

# PEOPLE OF ACTION

## Tom Bentley

(Member since 1981)

While other people may slow down once they hit a certain age, Tom Bentley is too full of energy, dreams, goals and ambition to ease his pace.

“I like to motivate people who think life is over at 70. I say, ‘get over it; roll up your sleeves and do something meaningful. Even if it’s one thing, do it! You’ve got the energy, the wisdom and the connections to make it happen.’”

“I climbed mountains in Colorado to shoot an elk at age 72. I went to Alaska to hunt bear after age 70. In the past few years, I wrote two books and produced a full-length movie,” said Tom.

The lifelong Milwaukeean and fifth-generation leader of a Bentley company is semi-retired but definitely not taking it easy.

At age 74, he remains highly engaged in his real estate business, Bentley Management Group, managing vacation properties, land and industrial buildings in Milwaukee, Racine, Iowa and Colorado.

Originally established in 1848 as Bentley Construction, the Bentley Company is one of the oldest family-run companies in the nation. And it’s still in family hands with Tom’s son, Todd, at its helm since 2017.



In 1969, Tom joined the family business after graduating from Bucknell University. Early in his tenure, Tom restructured the firm’s World War II export packaging for the current marketplace, and it grew into one of the largest export packaging companies in the eastern United States. For that, Tom was recognized by Ernst & Young with the Entrepreneur of the Year award in 1996. During his term as CEO, Tom tripled the size of the construction company over the course of several decades while managing Bentley World Packaging as well as the firm’s expanding property management group.

The company built numerous landmark buildings in the city and across the country. Take a drive around Milwaukee County (and beyond) and you’re sure to recognize some

Bentley buildings. During Tom’s career, the company primarily focused on constructing schools, commercial and retail buildings, banks, restaurants, law firms and clubs, and was a leading builder of churches in the state. One of Tom’s major projects and a particular favorite was the MSOE Grohmann Museum. He’s also extremely proud of the Bentley family history, which is documented in a book he co-wrote in 2019.

“I think it’s really important to preserve the personal stories of a remarkable family that persevered in business through many challenges but always remained focused on their families,” said Tom, a father of three and grandfather of eight.

“The men were always very supportive of their families even when they were busy running the business. That’s in keeping with the Bentley trademark: family first, business second, community third.

Another book about the Bentley Company was written in 2003 by renowned Milwaukee architectural historian H. Russell Zimmermann, and a full-length documentary produced by Tom about the company will be aired this fall tentatively on PBS and the History Channel.

Outside of work and projects, Tom loves spending time with family, including his children, Todd, Lauren and Kimberly, and eight grandchildren who range in age from 2 and 14. Tom is passionate about travel and has visited all seven continents, and his long list of hobbies and interests includes hunting, fishing, hiking, golfing, sailing, downhill skiing, horseback riding and photography. The self-professed “joiner and networker” has been involved with several and numerous charitable/nonprofit organizations including Milwaukee Public Schools, Milwaukee School of Engineering, the Boys and Girls Club, the Salvation Army, the Milwaukee Foundation, and was a Greater Milwaukee Committee member for many years. His favorite organization, of course, is Rotary, which he joined in 1981.



“I love meeting people and learning about what they do. I’m a people person and a networker by nature, so I like to meet and greet, which is always good for business, too,” said Tom. He added that he enjoys giving speeches to students, clubs and civic organizations about travel, entrepreneurship, running a business and other life lessons.

In Rotary, Tom served as president from 1998 to 1999 and was involved in numerous committees through the years. He is proud of Rotary’s charitable outreach, especially the PolioPlus global efforts, and its dedication to local efforts as well.

“Rotary has so many outstanding committees and social and outreach groups that offer members many different avenues of service. The major appeal of the club is that there is something of interest for everybody. It’s certainly been a good fit for me in both my business and my personal life.”

Tom’s son, Todd, is the 2021-2022 Rotary President and was featured in a People of Action piece [here](#).

**Editor’s Note:** Rotary People of Action is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Mary Bolich.