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CORRIDOR

The Cilek effect

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Because of Tom Cilek, many people in the Corridor are now familiar with David Gould.

David Gould is the coordinator of the University of Iowa's interdepartmental studies program. He likes to conduct question-and-answer sessions with authors and post the audio file to the web for his students to hear. One of the latest

authors he approached was Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos.com and author of the new book, *Delivering Happiness*.

Mr. Hsieh responded to Mr. Gould's request for an interview and mentioned that he would be in Iowa for his book tour. Mr. Hsieh, who speaks about the importance of being passionate about one's career and life, suggested they get together in person for the interview. Mr. Gould suggested conducting it in front of his students in a classroom.

Then Mr. Cilek got involved. Now, what started out as a simple Skype interview is expected to be a standing-room-only event at Englert Theatre in downtown Iowa City. Mr. Hsieh will discuss his new book at a free event at 7 p.m. Sept. 1.

Mr. Cilek is senior vice president at West Bank in downtown Iowa City and is known for his ability to organize community events.

"There are a lot of champions for downtown, which is great and very much appreciated," said Marc Moen, a downtown property owner and developer of the Plaza Towers. "But there are few as tireless as Tom and as committed as he is. And I don't think for a second that there is a hidden agenda with Tom. He just really sees the value in downtown and believes in it."

Mr. Gould and Mr. Cilek met at Capanna Coffee in downtown Iowa City last week to discuss the event and to introduce Mr. Gould to Nancy Quellhorst, president and CEO of the Iowa City Area Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Cilek planned to ask Ms. Quellhorst for financial support from her organization for the event. He got it.

"You connect with Tom Cilek and you're a celebrity overnight," Ms. Quellhorst said as she met Mr. Gould for the first time.

The UI instructor explained to Ms. Quellhorst the story behind bringing Mr. Hsieh to



Iowa City and the merits of the upcoming event. As the two talked, Mr. Cilek faded into the background, taking phone calls, checking messages and taking notes while they conversed about the event and how it relates to the attraction and retention of young professionals in the Corridor.

"He sounds like a terrific speaker; how can we help?" she asked.

And with that, the event was up to nine financial contributors.

"I met up with Tom, and the rest is history," Mr. Gould said.

The Tony Hsieh event is a good example of how Mr. Cilek coordinates community events throughout the Corridor. A few weeks ago, Mr. Cilek had never heard of Mr. Hsieh.

"This will be the biggest event of my life, I would guess, because of who he is and how he relates to people," Mr. Cilek said last week. "He's got the real message."

Mr. Cilek might consider this the biggest event with which he has been involved, but it isn't the only one. He was instrumental in bringing famed economist Richard Florida (The Rise of the Creative Class) to Hancher Auditorium in 2005. He also has spearheaded several smaller events, including an ongoing series of occasional breakfast meetings throughout the Corridor with an emphasis on regionalism.

Less than two months ago, Mr. Cilek was introduced to Mr. Gould and heard the story of Mr. Hsieh coming to town. Mr. Cilek thought it should be an event to share with the Corridor and started asking his many friends in the area about it. One of the people he e-mailed was Chuck Peters, president of the Gazette Co.

"First of all, I've heard him (Tony Hsieh) speak and he's great," Mr. Peters said. "Do you know Chris Brogan on Twitter? He's just gaga over Tony Hsieh. So, this is typical Tom Cilek. He'd never heard of him. So he called me and said should I do this, what do you think? I said, 'Tom, this guy is a rock star, and he's a fantastic speaker.'"

Mr. Cilek received a similar response when he asked Steve West, president of West Music.

"I knew who Tony Hsieh was, and when Tom brought up his name and Dave brought up his name, I said, 'Oh, this is big, you've got to do this, we have to do something,'" Mr. West said. "And Tom says, 'OK, let's do something.' And he puts a small group together and some great ideas came out of it, and it should be a great event."

Mr. Cilek said although he did not initially know of Mr. Hsieh, he followed his instincts about the idea.

"I guess I have these friends (across the Corridor), and some are 22, and some are old, and someone calls me with an idea and I decide, 'Am I on this thing?'" he said. "And I try to help. With this event, I made the decision, I am doing this."

He talked to Matt Traetow, director of sales and marketing at the Iowa City Sheraton Hotel, who offered to host the event for a loss.

"Tom is the most enthusiastic, energetic and passionate person I know," Mr. Traetow said. "He is a very good man with a huge heart. If Tom asks me to get on board with a specific idea or project, I know immediately it's for a good cause."

Ryan West, senior vice president of West Music, suggested the event take place at the Englert. So Mr. Cilek called Andre Perry, the Englert's new director, and secured the space.

"And we had no money, and that was six days ago, and by Sunday noon, Tony Hsieh had committed and that's when I called John Lohman and John Kenyon at the *Corridor Business Journal* and asked them if I could write a guest column about it," Mr. Cilek said Aug. 11.

"(Mr. Cilek) is just fearless," Mr. Peters said. "He says, 'I have no clue who Tony Hsieh is or how to pay for it. But I need to get \$1,500 to rent the Englert,' and within a day he's got the \$1,500."

Mr. Peters attributes Mr. Cilek's success to his passion for the community and to his wife.

"He deeply cares about this region, and he deeply cares about young people and wants to make people included and enthusiastic," Mr. Peters said. "He's got a great, stabilizing wife, Mary. He would not be where he is without her. He needs a rudder; she's his rudder."

Mr. Cilek's style should not be underestimated, Steve West said.

"I think Tom is a tremendous catalyst," he said. "He brings people together, and his energy is contagious. He is quite organized even though he gives the impression of being very loose. But he's got a good mission, and it's not centered around Tom; it's centered around getting things done, which is very admirable and works extremely well in this environment that we've got going within the Corridor."

A common observation about Mr. Cilek is he not only makes connections with people, he becomes their best friend.

"Everyone at one time or other has been Tom's new best friend. We joke about who the latest is," said Kelly Hayworth, Coralville's city manager, who has worked with Mr. Cilek on several events. "He always makes projects more fun to work on, and I have met a tremendous number of great people through him. Meeting these people has not only been productive but helpful as well. These contacts become important later when you are working on a completely different project or program."

Mr. Cilek is also planning an event for Touchdowns for Kids, a pledge drive for the UI Children's Hospital and a luncheon with Kirk Ferentz, UI's football coach. **CBJ**



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