

Family, Community Power Official's Den Success

By Ed Byrne
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HILBERT – In an era where the number of bowling houses in the country, and in northeast Wisconsin, has dropped dramatically lanes at Official's Den in Hilbert are busier than ever and owner Jim Schmidt is looking at expanding.

Maybe the fact that he started bowling at four years of age has something to do with that, but maybe it's much more.

For Schmidt, owning and operating a bowling center is a second career. It followed a career in large manufacturing plant in Neenah.

But that wasn't his dream.

"Our goal was always to find a small bowling alley that we could retire into," he said.

The Schmidts were looking at the establishment in Hilbert and another in Green Lake.

"That one [in Green Lake] was more of a touristy situation, and Hilbert was more of a home environment and community that we wanted to be in," Schmidt said.

The prior owners, who also owned Abstract Electric in Hilbert, had already started upgrading the facility. Because Abstract's business was taking off big time, the owners decided to sell the bowling business. The timing was perfect for Jim Schmidt, and his wife, JoAnn.

"What the business needed as a hands-on owner," he said, calling it a perfect situation for tender loving care to make the business an integral part of the community. "In a small community, the 'hands on' helps you a lot because you understand what the community needs. You get to see and meet the people; they get to meet you. I think it's a big part of small businesses to have the owner present."

It didn't take long for the Schmidts and Hilbert to get to know one another, and it might have been one of those "love at first sight" deals.

The business has eight bowling lanes, plus room for a pool table, darts, electronic games, and a bar and grill. There are also volleyball and horseshoes outdoors in the summer.

The grill has been so successful that plans are in the works to expand the kitchen. Schmidt is already upgrading the kitchen equipment to handle bigger lunch and dinner hours.

The lanes are busy, and that's an understatement. On Monday, all lanes are full with men's league play, and there's a traveling pool league; on Tuesday, there's a bean bag league with 32 people, plus a traveling dart league; on Wednesday, the lanes are full of ladies' league bowling, and a traveling bean bag league; on Thursday, there are two bowling shifts for ladies and men's leagues and two traveling dart teams; on every other Friday, there is a full house with couples; every other Saturday, there is an eight-pin league on four lanes, and a youth-adult league on the other four lanes; on Sunday, there are two shifts of afternoon youth bowling, and an evening every-other-week couples league, and a traveling pool team.

"It is crazy here in the winter," Schmidt said.

When he and his wife took the business over in 2016 there were only 59 adults and 20 youth bowlers in the house. Now there are 276 adult bowlers and 49 youth bowlers.

That trend is exactly the opposite of what is happening at most bowling center and inmost communities.

"We're more than a bowling alley, but as far as bowling goes, you need to be hands-on, to understand what your customers' need and wants are," Schmidt said. "Being a bowler since I was four years, I know what a bowler wants, what a bowler needs – and we cater to them."

Some example: league bowlers are treated to three free meals a year, and there are weekly pizza giveaways every week for leagues.

"They understand that we appreciate their business," he said. Schmidt also credits his employees, which he calls a great staff. "With a small business in a small community, you have to give them a great product, and great service, at a great price – and you should be able to be successful."

The bowling business is the core, but food is big and growing bigger. It is not unusual to see blue-collar and white-collar folks filling the dining room at the lunch hour.

"People understand that when they come here, we will turn the food around very quickly," Schmidt said. "It's good food, and quick ... We continue to upgrade our equipment to handle the capacity."

The business just added soft-serve ice cream – just in time for the recent hot weather.

In addition to all the tangibles, there are some intangibles that are just as big.

"We work very well with any organization, especially with youth," Schmidt said.

After high school football games, there is free open bowling for kids. Official's Den donates pizza for most school fundraisers.

One of the biggest and best surprises for Schmidt was a welcoming community that never made him feel like an outsider or newcomer.

"This community supports us ... we feel a part of the community," he said. "If we had known about Hilbert when your kids were younger, we would have moved here. It's just such a great place and such great people."

Official's Den is investing in the future with its youth bowling development program.

The business welcomes young people and makes them feel at home. Recreational open bowling exposes young people to bowling; they have fun and begin to take it seriously.

"If you want to learn how to be a better bowler, we have four coaches here to help you," Schmidt said.

His youth bowling program has a unique payoff, too. Participants can earn scholarship money for their post-high school studies.

During the 2018-2019 school year, four young people were involved in the program and raised \$4,000. That's \$1,000 for each participant to set aside for college.

"I don't know too many youth programs that do that," he said.

The business also runs its adult-youth bowling program "because it is family time."

"It is a very good family bonding activity," Schmidt said. "It's a great atmosphere ... where you can sit down and talk and enjoy each other."

Official's Den also has competitive middle school and high school traveling teams that bowl on Tuesday and Thursday evenings during the school year.

The middle school team had taken first place in its league two times in three years.

Jim Schmidt is also on the village's Plan Commission, where he is a strong proponent of growth.