

Club masters the art of standing tall

KC Skyliners members welcome a 7-foot-4-inch visitor to their Plaza Art Fair weekend gathering.

By JAMES A. FUSSELL
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If Kansas City's 6-foot-8-inch mayor, Mark Funkhouser, and Overland Park's 6-foot-10-inch mayor, Carl Gerlach, get tired of towering over everybody, they'd do well to hit the Country Club Plaza this weekend for a different experience — gazing up at 7-foot-4-inch David Rasmussen.

Rasmussen, president of the Tall Club of Milwaukee, is in town for a social event hosted by the Kansas City Skyliners Tall Club (motto: Long legs make fast friends). Nearly 30 (tall) people have traveled here for a weekend of socializing and partying, which includes a semiformal dinner, costume dance, golf and a stop at the Plaza Art Fair.

Rasmussen always looks forward to a tall club weekend.

"It's a blast," he said. "It's a fun dance and a fun way to socialize. The first time I went to one of these things, even though everybody is shorter

than me, I said, 'Where did all these tall people come from?' It was really neat to dance with a woman who I could actually look in the eyes instead of having to bend down."

This is the first time the Skyliners have hosted such an event. The group, which recently reformulated after years of inactivity, was founded in 1939 as the second tall club in the country. The California Tip Toppers Club preceded them by a year.

Rasmussen, 47, is the tallest member of the social organization's parent group, Tall Clubs International. He was named TCI's man of the year in 2007.

A fast grower

While it's sometimes useful being so tall — being able to see over crowds, etc. — it's also difficult. Rasmussen grew 9 inches one year in middle school; his parents spent a small fortune keeping him in clothes that fit. His muscles couldn't keep up with his rapid growth. Gangly and uncoordinated, he hated gym class. Classmates teased him.

As an adult, Rasmussen is constantly asked how tall he is and

whether he was a pro basketball player. (He wasn't, although at 6-10 in high school he did play center.) He got so tired of being asked, he designed a T-shirt that not only gives gawkers his height, but also pokes a little fun at them.

It reads on the front and back respectively "I tall-erate annoying people ... But they taste better with ketchup."

When people ask him, "How did you get so tall?" he responds, "My mother had grow lights in my bedroom. She didn't do so well with the plants."

Asked what he would like others to know about people who are tall, he didn't hesitate.

"Tall people aren't all NBA all stars," he said. "And if they're not a pro basketball player, that doesn't mean they aren't a success in life. If people approach a tall person they should consider asking them a question about something other than (being tall). For instance, one of my hobbies is I play the violin."

He's also an IT pro, his father was a public schoolteacher and his mother a traveling piano teacher. Oh, and also

he has a "little" brother named Jim who, at 6-feet-7, is the head veterinarian at the Minnesota Zoo.

His car? Don't laugh, but it's a Ford Aspire, a little car with a flat dashboard and a surprising amount of room for his head and knees.

But he knows it's his unusual length that people are really interested in. That is what got him included in a Discovery channel documentary on tall people. And it's why he loves being active in the tall club.

Amy Kesler, the spokeswoman for the Skyliners, understands. Being with other tall people is just easier. At 5-feet-11, she is one of the shorter ones in the club. Still, it can be difficult. What's more, she has been nearly 6 feet tall since she was 14, leading to teasing and low self-esteem.

"It's very difficult to find a guy that's taller than me," she said. "If I go out to the Power & Light District, I can see over the whole crowd. There doesn't seem to be a great deal of tall people in Kansas City."

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WHAT'S A 'TALL CLUB'?

Today there are more than 60 tall clubs throughout the U.S. and Canada and 38 in Europe. Tall clubs serve as social organizations for women and men 21 and older who are at least 5 feet 10 and 6 feet 2, respectively. Their mission is to make the public more aware of issues affecting tall people. The groups also often give away college scholarships to tall high school students and raise money for Marfan syndrome, a connective tissue condition primarily affecting tall people that can have serious complications affecting heart valves, the aorta, lungs, eyes and more.

If you're interested in joining the Skyliners Tall Club or checking out some of the events, go to www.kansascitytallclub.org.