

Breaking the Mold

TOMMY SOUTHWORTH, THE PRESIDENT OF SOUTHWORTH CLUBS, IS REDEFINING WHAT IT MEANS TO BELONG.

BY ABBY BIELAGUS

Willowbend, the luxury private club community on Cape Cod, was built by outsiders. Folklore has it that former Reebok CEO and developer Paul Fireman wasn't able to join a number of clubs on the Cape because he was Jewish. So when he had the chance, he set out to build his own on a foundation of inclusion. David Southworth was born and raised in Scottsdale, Arizona, unfamiliar with the popped collars and khakis that defined the stereotypical preppy club clientele. The two entrepreneurs and visionaries launched Willowbend in Mashpee in 1991, breaking the tether to antiquated ideas and defying the expectations and traditions of the club world. Now, decades later, David's son, Tommy Southworth (southworthclubs.com) is leading the charge, as president, to

continue to break the mold and redefine what it means to belong. "Back then, it was a new breed of country club that defied the inertia of the space and welcomed all genders, races and religion," says Southworth. "We're inspired by the past and proud of our legacy and will continue to push the boundaries of inclusivity. But we're also inspired to push elsewhere."

Unlike his father, Southworth grew up very much on the inside. He graduated from Harvard and worked as an investment banker with stints in private equity before joining the family business as chief financial officer in 2019. But despite his privilege, he didn't simply saunter into a leadership role. He spent some time on the ladder rungs. Growing up, he spent summers working at the club as a golf cart attendant, on the banquet



One of the scenic shots at Willowbend's golf course.

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From top: Willowbend's spacious acreage; an aerial shot of the club showcasing a pool and tennis courts.

in initiatives that will put the priority of human connection and community at the forefront. Community tables are coming to all of the dining rooms. Cell phone baskets will be available at the beginning of meals to collect devices until after everyone leaves the table. The club will be rolling out grills and hosting old school block parties in the neighborhoods for the members to come out and mingle. They'll be hosting days of service for people to engage and give back. The younger members are also being considered. The clubs have camps where kids are exposed to golf, tennis, swimming, arts and crafts. There are themed kids parties offered in the evenings while the parents enjoy a wine dinner. One adorable event is the mini member council where the kids dress in business casual and meet to discuss their feedback and vote on upcoming activities. It's a chance for them to feel included and exercise their agency. Yes, they ask to fill the pool with ice cream, but they also make reasonable demands, like a basketball hoop.

With all of the focus on providing authentic engagement for the members, Southworth hasn't lost sight of the employee's experience, some of whom have worked at the clubs for decades, once alongside Southworth himself. "It's a huge part of our strategy too. If we're going to live these values, we have to do it internally first. What does it mean for our employees to be happy and feel fulfilled?" he asks.

One of the things that makes the club world such a unique space is that there is a captive audience for decades. Southworth wants to continue talking to all the folks in his orbit about the importance of bringing people together and how that relates to their psychological well-being and happiness, from the inside out.

setup team, in the kitchen and he folded towels at the pool. He took a year off from college and worked as a bartender and greenskeeper at Machrihanish Dunes, one of the Southworth properties in a tiny Scottish town. "I am intimately familiar with every facet of the business and I am hopelessly in love with it. I really value the fact that I spent a decade outside of it and get to simultaneously bring a new perspective and a well-known one. That applies to deeply understanding the operations but also having seen other things, wanting to evolve it," Southworth says. For the past five years or so, he's been focused on what he calls the third chapter of the business and he's setting out to rewrite the definition of a modern country club once more.

As he drafts his vision, he leans on the writings and musings of a myriad of innovative thinkers like Robert Waldinger, the Harvard Medical School psychiatry professor who has extensively studied data behind what makes humans happy and Will Guidara, the former co-owner of renowned restaurant Eleven Madison Park who reinvented the concept of hospitality. Southworth is curious, thoughtful, he's a thinker. But he's also practical and

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excited by science and facts. He brings big ideas to the proverbial boardroom, as well as data. At the core of his plan for the clubs' future is a question—what is the role of a club in society? And he thinks he's getting closer to the answer.

"Over the last several decades, our culture has invested less and less in interpersonal connection. It wasn't necessarily by design, but the result mostly of the

proliferation of the technological revolution. Thinking back to antiquity, groups of people relied on each other to survive and they succeeded or failed together. Society has moved away from that and the club can provide a basic level of human connection. The world of psychology points to the fact that people need to establish positive human connection to be happy." Southworth is investing