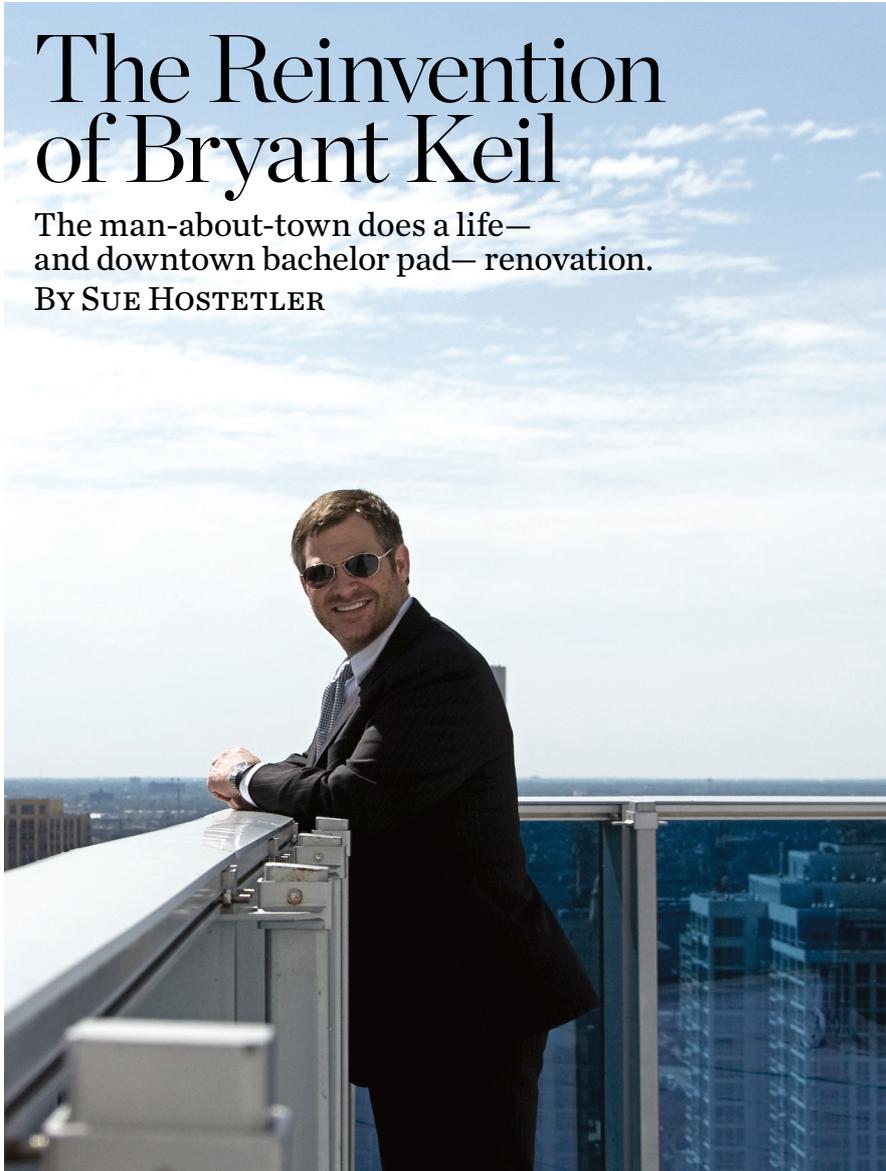


# The Reinvention of Bryant Keil

The man-about-town does a life—  
and downtown bachelor pad— renovation.

BY SUE HOSTETLER



**THEY SAY THAT** there are many acts in life. Case in point: Chicago entrepreneur Bryant Keil, who a year ago was CEO of beloved sandwich chain Potbelly and living the sweet suburban life in a classic 1920s Tudor home in Lake Forest. Flash forward to 2009; Keil has “retired,” is putting the finishing touches on a swank new River North bachelor pad and has re-established himself as a popular man-about-town.

Though no longer Potbelly’s CEO, Keil remains chairman of the board and a large shareholder in the deli business that he purchased in 1996 (and which originally began as a quirky Lincoln Park antique store selling toasted sandwiches). “My dad thought I was crazy,” remembers Keil, “but I knew there was a model for success there.” Keil expanded the menu to include salads, shakes and fresh-baked desserts; attracted investors like Starbucks guru Howard Schultz; amassed a near cultlike clientele and massively grew

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the business into the more than 200 company-owned stores it is today. Last year he hired the former president and COO of Yum! brands and the former president and CEO of Sears to take the company national. The self-deprecating Keil says, “It was a dream come true to find someone who was infinitely more qualified to take the company to another level.”

So, as he finalizes his much-discussed divorce and relocates back downtown, what’s next for the Hinsdale native? One thing is clear—Keil remains a devoted and protective father to his four children (two boys and two girls, ages three to 11). “My four children are the greatest love of my life and I understand that it is my responsibility to ensure that they are raised with a sense of compassion and empathy toward others,” Keil says.

You get the sense that Keil—much like the fictional capitalist turned full-time humanitarian character Teddy Rist on television’s *The Philanthropist* or maybe real-life rock star Bono—has matured into a person who knows there is more to life than just counting one’s money. “As wise men before me have said, ‘A good life can only be judged when it is eventually over,’” says Keil, admitting he’s made some mistakes along the way. “But I’m obsessed with making the world a safe and kind place,” Keil offers when discussing this new chapter in his life. He has evolved into a tireless supporter of worthy Chicago organizations and causes: He is a board member of the Field Museum, 2016 Olympic Committee, Chicago Club, Economic Club of Chicago, Big Shoulders Fund, Rush Neurobehavioral Center, and Kohl Children’s Museum and a cochair of the Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center, to name just a few. In September, he began a full-time master’s degree program at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism. And in 2008, he widened his interests to include domestic and international politics when he became a Henry Crown Fellow at the Aspen Institute. “I am working on an International Exchange of Peace initiative to further understanding and friendship between American and Middle Eastern children and families,” he explains.

In the short term though, Keil’s current obsession is the completion of his new ultramodern downtown digs, which feature soaring ceilings, every 007-worthy high-tech gadget out and an expansive outdoor space with a limitless vista of Lake Michigan. He is excited to get back to “the energy in the city, which is so inspiring and helps to ignite my creativity.” Creativity for what, many may be starting to wonder. “Potbelly is only one chapter in my life,” adds Keil coyly. “I know it was an interesting time, but I think there is so much more to come.” **||MA**