

2021 Annual Meeting Speaker Bios
Omni Viking Lakes Hotel



Matt Birk

Matt Birk and Company

Super Bowl champion Matt Birk is a 15-year veteran of the National Football League. Since retiring from football in 2013, Matt has held a number of roles inside the NFL League Office. A native of St. Paul, Minnesota, Matt was drafted by the Minnesota Vikings in 1998 and was a key off-season acquisition of the Baltimore Ravens in 2009. A six-time NFL Pro Bowl Selection and two-time All Pro, Matt proved to be an undisputed leader on the field and was named the sixth smartest athlete by *Sporting News*. More importantly, he has established a legacy of community service that will last far beyond his years of football.

A graduate of Harvard University with a degree in economics, Matt is the founder and CEO of Matt Birk and Company, LLC. He was the recipient of the *2011 Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year* award for his excellence on and off the field, including his commitment to emphasizing the importance of education through his H.I.K.E. Foundation. Established in 2002, H.I.K.E. stands for hope, inspiration, knowledge, and education, and impacts the lives of at-risk children by providing interactive programs and resources needed to guide a child through key educational transitions.

Matt also launched the “Ready, Set, Read!” program in Baltimore-area public schools to motivate and encourage more than 100,000 students to read at home through a system of incentives. He partnered with Scholastic to form “Read and Rise,” an initiative to join schools, families, and communities together in supporting the development of children’s literacy. Matt recently combined his commitment to education with his vibrant faith through the formation of Unity High School which he launched in 2019, offering a faith-based education to students in an under-served area of Minnesota. Matt also developed 4HG (For His Glory), a movement to create a healthy sports culture in elementary schools. 4HG ensures kids have fun and improve while keeping a Christian focus in athletics.

Matt parlays his diverse experiences culled from winning championships, creating partnerships, and educating others into a memorable message that connects with attendees and transforms audiences. He speaks to organizations across the country about the value of true inspiration, lasting leadership principles, the dynamics of teamwork, and fulfilling potential. Clients such as 3M, Coca Cola, Northwestern Mutual Life, and Walmart have benefited from the programs Matt has presented to their teams.

Matt is Chairman of the Board for both Gridiron Greats Assistance Fund and After the Impact Fund, and serves on the Board of Directors of the Pro Football Hall of Fame’s Game for Life National Advisory Board. He is the author of *All Pro Wisdom: The Seven Choices that Lead to Greatness*, and resides in Mendota Heights, Minnesota. Matt and his wife, Adrianna, are the proud parents of eight children.

[Click here](#) to watch an intro to Matt’s presentation.

**Barry Wilfahrt**

President and CEO

The Chamber Grand Forks, ND/East Grand Forks, MN

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Barry was named President and CEO of The Chamber Grand Forks, ND/East Grand Forks, MN in January of 2008. The Chamber focusses on relevance, advocacy for business and providing tangible value to its 1,100 Chamber members. During his time, The Chamber has also achieved financial strength and plays a lead role in key community issues at local, state and national levels. The Chamber has been part of a highly successful collaborative effort to maintain GFAFB, create an emerging UAS sector, workforce development effort, and extensive community engagement in a community visioning process focused on social offerings, openness and aesthetics and implementation of its action plan.

Barry also owns a billboard company, and has a lobbying/consulting firm. Wilfahrt continues to be the registered lobbyist for the ND and SD Professional Appraisers Associations.

Barry has served on more than 130 national, state and local boards over his career including the prestigious US Chamber's "Committee of 100" and is an ACC Civic Leader.

Barry has a BS degree in Government from Saint John's University in Collegeville, MN and his MA degree in Urban Studies from Minnesota State University where he was the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Fellow. Barry is also a graduate of the Chamber Institute for Organizational Management Program (IOM), US Chamber Academy Program and is a Certified Chamber Executive (CCE).

**Kelly Asche**

Research Associate

Center for Rural Policy and Development

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Education

2012. Masters of Public Policy, Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

2004. B.A. Political Science, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

Work Experience

After receiving his Master's of Public Policy at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, Kelly was hired as the Research Associate at the Center for Rural Policy and Development and moved to the best city in Minnesota, New London. Kelly's work at the Center for Rural Policy and Development is focused on data analysis, busting myths related to the rural narrative, and researching policy issues related to rural economic development, health care, and agriculture.

During his off time, you will likely find Kelly floating in his kayak, bicycling across rural Minnesota, gardening, spending time with his wife and cat, and generally shying away from places where there are large amounts of people.



Tom Forsythe

CEO & CCO

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Tom Forsythe's experience includes public relations, public affairs, media relations, crisis communications, M&A, issues management and stakeholder engagement on six continents as a FORTUNE 500 chief communications officer.

In 30-plus years as a communicator, Tom has supported six FORTUNE 500 CEOs, one Governor, three U.S. Senators and 30-plus campaigns as a message/media consultant.

Tom is retired from General Mills, where he led global communications for one of the world's leading consumer products companies, with operations in more than 100 countries and more than 100 leading brands. During his tenure, General Mills was recognized as one of the *World's Most Admired Companies* by FORTUNE, one of the *Most Reputable U.S. Companies* by Reputation Institute, one of the *Most Innovative Companies* by Forbes, and one of the *100 Best Companies to Work For* by FORTUNE.

At General Mills, Tom was responsible for corporate brand management, corporate reputation, communications, public relations, media relations, brand public relations, crisis communications, issues management, internal communications, employee engagement, stakeholder engagement and consumer services globally, while also serving as General Mills' point person on health care policy.

Previously, Forsythe operated his own strategic communications firm, consulting with clients such as 3M, Honeywell, and the University of Minnesota, and earlier worked in government and politics as a press secretary and message consultant.

A former State University Board trustee, Forsythe serves on the board of the Minnesota Historical Society and previously served on the boards of Twin Cities Public Television, the Greater Twin Cities YMCA, and MNsure – Minnesota's Health Insurance Exchange. A past member of the Minnesota Health Care Commission and the Governor's Health Care Transformation Taskforce, Tom helped found the Buyers Health Care Action Group, which went on to launch its own successful health care payment model and insurance plan. He is also a former board member and past chair of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors.

Engaging a network of current and former chief communications officers, Tom's firm, CCO Communications, now advises CCOs globally as a trusted strategist and advisor.

**Doug Loon**

President, Minnesota Chamber of Commerce
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Douglas B. Loon is president of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, a position he has held since September 8, 2015. The Minnesota Chamber represents more than 2,300 Minnesota companies, 130 local chambers and 65 business trade associations at the Minnesota Legislature on a variety of issues that impact Minnesota's economy.

Prior to assuming leadership of the Minnesota Chamber, he spent 20 years at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 17 of those in Minnesota. As the vice president for regional affairs and advocacy, he managed the seven regional offices that provide political and grassroots outreach across the nation. He also managed the U.S. Chamber's Midwest Region that includes Minnesota. He was intimately involved in supporting state and local chambers and businesses to move public policy in a direction that helps them be successful.

Loon received his bachelor's degree in government and international affairs from Augustana College in Sioux Falls, S.D. He is a graduate of the Congressional Research Service's Institute for Legislative Staff as well as the Federal Election Commission's program on campaign finance laws for incorporated trade associations and membership organizations. He also graduated from Leadership Minnesota, an exclusive program of the Minnesota Chamber addressing the economic and public policy issues of Minnesota businesses. He is past chair of the Eden Prairie Foundation Board of Directors.

**Carl Kuhl**

Co-founder and Principal
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A co-founder and principal of Velocity Public Affairs, Carl has more than 15 years of experience in politics and public policy. He has served in numerous senior communications and leadership roles for a United States senator, St. Paul mayor, gubernatorial and U.S. senatorial candidates. He is an adept communicator with a natural ability to distill complex messages while driving a public affairs campaign. Carl has experience in every facet of public affairs, having served as campaign manager, communications director, press secretary, field director, and policy liaison. He has blended his communications background with innovative digital and data tools to build multifaceted campaigns for clients such as Xcel Energy/Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce, Mayo Clinic – Destination Medical Center, and I-94 West Corridor Coalition.

Whether managing public policy campaigns, state-wide electoral campaigns or third-party campaigns, Carl has a unique ability to blend innovative ideas with a disciplined approach that focusses on the overall goal.

Following the 2008 election cycle, Carl founded Kuhl Partners. He has owned and operated public affairs consultancies since, including Connolly Kuhl Group, which was founded in 2010.

<https://velocitypublicaffairs.com/velocitys-people-and-resources/>



Todd Rapp

CEO and President
Rapp Strategies
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Todd Rapp is currently CEO and President of Rapp Strategies, Inc. For the past 19 years, Todd has provided counsel to state, regional and national clients in areas of issues management, media relations, coalition and grassroots advocacy, risk/reputation management and crisis prevention. Rapp Strategies has a diverse set of corporate, non-profit, association and government clients, including in the energy sector, health care, insurance, engineering/construction, education and hospitality.

During his career, Todd served in leadership positions at the State Capitol and managed successful statewide campaign strategies for the DFL Party and its legislative caucuses. He is currently a guest commentator on state and national public affairs for Minnesota Public Radio, and frequently accepts invitations from private organizations, public entities and the media to share perspectives on the changing political environment in Minnesota and the United States.



Tara Bitzan

Executive Director
Alexandria Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce
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Tara Bitzan has served as executive director of the Alexandria Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce since 2016. Prior to that, she spent 25 years working in communications as a journalist/editor at the Echo Press newspaper in Alexandria.

She obtained Mass Communications and English degrees with a minor in Scandinavian Studies from Moorhead State University. She joined the Echo Press as a college intern and spent the next 25 years “climbing the ladder,” moving from intern to full time reporter, then to Life Editor, Special Projects Editor, and finally Editor.

She was named the Business and Professional Women’s Young Careerist in 1999 and Woman of the Year in 2002, received the Women Strengthening Our Community for Tomorrow Girl Scout Woman of Excellence honor in 2005, and was awarded the Lakes Area Professional Women’s Spirit of Professional Development award in 2014.

She believes in lifelong learning, and graduated from the Servant Leadership Roundtable Level I and II and Servant Leadership Coaching programs, the Leadership Alexandria Program, the Forum Forward Leadership Program, the Blandin Publishers and Editors Leadership Program, the Blandin Community Leadership Program and the Institute of Organizational Management.

She and her husband Dennis have been married for 27 years and have two grown daughters.



Brad Gruhot

Chamber Director, Marshall Area Chamber of Commerce

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Brad started his Chamber career as the Membership Director for the newly formed SouthWest Metro Chamber in 2009. From there, he worked for the Bloomington Chamber in Membership from 2011-2014 before deciding to move his family back to his home town of Marshall to be closer to his mom who was having health issues. Brad was the Membership Director from July, 2014 until and then was named the Chamber director of the Marshall Area Chamber in January of 2016. Prior to Chamber work, Brad worked for the

Southdale YMCA in Edina for 11 years.

Brad is very active in the community and serves on the Board of Directors for the Marshall Area YMCA, Holy Redeemer Church, MACE & MCCE and also sits on various committees at Southwest Minnesota State University.

Brad has been married to Karen for 19 years and has two children, Jonathan-15 and Alayna-12. In his spare time, he enjoys traveling, visiting friends and even through all of the heartbreak, he is an avid MN sports fan.



Robin Anthony

Executive Director/President

Greater Stillwater Chamber of Commerce

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Robin Anthony is the Executive Director of the Greater Stillwater Chamber of Commerce since April of 2016. Prior to that, she worked 12 years in local and state government, 8 years in global consulting, and 6 years as a small business owner building a business from the ground up. In her prior life, she instructed marching band for 15 years across the State of Minnesota, hoping to make a difference in young adults.

Robin's focus is on collaboration, leadership, teambuilding, serving the public, and has a passion for social justice. She is proud to serve the St. Croix Valley and considers herself a life-long-learner to continue to improve, expand, and streamline processes and policy. Her expertise includes organizational management, project management, legislative affairs and elections, and business and community engagement.

She attended St. Cloud State University, *Communications Major 1986* and her continuing education includes multiple programs, certificates and courses from: Century College, University of St. Thomas, St. Charles Illinois, U of M, Auburn University, Capella University and just recently, a 2019 graduate of the Institute for Organizational Management, US Chamber of Commerce.

Robin has lived in the Stillwater Area for over 30 years and has two adult children who both attended the Stillwater Schools. Tyler, a former Marine, and currently, Military Police for the Stillwater National Guard and an Officer for the City of Crystal Police Department. Her oldest daughter Nicole is a teacher for the Hudson, Wisconsin School District. She is passionate and proud of her family, community, region and country.

**Shari Wilson**

Executive Director
White Bear Area Chamber of Commerce
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Shari Wilson is the Executive Director of the White Bear Area Chamber of Commerce which serves over 400 members. She leads an influential program of work that focuses on advocacy, economic development, networking and education. Shari graduated from the University of Minnesota with a Marketing Degree and completed the US Chamber of Commerce, Institute for Organizational Management. In addition to leading the Chamber, she serves on numerous boards and committees including the White Bear Lake Economic Development Corporation, the Century College Foundation Board of Directors, WBLAS Business Career Pathway Advisory Council and the White Bear Lake Rotary Club.

**Tasha Schuh**

Speaker, Author, Resiliency Expert
Tasha Schuh Inspirations, LLC
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Tasha Schuh was born and raised in the small farming community of Ellsworth, Wisconsin. Her parents owned a grocery store in town, where she often worked evenings and weekends during high school. She was also quite active in high school activities; however, acting was her true passion. As a sophomore, she landed the lead role of Sandy in her high school's performance of Grease.

By her junior year, Tasha was excited to learn the technical aspects of theater, so she decided to take on a role as a chorus member for her school's production of The Wizard of Oz. Three days prior to opening night, during a dark and hectic rehearsal, Tasha was on stage practicing a scene change when a trap door directly behind her was opened. Not knowing this, she took one step backward and plunged 16 feet to a cement floor, landing on her head and breaking her neck. She would never walk again.

Becoming a C-5 quadriplegic would test Tasha's spirit and emotions in the coming months. As she began her rehabilitation, she struggled immensely with depression and suicidal thoughts. She wanted her life to end. Tasha couldn't wrap her mind around her new life. She felt like her dreams and plans were crushed. Her depression continued for many months, especially after she moved home. Despite the desire to go back to life as it was, Tasha began to discover a new normal. There were many difficult days, but as time went on and Tasha began adjusting to her new circumstances, her outlook gradually began to change.

Fast forward to today and Tasha has accomplished more than she ever thought possible. With a dream to become an inspirational speaker, she earned a bachelor degree from Winona State University in Communication Studies. She relearned how to drive using her arms, built a new home, and learned how to be as independent as possible. She has written two books: My Last Step Backward and My Next Move Forward. She married the love of her life, Doug, in 2013, a former meteorologist for ABC in Eau Claire, WI. Now they travel across the country speaking and sharing Tasha's message of resiliency and hope. This road includes numerous awards: Ms. Wheelchair USA, the National Rehabilitation Champion Award, recognition by the Wisconsin State Legislature, and the Winona State Young Distinguished Alumni Award, among other awards.