

DiOrio Faces Significant Challenges as CMAA President

By Dave White, editor

Damon DiOrio doesn't shy away from challenges, mostly because he faced so many of them over the years...not the least of which has been a successful 10-year battle with leukemia.

So there's every expectation that DiOrio, newly-elected president of the Club Managers Association of America will be up to the many tasks.

And finding a replacement for the retiring Chief Executive Officer Jim Singerling will be at the top of the list, and it's a process well underway.

"Jim Singerling has done a spectacular job in his tenure," enthused DiOrio, in paying tribute to the long time CMAA chief executive officer.

"The level of programming, professionalism, networking, and stability that Jim has added in the last 20 years is something that we all need to respect, celebrate, and cherish. The next CEO has big shoes to fill, but I am confident that we will find an outstanding leader who will continue our progression forward," explained the chief executive officer of North Carolina's Charlotte Country Club.

Now the process of finding a new CEO is on DiOrio's plate and that of the CMAA's board of directors.

"I clearly recognize that finding the next CEO will occur during my tenure," DiOrio added, and "it is very important to me that this process is clear, methodical, thorough and occurs with the upmost in transparency, integrity, and with excellent communication."

The CMAA board has started the process by hiring Global Golf Advisors to carefully produce a comprehensive strategic business plan and transition plan.

"This has been done to provide a vision for the future of CMAA that's based on world class research, comparative data, and countless hours of interviews with industry leaders, the board, and CMAA staff.

"The business plan is excellent and has the unanimous support and endorsement of CMAA's board of directors. This document will serve as a guiding light for the next CEO and our excellent association personnel."

DiOrio, CMAA's vice-president in 2013, was elected president for 2014 at the recent CMAA World Conference in Orlando, FL and he takes over from out-going president Rick Bayliss.

There are significant other challenges DiOrio wants to tackle this year.



CHARLOTTE COUNTRY CLUB TEAM: LEFT TO RIGHT – ANDREW SHUCK, HEAD GOLF PROFESSIONAL; BILL FRANCIS, DIRECTOR OF TENNIS; DAMON DIORIO IN THE MIDDLE; DEE ANNA CLARKE, CFO; JOHN SZKLINSKI, GOLF COURSE SUPERINTENDENT.

Growing the Club Managers Association of America

"CMAA is an incredible organization. I'm amazed by the level of dedication and professionalism that my colleagues possess. The proud women and men who make up our membership are our greatest asset. We must expand our greatest strength, our membership, to enable us to have the financial resources necessary to expand the depth, breath, and scope of educational opportunities that we provide our membership. Our members crave learning new skills, and expanding the wealth of knowledge they have to constantly stay at the cutting edge of our industry."

Bringing joy to people's lives

"Our industry depends on our member's disposable income. The club industry is often the first impacted by recessions, and often the last to fully recover. I'm bullish on the club industry because we are in the business of bringing joy and positive memories to people's lives – finding happiness through socialization, recreation, and spending quality time with your family will always be in high demand.

"No business is better suited to fulfill these needs than the club industry. Our challenge will be to grow the interest of tennis, golf, fitness, yachting and family activities with the help of our allied associations so that collectively we work to solidify the strength of clubs for decades to come."

Mentoring and training

"I'm truly passionate about mentoring and training the next generation of club executives. I am energized and excited about "Generation M" and the knowledge, technological savvy and care that these aspiring leaders possess.

"This dynamic generation places a very high premium on quality of life, having established goals for their development, and finding mentors that will guide their careers. I recently read a survey of 20,000 college seniors that indicated that 73 percent of respondents could not envision themselves staying at one employer more than five years ever in their career.

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Search Firm Spencer Stuart Hired to Find Singerling's Successor

With the retirement of CMAA's long time chief executive Jim Singerling, the CMAA's board of directors headed by newly elected president Damon DiOrio faces the task of finding Singerling's successor.

As outlined in the cover story about DiOrio and his plans for the coming year the process has already started.

"It is very important to me that this process is clear, methodical, thorough, and occurs with the upmost in transparency, integrity, and with excellent communication," explains DiOrio.

CMAA's board has hired Global Golf Advisors to produce a comprehensive strategic business plan and transition plan, to provide a vision for the future.

"The business plan is excellent and has the unanimous support and endorsement of the board."

And CMAA has hired the search firm of Spencer Stuart to lead the organization through the CEO search process.

"While we have several outstanding search firms who specialize in placements in our business (led by former managers whom I truly admire and thoroughly respect), we felt that hiring a firm outside of those responsible for direct placements of club management candidates would be prudent, and further lead to the success of the incoming CEO," DiOrio added.

"Spencer Stuart is a global firm with impeccable credentials and extensive experience in this type of executive placement. The firm's Washington, DC office will handle the search," explained DiOrio.

"In addition, CMAA Past President Sandy Frappier will chair the search committee with a distinguished group of professionals including Augusta National Golf Club's Jim G. James, current CMAA board member Bobby Crifasi, Henry DeLozier of Global Golf Advisors, Rick Bayliss, CMAA's immediate Past President and current CEO, Jim Singerling, CCM.

"I will be fully engaged in this process, but have opted not to chair the search committee so that the committee can make a proud and independent recommendation for the board's review and approval," DiOrio commented.

"The CMAA's executive committee has studied this entire process at great length, knowing that our members deserve an outstanding CEO, selected through a meticulous process of which we can all be proud. We will be deeply dedicated to sharing the business plan and updates on the search process with our members at the appropriate time," DiOrio concluded.

DiOrio says there is no timeline on when CMAA's new CEO will be in place. BR

“We need to remove barriers and collectively post training plans on the public side of our websites. We need to reach out to the local colleges and welcome students into our properties, and I encourage all clubs to host meaningful internships that expose students to the exceptional benefits of working in private clubs versus other hospitality venues. Please consider sponsoring a meaningful student intern program or hiring a college graduate in hospitality – even if you can only offer a server’s position with the promise of giving a college graduate some management exposure and your time. Let’s embrace mentoring as a critical component of our careers.

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“Our club has started adding statements such as, ‘we provide a safe, healthy, and positive work environment with polite and respectful management’, and over 85 percent of young applicants to our club have cited



TOP PHOTO L-R: DAMON DIORIO AND HIS WIFE SUZANNE DIORIO

BOTTOM PHOTO: CHARLOTTE COUNTRY CLUB CLUBHOUSE



this statement as a key reason why they applied for a position with our club.

“At Charlotte Country Club we have a 59-year employee and we treasure tenure, but this type of loyalty to one club or employer is quickly disappearing. As managers, we must evolve and recognize that technology is enabling a new generation to find answers to questions in minutes, that once took us weeks to research in books.

“We must face the reality that having long tenured assistant managers, food and beverage directors, etc. will be the exception and not the rule. Large hotel chains are very successful with luring bright, articulate college graduates because they offer established training programs that are readily available to view on the public side of their corporate websites.”

“We need to remove barriers and collectively post training plans on the public side of our websites. We need to reach out to the local colleges and welcome students into our properties, and I encourage all clubs to host meaningful internships that expose students to the exceptional benefits of working in private clubs versus other hospitality venues.

“Please consider sponsoring a meaningful student intern program or hiring a college graduate in hospitality – even if you can only offer a server’s position with the promise of giving a college graduate some management exposure and your time. Let’s embrace mentoring as a critical component of our careers.

“Very few businesses can create COO positions in companies for professionals within 10 years of college, and while we can never

remove nights, weekends, and holiday work from most of our clubs; we can triumph our exceptional benefits, growth opportunities, and stability.

"Our reality suggests that students are the fastest growing sector of our CMAA membership (by %). It is also true that a very small percentage of these dynamic young folks are retained in our profession for 24 months or more after they graduate. So our industry and the growth of professional club executives depends on our ability to teach and inspire tomorrow's leaders," DiOrio explained.

It is also a reality that DiOrio can successfully face so many of his challenges because his long time experience in the private club industry...starting back to as a 15-year old, stands him in good stead.

"My parents were both school teachers, but it was my father's dream to own a restaurant. As a 12-year old, I began washing dishes and helping at our family-owned restaurant on weekends. But I quickly discovered how much I loved the hospitality business...working with highly motivated and caring professionals performing as a team to make our customers experiences special and memorable."

A stint at The Alpine Country Club in Cranston, RI, working at the pool snack bar to earn money in the summer to pay for his first car followed.

DiOrio loved growing up in New England, but one wintery March, he left Rhode Island in a driving snow storm to see his older sister, Rana at Duke University in Durham, NC. "Arriving in North Carolina with its 70 degree temperatures made me realize how much I wanted to move south", and DiOrio did, moving to Charlotte 1986!

A University of NC, Charlotte political science grad ("very effective in navigating through the club dynamic!"), DiOrio waited tables at Charlotte Country Club to earn money for school, and he's been there ever since – "almost 24 years and I have loved every minute of it. The club is special for so many reasons, the first being that it's where I met my amazing wife Suzanne," DiOrio intoned.

"The respect, love, and admiration I have for her is beyond words. She sacrificed her career and witnessed 10 years of my battle with leukemia; is always caring and loving with a smile on her face.

"I regret each day what I put my wife through as she is definitely the best half of the DiOrio family!" the new CMAA president exclaimed.

But the odds are, DiOrio will face the CMAA's challenges of the next year with the same strength, enthusiasm as he has over the past 24 years in the industry.

And you can bet on it! BR

Change Is Inevitable In The Private Club Industry

"Change is a word that can sometimes evoke stressful emotions," ventures Damon DiOrio, newly-elected president of the Club Managers Association of America.

"I learned though my battles with cancer that sometimes the path you're on isn't as important as the direction you're headed.

"Change to me is inevitable and something that I embrace in every aspect of our business. We are so fortunate that we are largely in the replication business and not the innovation business.

"We have hundreds of exceptional clubs to look to as shining examples of excellence in business in our industry," DiOrio outlined. "I'm often reminded that experience in our business needs to be a guidepost - not a hitching post.

"Every club must be willing to hold on to their history while evolving to the desires of future generations. At Charlotte Country Club, a traditional 103 year old club (DiOrio is the club's CEO) "I could not have imagined five years ago that we would have such a sophisticated SmartPhone website app that allows our members to make dining reservations, post golf scores, make tennis, swimming, or golf lessons, etc.

"Change is inevitable and I embrace the challenge of what we can do to further influence the positive impact we have on people's lives. Clubs have a competitive advantage over any business in that we know most all of our customers.

For example, staff at the Charlotte Country Club records every touch point of a member's preference to personalize every aspect of their experience.

"We know everything from who drinks their martini with two olives to providing gluten-free options to diners with this dietary preference before they ask. Customization and personalization of every aspect of service is one of the next big changes in the way we operate. Ensuring that the memorable club experience becomes a fine thread woven into the fabric of a club member's life will enhance our industry's success moving forward."

DiOrio also suggests we're witnessing a fundamental shift a lack of volunteer participation in club governance, shifting the governance responsibilities to club general managers and chief executives.

"Time is a precious commodity and busy professionals who lead club boards and committees want the club's GM/COO to capably guide the member's vision and expectations for what their club represents. This fact is very positive, and is germane with the management to leadership model that CMAA has been championing for years. Club executives must continue to evolve into effective business executives with vast skill sets and capabilities," added DiOrio, CCM, CCE.