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The great white hunter

Long Grove man at home on safari.

BY STEVE ZALUSKY

Daily Herald Staff Writer

Mike Wilmet is not what you think would fit the image of a big-game hunter.

In fact, behind his massive desk, he looks like a fitter version of Frazier Thomas.

But glance along the walls, and you'll be greeted by his trophies — huge heads testifying to close encounters with big game in such exotic locations as Tanzania.

The Long Grove resident has achieved success in both the great outdoors and great indoors. His firm, FMP Direct, in Libertyville, is a successful full-service direct marketing company.

FMP's recent success includes recognition as one of the "Top 200 Best, Brightest and most Powerful Direct Marketers" in the country by Target magazine, a direct marketing industry publication.

But as the trophies attest, Wilmet is more at home away from the office. He has been involved in Safari Club International for seven years and has been on the board of directors for the last five.

His family, including wife Rachel, son Tony and daughter Nicole, join him in his outdoor pursuits. The whole family has been on safari with him, and Rachel and Nicole have bonded with him in another of his outdoor activities, raising Arabian show horses.

"He has a love for life," Rachel said.

Wilmet's outdoor activities have become so much a part of his life that his company has branched out with a separate sports advertising agency (International Sportsman's Marketing Network). The company itself is a family effort, with Rachel serving as the president.

Wilmet grew up in Green Bay, where he worked on the security staff and as an usher at Lambeau Field. He also developed an unusual connection with the team, briefly dating the daughter of Coach Vince Lombardi. They met at a dance when both were going to different parochial schools. There were times Wilmet went over to the Lombardi household to find someone like Paul Hornung or Bart Starr in the coach's study, "hashing over game plans."

Given his upbringing, the last thing you would expect Mike Wilmet to be is a big-game hunter. In World War II, his father was in a tank that was blown up in Okinawa. Flying shrapnel left him blind in one eye and deaf in one ear.

"He wouldn't allow a gun in the house," Wilmet said. But he didn't say anything about Wilmet using guns outside the house.

The summer before Wilmet's senior year of high school, he went to visit his great uncle who owned a couple of hundred acres in Canada. That's where he discovered his uncle's 12 gauge shotgun, rusted and with the barrel duct taped to the stock.

"On the third shot, it blew up. I was crushed."

When he returned home, he convinced his father to "make one of the most difficult decisions of his life," buying him his first gun.

When Wilmet finished high school, he went into the Army, winding up in the Korean demilitarized zone on his 18th birthday. Later he studied at DePaul University. In 1970, he joined Montgomery Ward, where he spent 15 years and eventually became director of credit card marketing. After a stay at ITT Financial in Minneapolis, he struck out on his own. FMP Direct began in his mother-in-law's basement in Bensenville.

In 1994, he saw an ad for a Safari Club gathering. When he attended, his interest in hunting was rekindled.



Mike Wilmet of Long Grove does public relations for the Safari Club and has a collection of bagged animals that greet him every day when he goes to work.

He joined the club and the Illinois SCI Chapter.

He has joined safaris in South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, West Africa, Argentina, Spain, Alaska, Russia and Canada.

One of his favorite experiences was out in the bush in South Africa.

Some of these safaris make even the ordinary activities in life interesting.

"Sometimes, you're showering under the stars," he said. "The nice thing about going on safari is it becomes a family experience," He said.

He said planning a safari is "basically like planning a vacation." You have to choose a weapon of sufficient caliber to bring a quiet and humane ending to the animal after a fair chase.

But you also have to be prepared for the unexpected, like a lion following you up a tree or an animal you see

in front of you at one moment charging you from behind the next.

Wilmet said the Safari Club also is involved in humanitarian and conservation activities. The Safari Wish Program helped David Franklin, a 17-year-old from Missouri in the final stages of Leukemia, realize his dream of harvesting a white-tailed deer.

The club donates game meat and fish to soup kitchens. More than 8 million meals are planned for this year through Safari Club International's Sportsmen Against Hunger program.

In Africa, he said, trophy fees have helped communities install wells and get access to medicine.

And, he said, in the United States, the taxes on hunting and fishing licenses alone bring in \$1 billion annually for the states to use in their fish and wildlife conservation programs.