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What Facebook Can't Give You

Over 52 Years, These Men Have Evolved Into Movers and Shakers—Together

By KATHERINE ROSMAN

Before there was Facebook, there was the Wednesday 10.

In 1957, as men in their late 20s, they began meeting—initially over breakfast, then over dinners held at the Sherry-Netherland Hotel or at the Harvard Club in midtown Manhattan. Few were born to means. Many were sons of immigrants. Most went on to become luminaries in their fields—presidents of television networks, partners at banks, editors of magazines.

On occasion, they shared their influence with one another. When member Mort Janklow made a career switch from corporate attorney to literary agent, a fellow member, columnist William Safire, offered himself as a famous first client. When Robert Menschel, a senior director at Goldman Sachs Group Inc., was considering deals involving large consumer companies such as Procter & Gamble, he would pick the brain of fellow club member Ed Meyer, the former chief executive of Grey Advertising.

In a day when "social network" is a buzz term from colleges to board rooms, the members of Wednesday 10 show the benefits of old-fashioned networking. "We were all young kids starting out, and it is easy when you are so involved in building your career to lose touch with other people who are outside your field," says Mr. Menschel, who has been at Goldman Sachs for 55 years. "It helped me to understand why other people do what they do—which is important in life and in business. You don't learn anything from talking to sameness."

The Wednesday 10 comprised, at various points, more than 20 men; the goal was a number small enough to maintain intimacy yet large enough to ensure that at least 10 members would show up for each of the monthly Wednesday-night meetings. No more than two representatives of any one industry were permitted. The idea was to combat insularity, to keep the men connected to people and events outside their own professions.

Last Wednesday, in a prewar Manhattan duplex, the membership met for the first time since the death of the group's founder, Mr. Safire. At a sit-down dinner of lobster pot pie, short-ribs stroganoff and fall-vegetable slaw, 16 of the group's members engaged in spirited discussion about the economy, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the friendship they have cultivated during the past 52 years.

The members bantered like brothers as they greeted one another over cocktails, hors d'oeuvres, handshakes and a few hugs. "How old are you Larry?" Lawrence Grossman, the former president of NBC News and PBS, was asked as he walked into the reception.

"What the hell kind of question is that?" Mr. Grossman replied. Turns out he was born in 1931, making him the youngest member.

"I am the oldest," said Charles Sigety, 87, a former nursing-home owner whose family has significant real estate holdings. Later, he pointed out another distinction. "I'm probably the only gentile here tonight," he said.

"We've been meaning to talk to you about that," replied Mr. Menschel. (The group is about 75% Jewish.)

By today's definition, the Wednesday 10's idea of diversity isn't expansive. "They're anti- women," Barbara Walters says. When she worked in public relations with Mr. Safire in the 1950s, she would rib him about the all-male make-up of the group. "No women!" he would respond, Ms. Walters says.

"In 1957, it didn't occur to us to include women," says Mr. Menschel. "If we formed it today, it wouldn't occur to us not to include women." When asked about the homogeneity, other members point to the many banquets that included wives and their invitations to Ms. Walters, Gloria Steinem and the late "Feminine Mystique" author Betty Friedan, each of whom addressed a Wednesday 10 meeting as a guest. Ms. Walters says she recalls nothing from the meeting she attended. Nor does Ms. Steinem. "It may not please them to know that I don't remember," she says. "But I would urge them to change the name to the Wednesday Men's 10."

The advantages to membership were many. Mr. Janklow secured Mr. Safire lucrative contracts and also scored book deals for other members: Edward Bleier, a former top executive at ABC and Warner Bros., wrote "Thanksgiving," a guide to and history of the holiday; George Lang, who owned restaurants including Café des Artistes, chronicled his journey from a Nazi work camp to the height of New York's culinary world in "Nobody Knows the Truffles I've Seen"; and Mr. Menschel wrote "Markets, Mobs & Mayhem: a Modern Look at the Madness of Crowds." Mr. Safire wrote the forewords to the books of Messrs. Bleier and Menschel.

Mr. Menschel was the chairman of the board of trustees of the Museum of Modern Art from 2005 to 2007. He encouraged curators to attend the one-man photography exhibits of Wednesday 10er Marvin E. Newman, who shot for Esquire, Sports Illustrated and [Life](#) magazine. Mr. Newman's work is featured in permanent collections at MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. When members get sick, they call member Mortimer Lacher, a pioneer in lymphoma research who has been on the staff of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center since 1961. "I'm the house doctor," he says.

By almost every account, Mr. Safire founded the group after one of his superiors at public-relations agency Tex McCrary Inc. asked him to round up some of New York City's most promising young businessmen. The rumor was that Ruder Finn Inc., a competing publicity company, had a connection to the Young Presidents' Organization, a networking group of business leaders.

'Our Own Organization'

One of the Tex McCrary executives said, "We need our own organization which has a purpose but might feed business to the firm," recalls Mr. Bleier, who was also a Tex McCrary employee.

Mr. Safire shared the plan with Mr. Lang after the two men worked together on a 1956 reception hosted at the Waldorf-Astoria (Mr. Lang was assistant banquet manager) for Princess Grace and Prince Rainier by the Overseas Press Club (Mr. Safire handled the PR).

They each invited friends and acquaintances. Over time, Mr. Lang says, the group helped him to understand the motivations and concerns of powerful men who worked in New York City's core industries—the type of men who were his customers. "Through the Wednesday 10, you begin to understand the world," says Mr. Lang, 85. "I knew about restaurants but not about Wall Street or show business."

To begin the meetings, each man gave an update on his life. Impending marriages and expected babies were nodded to, but the thrust of the discussion centered on career development. "It was a professional support system," says Mr. Meyer, 82. By the end of each meeting, he had a snapshot of what was going on in the realms of law, media, art, finance, real

estate, public service and cancer research. "It was like reading a newspaper cover to cover," he says.

Distinguished Guests

For the first 15 years or so, the men invited one guest per meeting to brief them on the issues of the day and answer questions. As the members' careers got traction, the profile of the people to whom they had access grew. Over the years, the roster included CBS News's Mike Wallace, Public Theater founder Joseph Papp, former New York City Mayor John Lindsay, accused Soviet spy Alger Hiss and Roy Cohn, who was a prosecutor during the espionage trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and an aide to Senator Joseph McCarthy during his anti-Communism hearings.

On Friday, Nov. 19, 1971, the group traveled to Washington, D.C., for a black-tie dinner at Blair House. The highlights included a speech on domestic policy delivered by Donald Rumsfeld, who was a Cabinet-level counselor to President Richard Nixon. (Mr. Safire was by then a White House speechwriter.) "I rarely got into black tie, but Bill said it was important," Mr. Rumsfeld says.

Once Mr. Safire moved to Washington, D.C., the group scaled back the frequency of its meetings to twice a year and stopped inviting guests so the members could spend their time together reconnecting. At one gathering last year, though, the group gave special dispensation to a doctor of gerontology.

"I don't know why someone thought that was appropriate for this group," says Mr. Bleier, 79.

'Daddy's Ideas'

The men had hoped their sons would create an adjunct group that would one day assume the Wednesday 10 mantle but none took the initiative. "Daddy's ideas are not the ones children tend to take on," says Mr. Menschel.

Mr. Safire's is the club's eighth death, according to Mr. Bleier. A few decades ago, one member dropped out—Bill Adler, a former publishing entrepreneur. "It was getting to be a very self-admiring group, and it lost appeal for me," says Mr. Adler, who also says that the idea for the club was his, not Mr. Safire's. The rest of the membership disputes that contention.

At the apartment of Jenifer and George Lang last Wednesday, the men sat around a large rectangular table set with china, flowers and printed menus. (Mrs. Lang cooked the entire meal but disappeared at dinner time.) The formal discussion began when member Robert K. Lifton, the former president of the American Jewish Congress, was asked to address the peace process in the Middle East. "I see nothing changing in the next five years" unless the interested parties change their patterns of conduct, Mr. Lifton said, after giving his impressions on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whom he has known for 20 years. The situation in Afghanistan? "Quagmire," Mr. Lifton said.

"I'd like to hear a little about the economy from our financial guru," said the photographer Mr. Newman, in reference to Mr. Menschel.

"The question is, what is going to get 15 million people back to work," Mr. Menschel said. "It won't be big companies. It's going to be driven by the 'mom and pop economy' and that takes a long time."

During the economic discussion, Mr. Menschel had to weather some Goldman Sachs-bashing. Dr. Lacher called one of Mr. Menschel's colleagues a "bozo." Stanley Bartels, a banker who made his career at smaller establishments, called Goldman a "monster," and Mr. Menschel rolled his eyes.

Most of the meal was spent discussing Mr. Safire and the group he built. James Rosenfield, former president of CBS Television Network, looked around the table and gave in to a moment of wistful congratulations. "Each of us started from zero with a common denominator—we were ambitious and hard-working," he said. "And I look around and there isn't a single guy in the group who wasn't a winner in his own world."

"This group is amazing in its longevity," added Dr. Lacher.

The brandy had been served, so Mr. Menschel said, "Let's drink to that."

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