

# ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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## Family makes 200K a year and gives most of it away

How rich is rich? The Hsieh family donates most of its earnings to others. Take a quiz to find out how rich you are.

By LORI BASHEDA / The Orange County Register

**W**ho on earth would make \$200,000, and give away all but \$48,000 of it?

Who would hunker down in the hood when they can afford the heights?

Tom and Bree Hsieh. That's who.

The couple belongs to a club made up of people who donate at least half their salary to charity for at least three years straight.

It's called the 50 % League and it grew out of Bolder Giving, an organization started in 2007 by Boston suburb philanthropists Anne and Christopher Ellinger. The mission: To encourage people to publicly proclaim their stories of giving in hopes that it inspires others to give boldly.

Many of the 120 club members are millionaires, often folks who inherited giant sums of money and, feeling either burdened or guilty or unbelievably generous, decided to give most or all of it away.

Folks like John Hunting, who is quoted on the Bolder Giving website, saying this gem: "When I

“Tom, 37, agrees his lifestyle isn't for everyone. "But at the same time, wow, how powerful would it be if more people took that challenge. What is wealth? How much do you really need?”



**FIFTY PERCENT:** Bree and Tom Hsieh are members of the 50 percent league, a club of people who give away at least half their salary. Tom made \$200,000 last year as a partner in a company. He gave away all but \$48,000, the median income in the nation at the time.

got a \$130 million windfall in 1998, I decided to give it away quickly."

But as admirable as that is, its one thing to give away windfalls when you're still left with enough money to live comfortably (Hunting kept \$10 million). It's another thing to give away so much money that you wind up wearing 99 cent thrift store ties to corporate meetings. Cheerfully, we might add.

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Not everyone understands. Take Tom's dad John for instance.

Tom was 5 when his parents left Taiwan with him and his little brother Tim. They arrived at the airport in San Francisco, not speaking much English, bought something called a hotdog and immediately feared they had made a wrong decision.

Tom's dad had been a successful businessman in Taiwan. Here, they had to start over. They were lonely. Hotdogs were disgusting. But there was a payoff: "My children will get an education in schools that are the envy of the world," Tom says his dad thought. "God will reward me for what I've endured."

In eighth grade, Tom decided the high school he was about to enter was not good enough to get him into Cal Tech. So he put together a chart for his parents, showing other school districts with better college admissions rates and SAT scores, as well as median home prices in those areas. His parents agreed to leave West Covina for the more affluent South Pasadena so he could attend high school there.

Tom did get accepted into Cal Tech. But a friend of his happened to be heading off to Harvey Mudd. Tom visited the smaller private college, fell in love and enrolled.

"It was there that my faith came alive," he says. He joined the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship and soon came to a conclusion: "First, that God had love and

passion for the poor. And, second, that I did not."

He began working at soup kitchens and doing laundry at shelters to try and change his heart.

This was not what his parents had in mind.

"We kind of had a pact," Tom says. "And instead of being focused on studies and making career my first priority, I was talking to them about God and homeless people."

They disowned him.

After graduating in 1993 with a degree in physics he was offered some lucrative jobs. But fearing they would "move me in a different direction," he turned them down, instead taking a low-paying tech job.

Again he made a spreadsheet of possible neighborhoods where he and a few like-minded friends could live; this time of poor neighborhoods that needed help.

"We weren't just gonna come in and be saviors; but where we could become neighbors." They rented an apartment in south Pomona.

And for the last 13 years, Tom has lived in the same three block radius, despite two stolen cars and a gun fight in front of his apartment, even as his income steadily climbed.

"When I cracked \$100,000, I sat my parents down and told them: 'I'm not the Chinese son who buys you the Mercedes,'" he says.

In 1999, Tom met Bree. She was interning for Servant Partners, which works in slums around the world, and living by choice in South Central.

When Bree, who grew up middle class in Fargo, N.D., learned that Tom gave away much of his salary, she says, "I was really pleased."

The couple married in 2001 and decided to live at the national median household income. Last year that was \$48,000. It recently jumped to \$50,000, U.S. Census statistics show. "We'll have to give ourselves a raise," Tom joked, when he heard.

Two years ago, Tom became CEO and co-owner of SplinterRock, a telecom consulting firm. His salary hit a high of \$200,000. He gave all but \$48,000 to various charities that work with the poor, including Pomona Hope, a community center that Tom is founding president of. This year he expects his salary will be less since he has to invest more money in his company, but it will still be far more than the \$48,000 he and his wife are living on.

They don't feel at all deprived, says the couple, now living in a 2-bedroom apartment with their baby girl.

Tom likes to point out that one of the compliments he most often gets is for the 99 cent tie his wife found for him at the Veterans Thrift Store. "I always enjoyed a bargain," says Bree, 33.

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That's not to say there are no temptations. When a \$300 Coach bag recently caught her eye, she had to tell herself: "I have a purse. And it's a good purse." The longer she has lived frugally, "the less the wants drive me."

Keep in mind that she doesn't consider Starbucks a "want." "That actually falls into my needs category," she says.

When Tom heard about the 50 % League last year he shot an email to the founders. They didn't just make him a member, they made him a poster boy. The couple's story is on the Bolder Giving website.

Tom, 37, agrees his lifestyle isn't for everyone. "But at the same time, wow, how powerful would it be if more people took that challenge. What is wealth? How much do you really need?"

Are you ready Orange County? ■