

Eyewitness to History

Steve Fisher reflects on a dynamic decade at the Club



On his recent return to Hong Kong, Former Club President Steve Fisher spent a morning chatting with *Eagles & Dragons*.

Former Club President Steve Fisher stepped out to the Town Club’s 49th floor terrace, as he had done so many times before, and drank in the harbor view. Winter sunlight glistened off the surrounding skyscrapers and the water below. Boats motored to the east and west, from North Point and Kai Tak all the way to Lantau and points beyond. The scene was majestic, just as he remembered.

Little did Mr. Fisher know that inside the Club, *he* was being remembered – by Medwin Chu, Forty Niner Manager and one of our longest-serving team members.

“There’s a guy on the terrace. He looks really familiar,” Medwin said to Michael Pitsiladis, Town Club Director of Food & Beverage.

Clipper Manager Wingo Lai, who’s been at the Club for over 30 years, joined the discussion. He too recognized Mr. Fisher. “That’s him, that’s him,” he said.

Michael and Medwin approached the Club’s 1997 President.

“Excuse me, are you Mr. Fisher?”

And so it was that Mr. Fisher and his wife, Ann, were warmly welcomed back to the Club during a vacation stopover in February. It was their first trip back to Hong Kong in over a decade.

The couple moved to Hong Kong in the 1980s and lived here for over 10 years. After stints in Chicago then Shanghai, the family, including daughter Alexandra (Allie), returned to the States for good in 2012. Mr. Fisher is now semi-retired and enjoying lakeside living in Michigan with Ann. He continues with consulting work while also serving as a board member with the International Affairs Council.

As President during Hong Kong’s handover year, Mr. Fisher was an eyewitness to the Club’s pivotal role in the American community. *Eagles & Dragons* asked him to sit for an interview during his visit, to reflect on not only that momentous time but also his many years of service to the Club.

Here is our conversation.

Q: Let’s begin with your move to Hong Kong. What brought you here?

A: When I came, my wife was the expat, with New York-based advertising firm Ted Bates. I was a trailing spouse initially, and then I ended up at KPMG. I ran their general consulting practice,

1988-1993. Then I moved to A.T. Kearney, another U.S. consulting firm, where I was a partner.

Q: The late '80s and early '90s were such an interesting time in Hong Kong. You must have seen a lot of changes.

A: Hong Kong was, I would say, a very advanced place in some ways, but also not very developed yet. It was probably in the early '90s when there was a big boom in new restaurants, new hotels – where Hong Kong really started becoming very dynamic. It was a fascinating time to live here.

Q: How did you join The American Club and what were your first impressions?

A: When I was at KPMG, the office here had about a thousand people in it. There were three Americans, and the other two were both tax people. So, I was in a largely English, Scottish, and Chinese environment, and we lived in a flat up in Mid-levels. We were desperate for some grass and some western food. We were invited out to Tai Tam, and we decided we needed to join.

The only way to do it, because we were too old for the Young Americans program, was to join through a debenture. Being in The American Club was a life changer. We met a lot of people – Americans, expats, but also Chinese and other nationalities. Hong Kong is a very international place, and we thoroughly enjoyed it.

Q: What's one of your earliest memories from being a member?

A: I remember being out at Tai Tam at Christmas. There was a guy named Kenny; he'd been in the British forces, and he was the athletic director. He arranged for a parachutist, or a couple of



Mr. Fisher, daughter Allie and wife Ann at the Country Club Christmas party in 1991.

them, to come and land near the pool, on the lawn. They were dressed as Santa Claus. For our daughter Allie, this was very exciting. She also learned to swim there.

Q: Tell us a bit more about her and your wife Ann.

A: Allie was born in 1989 at Matilda Hospital. She went to a Montessori school in Stanley and then to HKIS through the fourth grade. My wife was on the board of HKIS, and she was very involved in designing and setting up The Eagle's Nest.

Q: It sounds like you both got involved in the Club straight away.

A: Yes, a lot of people would know Ann here. My wife is still working a little; she's an executive coach and does work with corporations. I was asked to join the (Club's) Finance Committee; my background is finance, economics and accounting. That's how I initially got involved, and that led, progression-wise, to treasurer to Vice President, and President.

Q: After you all moved from Mid-levels to Tai Tam, how did that change your relationship with the Club?

A: Tai Tam was great because I could walk across the street very early in the morning to go to the gym. There was a whole group of us

that would meet every morning. The American Club became a big social center for us.

Q: Culminating, I suppose, in you taking on the President's role in 1997. What are your memories of the handover and that historical year?

A: Looking back, there were a number of big events. Being on the terrace of The American Club during the final departure ceremony and watching the changing of the flags and departure of Prince Charles and Governor Chris Patton. It was a rainy evening, but a truly major event for Hong Kong.

Another thing I remember – and it's probably because of where we lived – on the evening of the handover, we saw the British forces leave Stanley Fort in big trucks. The next morning, we saw the PLA forces come in, on trucks, and go out to Stanley Fort.

Q: Was there any particular handover event or person that stands out in your mind?

A: I remember having dinner with Bill Clinton. I think it was at the Town Club. I remember that I wore the same tie twice, and the first night, no comment, then we met him the next day at the Hong Kong Convention Center, and as he came in, he said, "Ah, I did like that tie."

Deng Xiaoping was another. I didn't meet him, but he came through that year. And the (U.S.) Seventh Fleet would come through. We used to invite senior officers or enlisted people to our flat for Christmas and Thanksgiving.

Several of us – I was the current President, but past presidents too – we all went out on a nuclear submarine. We actually had two generals from the PLA with us. It was one of these friendship things. Another time, the same group of us took a boat out to the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier. They catapulted us off the carrier, and we flew back to Kai Tak, it was still Kai Tak then.

Q: In your President's report that year, you mention how the handover itself was quite smooth.

A: What made a bigger impact was the currency crisis, which started in Thailand and then affected, really, all of Asia except China. That hurt the economy here a lot, and most of the big regional businesses. We went through a recession. It was really a macroeconomic issue not the handover.

Q: What role do you think the Club plays in weathering these storms, whether it's the Asian Financial Crisis or the recent pandemic?

A: It provides continuity, and it's a little bit of hope and camaraderie. In a big active town, it's a smaller community, where you meet people and develop a sense of the American community in a way.

It was really important for us. For the Americans that I knew then, that I personally socialized with, it was very much the same. It was a way to connect with people.

It was a place to entertain, and it was a place to put your feet on

the lawn. Although one of the problems that always was a topic in the Board meetings back then – and I'm sure it still is now – was: How do you keep the grass alive?



For the Fisher family, the Country Club was their 'backyard' when they lived in Hong Kong.

Q: Aside from maintaining the Country Club lawn, what would you say was the most challenging aspect of being president?

A: One of the big changes that always occurred, and probably still is with Presidents, is to run the Club in a fiscally efficient way. When you do that, there's always a tension between dues and cost of services, such as food. I'm sure every President and Board has faced that.

Q: It's interesting to read about the social changes at that time. In your President's report, you mentioned the smoking and non-smoking areas of the Club.

A: Well, that was a big deal! Most people were non-smokers, but there was a small group of older Caucasian men, and one or two Chinese men, who wanted

to smoke cigars – including a couple of past Presidents. And they wanted to be able to smoke on the terrace. That caused a problem because a lot of people didn't want anybody to smoke.

Q: Looking back at your time on the Board, what would you say you're most proud of?

A: I should have read my old American Club magazines! I would say, we took steps to ensure the financial viability of the Club, in terms of how the debentures and individual memberships were handled.

One of the challenges is, it's very hard to increase the monthly dues. In the U.S., typically at a nice club like this, (dues) would be US\$600, \$700 a month. Here you're in a very expensive environment; striking a balance between new members and managing costs was key. That was one of the big things we worked on at that time.

That's probably one of the things I would be proud about. That we had to restructure the finances to a more viable, long-term operating basis. You know, you 'gotta pay the freight'.

Q: Finally, what has expat life and your Club experience taught you?

A: You have to be curious, you have to want a new experience. And if you want a new experience, and you're adventuresome, it never is a problem. We did know a few expats, mainly Americans, who simply wanted to be home, and it was very tough.

Here you can meet a lot of interesting people – get into a club and get into the leadership of the club, get involved. You form a lot of lasting friendships here. We still see a lot of people that we met in Hong Kong.