

## Martin (Marty) Brooks

President/CEO, Wisconsin Center District

Member since June 2021

Wisdom gained from negative experiences can be just as impactful as lessons learned from positive experiences. That's something Marty Brooks discovered early in his career.

"I worked for a small company that presented great experiences and learning opportunities, but exposed me to business practices I was not comfortable engaging in," Marty said. "From that, I learned important lessons on how not to treat people and how not to do business."

Marty, president and CEO of the Wisconsin Center District since January 2018, has leaned on that insight throughout his career—from his work in sports television to producing the Miss Universe Pageant for Madison Square Garden to his tenure as general manager of America's Center Convention Complex in St. Louis, Missouri. Marty, who graduated from the University of Maryland with a degree in journalism, also credits a mentor named Bob Gutkowski for informing the way he conducts business to this day.

"Bob showed me the importance of not basing every decision on the cost or potential profit. Return on investment isn't solely about the dollar amount involved; there are other important factors to be considered that have nothing to do with the bottom line," said Marty. "I met Bob early enough in my career to truly be influenced on how I made decisions, and those lessons have stuck with me to this day."



The decisions Marty oversees these days are wrapped around the \$420 million expansion of the Wisconsin Center—doubling the venue's current size—along with the daily operations of the center, UW-Milwaukee Panther Arena and Miller High Life Theatre. His days are packed with meetings—the daily expansion update, vendor meetings, interviewing potential employees, staying in touch with the design team, appointments with lobbyists and owner representatives, and a continual lineup of pre- and post-conference meetings, just to name a few.

"I don't micromanage, but all departments report directly or indirectly to me and I think it's important to take part in these meetings and be accessible. I want our clients to know that they are supported at all levels of our organization and that we treat every single event with the utmost respect," Marty said.

How did this journalism grad from suburban Baltimore find himself overseeing prominent venues around the country?

"I'm proud of how I've been able to build on and learn from all the different components of positions I've held and apply lessons learned to accomplish great things. That has been the most satisfying aspect of my career. This organization in Milwaukee is exploding with opportunity and here I am at the helm of a \$420 million expansion. I'm having the time of my life and I have to pinch myself and say, 'Can you believe you're doing this?'"

Securing approval for that major expansion was especially impressive given that it coincided with a global pandemic.

“At the height of the COVID pandemic, the Wisconsin Center District Board of Directors approved a \$420 million expansion. We fought so hard and proved why this is such an important project, and we succeeded with all odds stacked against us. People were probably right to call me crazy, but we just knew it was the right thing at the right time.”

Moving to Milwaukee seem to be the right thing at the right time as well. From the moment he arrived, Marty found Milwaukeeans to be exceptionally supportive and friendly.



“My wife, Leslie, and I have moved around a fair amount and what was completely unexpected was how incredibly polite, genuine, warm and welcoming people in Milwaukee are. From our very first week here we’ve been treated with a sincerity and warmth we’ve not experienced anywhere else.”

As empty nesters at or near the typical retirement age, the decision to pick up and move to a new city was not an easy one, Marty said. “We didn’t know much about Milwaukee or know anyone here. But Milwaukee is a such great city. It’s a wonderful place to live and work.”

The Brooks, who met their freshman year of college, have two married daughters, Samantha, who lives in Washington D.C., and Chelsey, who lives in California. They also have a one-year-old grandson, who Marty unabashedly says he loves more than he ever thought possible. Leslie, a senior public relations manager for an international law firm, works remotely from the couples’ Mequon home, where Marty enjoys feeding deer that visit their backyard and constructing complex LEGO sets designed for adults, something he took up after knee replacement surgery. Other than that, his work is his passion.

“As the saying goes, ‘Love what you do and you’ll never work a day in your life.’ I love what I do so I spend a lot of time in the office working. I’m always thinking about and doing work. My career has always defined who I am. I know I’m blessed and I never take it for granted.”

When things slow down a little with the expansion, scheduled to be completed in 2024, Marty hopes to find more time to become more engaged in civic and philanthropic organizations, including Rotary.

“When I heard people talk about Rotary and I read about the club, it inspired me to connect with an organization that I thought I might benefit from as well as one that I might be able to lend my expertise and institutional knowledge to help make an impact on Milwaukee. All of sudden, I realize how quickly time has passed. I do want to focus on taking a step back to provide time to my community.”



**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.