

Hospitality



Genuine Hospitality

An Interview with John Kiesendahl,
President and Chief Executive Officer, Woodloch Pines Resort



Woodloch Pines Resort founders Harry and Mary Kiesendahl (left);
Woodloch Springs Golf Course (above)

EDITORS' NOTE John Kiesendahl is the eldest son of Woodloch Pines Resort founders Harry and Mary Kiesendahl. He attended Cornell School of Hotel Administration and served as a naval officer before deciding to make Woodloch his career. He is best known for greeting guests personally during meals and wearing "funny" pants (he has custom-tailored pants featuring many different children's characters). Kiesendahl serves on the Board of Directors for the Dime Bank, is a 35-year member of the School Board and is also Vice President of the Pocono Mountain Visitors Bureau.



John Kiesendahl

PROPERTY BRIEF For over 60 years, the Kiesendahl family has owned and operated Woodloch Pines Resort (woodloch.com) in Hawley, Pennsylvania and has worked very hard to grow Woodloch into what it is today. The family of properties operated by Woodloch includes a year-round family resort – Woodloch Pines, an award-winning championship golf course – Woodloch Springs, and a luxury destination spa – The Lodge at Woodloch. The Kiesendahl Family's commitment to excellence shows in the hands-on running of daily operations, as they embody what it means to treat guests as if they were company in their own homes. The original founders, Harry and Mary Kiesendahl, passed along their passion and traditions to their children and grandchildren to provide memorable experiences to thousands of families each and every year for generation upon generation. The Kiesendahl family has always understood the importance of community. Each family member is active in the local community and serves on many chambers and boards.

Will you discuss the history and heritage of Woodloch Pines and Woodloch Resort and how the property has evolved to where it is today?

My Mom and Dad bought a little boarding house in 1958 – they paid \$40,000 for the house that included 12 acres with 200 feet of lake frontage. It had room for 35 guests but no running drinking water and only one year-round employee.

I was 11 when we moved up here from Long Island. We started the resort and treated every guest just like they were coming into our home. We offered personalized hospitality that originally cost guests only \$6 per day to stay and that included three meals per day.

We started very humbly with a very small season between Memorial Day and Labor Day. We gradually grew. In 1961, my dad attempted to buy a building next to ours that was a camp. We borrowed the money to buy it.

He was forward-thinking and he knew that if we were going to stay here, we needed more property, so he sold bonds to our guests to raise funds. If they bought a \$500 bond, they got a 4 percent discount on their stay and a 6 percent interest rate. We ended up selling \$60,000 worth of bonds, and that summer, we were able to buy the camp.

We went from a little boarding house to a small resort, and that really changed things for us because we could then renovate the space at the camp. We more than doubled our size in acreage and lake frontage.

We offered horse rides and a lot of other activities which allowed us to extend our season. The key was always taking care of our staff and our family worked side by side with them. I used to go down to the spring and get water so people could have something to brush their teeth with in the morning. It was really humble. This laid the foundation for everything we have done since.

During the '60s and '70s, we grew gradually, mostly by extending the season until we were eventually open pretty much all year-round.

I bought the business from my dad in 1981, when we had 180 staff members and a full house of 150 guests. I was 34 at the time and very ambitious. I had gone to Cornell School of Hotel Administration and spent 4 years as a naval officer. When I left the service, my dad asked me to come home as he was going to sell Woodloch.

I worked hard and got a good handle on the property. After purchasing the business, we went through a strong growth spurt. From 1981-1986, we added 75 suites, a 700-seat nightclub, an Inn as well as two additional dining rooms. We also purchased an additional 250 acres of land.

By 1987, we were well-known. We didn't have a golf course, and our clientele were becoming more affluent. It was obvious to me that with all of the development it made sense to build housing along with it. So we developed Woodloch Springs, which is a 438-acre, 402-home community with a beautiful golf course as the centerpiece along with an indoor sports club and complex.

That was a challenging and expensive education. I bought the land in 1988 and decided to put the infrastructure in up front because our marketing study said we would sell it out in a few years. However, we then had the real estate recession in 1991 and 1992, so it took us much longer. I used my dad's formula to sell bonds once again, which helped us get through that difficult time, and Woodloch Springs has become successful.

We continued to grow over time and owned 1,200 acres and a mile of lake frontage. By the time we got to the late '90s, our guests were looking for a spa. We had long-time guests who were spa consultants, and they suggested we build a destination spa. A few of my friends invested with us, and we started The Lodge at Woodloch, which is situated on 72 acres with its own 18-acre lake.

We had our spa consultants running the spa, but it became very elitist, and it didn't fit with our name and reputation. It was a beautiful structure but didn't have the right personality, so we changed things around. Right now, we're running 85 percent occupancy annually. It has become a great success.

This is a high-end property – *Condé Nast* has named us the third best in the country, and we get a lot of nice press. TripAdvisor also selected us as the number one family resort in America.

My dad chose a great location, which is 90 miles from New York and two hours from Philadelphia. It's also only five hours from Washington and Boston.

We're not particularly fancy, but really genuine. We get to know our guests, and we know all of our staff. We treat everyone how we want to be treated.

Our family is here all the time. We are an old-fashioned throwback – everything we do is pretty wholesome.

Is the property open year-round?

Yes. We make our own snow for snow tubing here on property, and skiing is available at

Ski Big Bear just 10 minutes down the road. We have a beautiful lake that guests can skate on when it freezes during winter, and we have a canopy-covered, synthetic ice rink that guests can use year-round.

Any time that kids are out of school, we're busy. In our shoulder seasons, we do more corporate and senior business midweek.

Woodloch has 75 two- to six-bedroom guest homes, which are scattered throughout the property. Each one is set up to be a rental unit that we sell and manage. Fifty-five of these guest homes are located at Woodloch Springs.

We also have 160 guest rooms, and all but 20 overlook the lake. Most are either one- or two-bedroom suites with beautiful views. We have great outdoor pools and water slides, and the lake is used for water skiing and various boating activities.

It's a very active place, but we're also surrounded by natural beauty. There is no development other than what we have created. We're proud to have received several environmental awards for the projects we have developed.

Will you discuss your success in attracting and retaining talent?

It's important that our clientele see the same faces each time they visit. The key to our success is the staff. We have been blessed with 1,218 wonderful people on our team, many of whom have been with us for a long time. We are the largest employer in Wayne and Pike counties.

In the early 2000s, the State of Pennsylvania chose us as one of the best large companies to work for throughout the entire state. We care for our staff, and they do a great job.

The staff are very genuine. They don't just deliver food or clean rooms; they really get to know our guests. We even try to assign specific waitstaff to clientele so that they really get to know them during their stay.



The Lodge at Woodloch (above); Woodloch Pines Resort lakefront (below)

We have 140 people on our Social Staff who handle our activities. We have to make sure the property runs well from a general standpoint, but we also need to have a great social program. Our social activities really set us apart.

Each of my children now has a different area of responsibility. The genuineness of our hospitality is the key characteristic people feel when they come here.

Our staff includes many generations, which makes a big difference as one generation helps the next. Nonetheless, staffing is always a challenge. It's difficult for us to find the quality of staff we need; it's becoming more difficult to find those who don't mind working weekends and nights, which is a requirement in the hospitality business.

In the summer, we bring in college students from Eastern Europe to work with us, and we have found they are good people who work very hard. The visas for this program were recently cut significantly, which hurts the hospitality industry overall.

Do you have plans to grow the property further, and is it more difficult to maintain the family feel as you have grown?

We have decided not to become any larger than we are today. We are paternal with our staff. If my kids didn't come back into the business, we could never have grown in the way that we have. In the early days, the staff were our friends. We're committed to maintaining that genuineness because it makes us different from any other resort. Our lobby feels like a living room, and guests are greeted by people who are truly invested in their well-being here.

We want to upgrade the resort to enhance the facility, but the size will remain the same. There are always things to do to make it better.

You have placed a strong emphasis on entertainment. How important is this offering to the success of the property?

It's important, and we put a lot of money into our theme shows. We invest over \$250,000 a year into producing a theme show. Nobody else does this so it is critical in separating us from the crowd.

The nightclub opened in 1986, and we have expanded it. However, it's still not really large enough since everyone wants to come to the shows, which are very family-oriented.

In regards to dining, we serve everyone at once, which brings people together and gives us the opportunity to do things such as announce birthdays and anniversaries. The families that come here really enjoy this; they don't always get to sit down and have dinner together anymore.

While you're constantly looking at what is ahead, when you look back to when you first arrived at the property and how things have evolved, are you able to enjoy the process and appreciate what your family has built?

My wife would say I don't do that enough. I don't see what I do as work. I have a passion for doing what I do. There are difficult times, but I love what I do. I also feel very blessed to have my wife, children and grandchildren working here at Woodloch. ●