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How we ... Turned aging bowling alleys into modern money-makers

Aloma Bowling Centers in Winter Park, east Orlando and Sanford are in being completely revamped.

Aloma Bowl General Manager Kendra Gaines, 42, said the renovations are causing guests, who hadn't been to the aging bowling center in years, to start coming back.

Since it opened in 1977, the firm's Aloma Bowl at 2530 Aloma Ave. in Winter Park has been a popular spot for birthdays, corporate events and fundraisers. Yet since the economic downturn, Regional General Manager Keith Baldwin, 45, said there's been a downturn in the sport and an upturn in the entertainment side.



Aloma Bowling's 32-lane Winter Park location celebrated its "Grand Re-o-pin-ing" on Oct. 14, having invested nearly \$500,000 into the 45,000-square-foot facility.

Aloma Bowl's Airport Lanes, a 32-lane Sanford bowling alley with a bar, grill, arcade games and pool tables, will be renovated next, slated for completion in 2016.

Aloma Bowl's 100,000-square-foot Boardwalk Bowl Entertainment Center at 10749 E. Colonial Drive — which has 80 bowling lanes, an arcade and a sports bar hosting comedy nights — will be revamped after that.

The process of revamping the aging bowling alleys also will add more jobs to the market. Total investment is expected to reach more than \$2.5 million.

Read on to see how Aloma Bowling Centers is making \$1.5 million in revenue this year while revamping its aging bowling alleys:

Has the space at any of the bowling centers expanded as you revamp them?

Baldwin: No, we've done interior upgrades, like the bar and a new menu.

Gaines: We redid the arcade with a redemption option. The tickets can be redeemed for prizes like at Chuck E. Cheese or Dave & Buster's. It's a new feature, and operates coinless and ticketless. Everything gets added to a game card. It was completed in June, and it's been a big hit ever since.

How did you get into the business?

Baldwin: I was in the entertainment business. As the video game industry took a downturn, I was attracted to bowling.

Gaines: I used to bowl professionally on tour. I've received a couple of titles. I started when I was 4. My first job was in a bowling center snack bar, flipping burgers. I made team USA in 1995-1997 and 1998, but I went out on tour. I dreamed of owning a bowling center. You reach people in all walks of life who share this love for bowling.

How many businesses hold corporate events at Aloma Bowling centers?

Baldwin: Corporate events are about 25 percent of our business. Some firms have team-building parties every year. We help companies host fundraisers for charities. We just did one for breast cancer awareness, and we've done some for special needs and Make-A-Wish Foundation, among others.

How has bowling changed over the past few years?

Baldwin: Since the economic downturn, companies are finding dollars to help their employees develop. We changed the vision to be family-oriented versus just a one-stop bowling alley. Our grill at the Aloma center, Brooklyn South Grill, offers pizza that is hand-stretched to order, the dough's imported from New York, and the burgers are hand-patted every day. The mentality behind eating at a bowling center is changing.

How many workers do you plan to hire in the next 12 months?

Gaines: We'll be looking to hire 20-30 jobs across all the centers; two to five at Aloma Bowl. The positions range from service personnel to servers, bartenders, pinsetters and cooks. The average hourly salary is up to \$11.

Baldwin: We tend to hire locally. All of our local operations are working on the entire hiring process. Our centers are looking for additional help in late December, as we typically see an influx of transient business in the first quarter.

What key factors help you attract and retain top talent?

Baldwin: We have a great working environment. Some of our success is due to our decision to promote from within. For example, our current managers all used to be hourly staff.

What's the most exciting project you're working on now?

Baldwin: We're taking the same model of renovation to our Sanford center to modernize it and attract millennials. We want to make it a great socializing place for guests to eat and drink with games, comedy club and trivia nights. Guests also can watch most sporting events, including NFL, NASCAR and Major League Baseball.

Where did you get the money to fund the renovations?

Baldwin: We have a relationship with First Green Bank, and they opened a line of credit for us.

How are the renovations directly affecting business?

Gaines: So far, it has been an estimated 10 percent growth per month. As far as guests, we've had a great return, with some guests who hadn't been here in years. We've just finished some exterior design and we're painting a new sign.

What was your most challenging part of the renovations so far, and how did you overcome it?

Gaines: We are dealing with a building that has been here for quite some time, so we're limited to the space we have. We were able to double the arcade and open up our bar area by knocking out a wall. Now the bar feels like it's part of the bowling alley, but it still has its own identity. It's been neat to see the transformation from years ago to now.

Baldwin: Like most small businesses, we fell victim to the economic environment back in our planning stages and now are coming out of it.

What's your advice for others in your industry?

Gaines: It's important to be involved with what's going on, to keep up with the times. We were guilty of being a little stagnant. You have to keep doing new things, and if you do a little at a time, you'll come up with something cool. Funding was tight, but we did it in a year, and now we keep things fresh in our guests' eyes.

Baldwin: Listen to your guests. Listen and take it to heart.

Aloma Bowling Centers

Description: Bowling alley firm with three locations: Winter Park, Sanford and east Orlando

Top executives: Kendra Gaines, general manager; Keith Baldwin, regional general manager

Founded: 1977

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