setting a standard that challenges those around him to strive for greater heights."

—Mitchell Platt, MCM, CCE, ECM, General Manager, Cosmos Club, Washington, D.C.

- "I believe the Mex Rex Award was created precisely to recognize individuals like Bob St. Francis—professionals who recognize that excellence in club management is not merely about operational metrics, but about creating environments where meaningful human connections thrive. Bob's career stands as compelling evidence that when loyalty, intergrity and compassionate leadership converge in one individual, the impact extends far beyond a single club to elevate our entire profession."

—Simon H. Carey, CCM, General Manager, Allegheny Country Club

support of his ECM nomination. "He has an innate ability to see potential in people, nurturing their growth and helping them become the best versions of themselves. He never asks others to do what he wouldn't do himself, and that level of commitment is rare and inspiring."

Beyond the Club Walls

As noted by other supporting comments submitted for his ECM nomination (see "Praise from Peers," above), Bob St. Francis has always found time to make contributions that extend beyond the Sulgrave Club as well. He serves on the board of the local Dupont Circle Business Improvement District (BID), established to elevate the 22-block neighborhood that surrounds the club with initiatives for public space management, strategic marketing and economic development, all funded by a self-imposed assessment on commercial property owners.

Initiatives undertaken by the BID have included "Clean Team" graffiti mitigation, tree-box weeding and snow and ice removal; Public Safety Ambassador patrols; Homeless Outreach and Community Impact partnerships; and Infrastructure and Placemaking development of a flexible public space that could accommodate events such as festivals and street markets (the BID has already hosted community music events, an Art Walk and a Christmas Market).

For the broader club industry, in addition to numerous affiliations and leadership positions with industry organizations, St. Francis works closely with the Hart School of Hospitality, Sport & Recreation Management at James Madison University, offering its students holiday employment and internship opportunities at Sulgrave, along with club tours and educational presentations. His infectious enthusiasm for the business and the example he has set has also inspired his son Trey, currently restaurant manager for the River Creek Club in Leesburg, Va., to follow him into a club-management career.

On top of everything, colleagues, members and those who have worked with and for St. Francis laud his ability to mix the pursuit of the highest standards and an uncompromising attention to detail with an earnest good nature and more than an occasional injection of levity.

"Bob has a unique gift for bringing lightness and positivity into even the busiest and most stressful days," says Beuscher. "His 'Bob-isms' and ability to balance professionalism with warmth have a way of diffusing tension and bringing smiles to everyone around him."

Adds Emily King: "It is also important to note that Bob helps to make the role of president fun; for every frustrating moment, there is another where we laugh together."

The Collective Approach

" 'My way or the highway' doesn't work anymore," St. Francis says when reflecting on what constitutes excellence in club management in today's club environment. "The secret sauce is to be flexible and make sure everyone feels they are contributing to being standard-bearers and keepers of the culture. I try to be a 'floor guy' who takes frequent laps through the club, to give everyone an opportunity to get in my ear and let me know what's needed to consistently deliver the best service for our members.

"That's why this [ECM award] is truly a reflection of what our entire team has achieved," he adds. "Together, we've shared the belief that while getting great is hard, staying great is harder. Every day we're still driving to get better. And because of that, I'll take our 80 [staff members] against any."

All in all, it sounds like Hollywood may have missed out on quite an engaging talk-show host. But clearly its loss has been the club world's gain. ■