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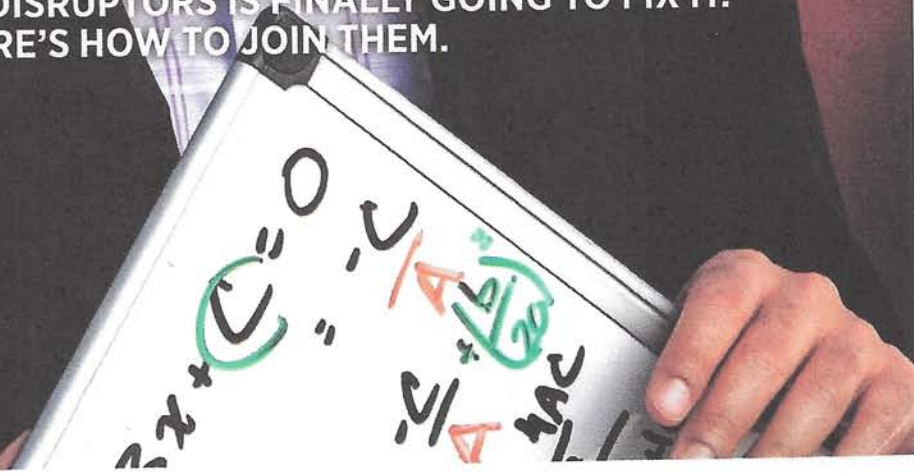
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Estate manager David Barrie Jr. oversees the Stephenson home, down to the horse stables.

Secrets of **The Help**

A new breed of highly educated, hyperdiscreet estate manager has emerged. Here's what happens when they get together to compare notes.

BY MORGAN BRENNAN

TWO HUNDRED FIFTY MEN and women mill around the Sheraton Gateway Los Angeles Hotel ballroom, notepads in hand. They siphon off to workshops like Mastering the Arrangement of a Private Jet Flight; Art as an Asset: Protecting Your Client; and Managing Difficult Terminations: A Safety Perspective. Other educational options include lectures on labor law, green home-cleaning

methods and sourcing the right nanny. Welcome to the Domestic Estate Managers Association's national convention, the first of its kind ever organized for a secretive industry you may not have known existed.

"Everything we do happens behind closed doors," explains Richmond Schmidt, majordomo for a Palm Beach estate and president of the Southeast Florida DEMA chap-

ter. "There are people who work on the same block as I do, and I don't know who they are."

For those living exceedingly large, Schmidt and the other conference-goers represent a new breed of servant, 21st-century gentlemen- and ladies-in-waiting. They may elicit comparison with *Upstairs, Downstairs* or *Downton Abbey*, but unlike the late Victorian English country



In a day's work: Barrie starts at 5 a.m. His workload entails sourcing vendors, delegating tasks to his team and inspecting every structure.

house concept popularized by TV, these highly educated estate managers are forging a new profession. In fact, many of them are white-collar transfers in second or third careers.

But for all that, there's a good reason domestic estate management as a career flies under the mainstream's radar: The job description requires unwavering discretion. Disclosure of even the most seemingly minute fact could threaten a career in an industry where staff are privy to the most intimate details of their "principal" family's personal lives. There is a code of ethics that is signed and sealed with nondisclosure agreements. (It is not unusual for applicants to sign NDAs simply

to interview for a position.)

The fact that five-year-old DEMA (which vets prospective members and requires all 1,500 participants to sign NDAs) has organized a national conference where these managers can meet one another, network and further their education among peers is a somewhat unprecedented—and long overdue—concept. The association has 14 chapters scattered across the wealthiest areas of the U.S., each meeting monthly. The local get-togethers are part support group, part educational workshop, part professional network. The idea is to add both validation and a system of checks and balances to this insulated industry.

It is believed that there are

about 1,000 estate managers—at the pinnacle of the private service pyramid—overseeing properties around the country, though few data exist. "I think no one truly knows how many private service professionals are out there. ... Some are paid properly and some are not, while others are on the corporate payroll despite working in the home," says Michael Wright, cofounder of the Domestic Estate Managers Association. Adds Matthew Haack, DEMA's other founder: "Think about just the professional sports teams out there and how many millionaires are on those. Someone is handling their estates. Now add celebrities and billionaires."

There are 50 generally recognized household job titles, with room for more, according to Teresa Leigh, an estate manager turned household advisory specialist. The estate manager hires and manages those positions, typically overseeing two or more such properties. He or she also sources outside vendors to carry out specialized jobs or tasks.

"[My boss] pays me for the knowledge and experience that I bring, just like a CEO," says Graham Lefford, an estate manager and the vice president of the DEMA chapter in Detroit. He has dedicated 24 years to household service, after logging a dozen in hotel and restaurant hospitality. "The CEO isn't doing the

On-the-Job Training

LESSONS FOR ESTATE MANAGERS

1) ALWAYS CARRY A CAMERA. "It reminds you of the table setting for a Christmas three years ago, or of the placement of figurines on the mantel that need to be returned after the chimney sweep leaves. Employers also love to see progress on projects in their absence."
—*Richmond Schmidt, majordomo*

2) NEVER PUT YOUR PRINCIPAL in the position where he or she has to say no. "I can say, 'The

chauffeur has to take Thursday off. Is that okay?' Or I can say, 'The chauffeur needs a day off. Would Thursday be okay, or would another day be better?'"
—*Graham Lefford, estate manager*

3) MAINTAIN A COMMUNAL household calendar so everyone is looped in to the principal's schedule (events, parties, vacations, guests arriving, etc.).
—*Elise Lewis, founder, Distinguished Domestics*

4) NEVER TAKE YOUR principal up on an offer. For example, never use the pool when they are not home, despite the invite.
—*Anonymous estate manager*

5) PHOTOCOPY EVERYTHING in your employer's wallet—front and back. Keep it all in a safe place in case the wallet is stolen.
—*Bonnie Low-Kramen, author of Be the Ultimate Assistant and former assistant to Olympia Dukakis*

hands-on work in a company, but he is bringing the knowledge and experience to run the company and get others to do it. That's what we do, though most of us grab a plunger just as quickly as anything else."

Experienced estate managers typically fetch six-figure salaries in return for a substantial skill set that spans everything from knowledge of fine food and wine to an understanding of art and architecture to skills in household accounting, personnel management, first aid, computers, high-tech security and HVAC systems.

"No task is too small or too large. In the same day you could be picking up poodle poop and calling Al Gore's office," says Allison Pulley, San Francisco Bay Area chapter vice president.

Social skills—and thick skin—are a must. Private service professionals must know when to enter and leave a room, when to be present but unnoticed, how to tactfully update a principal with household information. Estate managers are paid to anticipate needs and solve problems. Perhaps a principal family plans to shoot game at their ranch in Kenya for a month with the in-house gun collection. Figuring out how to transport family and firearms starts with calculating the combined weight of the luggage and the arsenal and perhaps hiring four SUVs to transport everyone and everything to the airport comfortably.

"Just because you had nine kids or because you were a corporate personal assistant doesn't mean you can run one of these houses," asserts David Barrie Jr., an estate manager for Richard J. Stephenson, the founder of the Cancer Treatment Centers of America. Barrie, the Chicago chapter president, has worked with his principal family, based in Chicago's northwest suburbs, for six years.

Barrie, a former engineer, starts his morning at 5 a.m. He knows how

to lift a prized vase so as not to leave behind trace oils and whom to call if a 17th-century piece of furniture needs to be moved (the historians at the local museum). He has learned how to assemble staffs for several residences, how to breed Haflinger horses (and muck their stalls), how to fire guns and how to fix furnaces. He has attended both etiquette classes and codependency workshops.

If the Stephenson family flies to, say, a ranch in Aspen, which Barrie has painstakingly transformed into a winter paradise, and the cold spurs them to relocate to a property in Florida, he scrambles to make sure every aspect of that property is ready to be inhabited without a hitch, from stocked pantries to heated swimming pool.

"David is the facilitator. He is the guy who can express Dad's needs when he can't be there, and that can entail any aspect of a property," explains Richard's son, Christopher Stephenson. Despite the fact that he works directly for the elder Stephenson, Barrie is available to everyone in the family. When raccoons ab-

sconded with the baby chickens and baby pheasant Christopher's son had hatched on a Sunday morning, Barrie left the concert he was attending and tracked down replacement birds from Indiana before the day's end. "I fell in love with the family I work for and what they do," says Barrie, in response to the appreciation elicited by his deed.

A mutual display of respect, and in some cases even love, is a common thread in the work life of estate managers. That is, once they find a great family to work for. "You don't want to work for every billionaire or celebrity or multimillionaire. You want to work for the family that you get along with best," says Nikki Brown, Atlanta chapter president.

Horror stories do crop up. Navigating the sometimes tumultuous power dynamics asserted by "trophy" wives is a common source of workplace ire. One estate manager, for example, recounts being impetuously fired by a new wife when the numbers on the replacement remote control were deemed too small. (He was just as quickly rehired when he returned from the store with a larger remote.) Some have struggled with party-loving playboys hoping to be supplied with drugs. In one instance, a female manager was forced to quit when her boss would not stop making overtures.

But for every tawdry story, happy ones flood the conference rooms of the DEMA convention. There is an overwhelming sense of pride and loyalty that explains the allure of this on-call, 24/7 career. "The romance of the industry is in the ability to see and to care," says Leigh, swiping at tears as she recounts a fond memory of a former employer's heartfelt reaction to a simple birthday gift she crafted for him years ago. "To be able to identify all of those little things that someone likes just so and be able to make it just so, that is the magic of this industry." **R**

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