

Awesome. So thanks so much for coming on today, Natalie. I know we've been, uh, going back and forth a little bit. I'm really looking forward to this conversation. Um, for anyone who has not had the pleasure of meeting you, tell us a little bit about yourself and, uh, the centers you work with. Um, my name is Natalie Ahi.

Um, I work with three different centers in, uh, once broke Kentucky and Henderson, Kentucky. Now, um, I have grown up in the business. Um, two of the centers are owned by my, my father, um, which is how I got into the industry. Hmm. Um, my husband and I recently bought, um, our own location, our third location last, so Oh, very exciting.

Yes. So we did, um, a big remodel on that third location. Mm-hmm. and have business since February. Oh wow. Yeah. Congratulations. Thank you. Mm-hmm. . So, um, were you working in the other centers like the whole time or is this like your first jump back into the family business? Um, no, I've been involved in the centers from several aspects pretty much my whole life.

Um, I worked in them as a teenager, um, started out doing the league secretary job where you processes Oh. Yeah. That's not an easy job. No. Actually I started that when I was 13, so that was my first job in the center. Yeah. Um, as a child, my, my mom was involved too. She used to, um, go out on calls for merchant leaves, what we called them back in the nineties mm-hmm.

Around all the businesses and, you know, drummed up business. So I was a tag along for. Wow. So really been involved in pretty much all of it. Um, you know, went, went away for a few years, went off to school and did a few things, and then came back business in 2007. Okay. So I've been managing those two centers, um, since then.

And then, like I said, we opened the third center, um, this winter. Mm-hmm. So very cool. So now, um, what made you, I guess, decide to jump in and have your own center? You just felt like it was time or you guys wanted to expand? Or tell me, tell me a little bit about that. Um, well it was just kind of an interesting opportunity that arose.

Um, the center that we bought was owned by a family that we knew actually their daughter was working for us in one of our current locations. She was, um, a college student and she had Okay, you know, move. 30 minutes away to go to school in our town and um mm-hmm. . Anyways, her father unfortunately ended up passing away and they to sell the center.

So, um, it just kind of organically. Tyler was right. Yeah. Right. We hadn't really gone looking for it, but, um, it happened and. It. Um, it was a little dated . Yeah. . Um, they hadn't had a whole lot done to it. It opened in 1960. Oh, wow. Yeah. Lot of original things in there. So we did a, a really big remodel, not only to the facility itself, but the bowling aspect.

Mm-hmm. , well, we, um, we upgraded to string pin setters. Oh, very cool. Put in new scoring, did synthetic overlays, um, you know, all of that. And then, you know, the actual shell of the building too, needed a lot of work. We knocked walls and, uh, brightened it up. Repainted new flooring. Mm-hmm. , new kitchen, a lot of stuff, so.

Wow. Yeah. So like a total overhaul basically. Yes. Yeah. That's very cool. So, uh, you went with string. What, tell me a little bit about that, cuz that's, uh, controversial in some circles. Um, how was that and are, how's the decision been so far? Well, it's been good so far. Um, they really have functioned really well.

They've had very few problems. Mm-hmm. Um, mm-hmm , the things I was really set on from the beginning, um, in our two centers that we had previously. They'll have, um, just regular Brunswick, a two pin setters in them. And I have felt for quite a few years now, like that's the biggest problem that we're gonna hit in the future.

Mm-hmm. maintaining of those pin setters because there are so few trained mechanics, right? Yeah. It, yeah, it's. Right. So there's definitely a shortage of experience there. And not to mention major rise in cost of parts. Right. And then the cost of labor too, since you have, um, full-time mechanic on duty pretty much every hour that you're open.

And then preventive maintenance that goes in the office. Mm-hmm. so. It. Um, that was one of the things that I, I really wanted to try in this new location. Mm-hmm. . Yeah. And, and not to mention, uh, electricity too. Yes. And I can tell from my electric bill since, um, two of our centers are approximately the exact same square footage.

They're mm-hmm. , number of lanes, similar square footage on the front end, um, and our electric bill is half really half. . So that's Wow. Big improvement. . Yeah. I'm sure you're gonna get some calls from some of the, uh, am m f guys or whoever else who's doing the strings for, to talk about that. . . That's, that's, that's, uh, that's a big difference.

Did you go with the, uh, edge or who did you go with? Yeah, they're the Cuba, um, edge. Edge, strange. Those are really nice. They, they are, they're actually so pretty themselves. Mm-hmm. , you kinda hate to be in the back of the house cuz they. They're, they're fancy looking. Mm-hmm. . Yeah, I know. Uh, over at the, uh, expo, you can walk around back and look at 'em and it's pretty nice and it's like, not like that crazy amount of moving parts.

It's pretty simple. They are really very simple and they, you know, I don't have a whole lot of time and on 'em yet. Like I said, we've only been open since February, so I can't, can't speak to longevity, but they have been relatively drama free. Mm-hmm. . . So, and as someone that has grown up in the bowling center business, I really appreciate that.

Yeah, absolutely. . So, speaking of which, what are were, was there anything like going from working, um, you know, with your parents and their centers to having your own that you were not expecting or something that popped up? Or was it pretty much business as usual from day one? Um, well, It's been pretty much business as usual.

I feel like I had a idea of what to expect. Yeah. Um, you know, there have been some differences. This is in a different, uh, market, so, you know, kind of had to get into that community and meet some of the former bowlers. That was sort of an issue with getting some of the, the previous, uh, league bowlers to try out the strings, you know?

Oh. Um, and you know, they're not sanctioned, so we don't have any sanctioned leagues, but we mm-hmm. , were able to there, um, five different casual leagues mm-hmm. right now, and they've gone over pretty well actually. Mm-hmm. , the Seniors League Bowl, which I think it's a pretty big sale for seniors to be trying out something.

Right. That's a good point. So progressive. Mm-hmm. . So anyways, they're bowling on it and they're, they're having a good time. They like, that's awesome. Fewer, you know, the bowling experience is better. There are fewer breakdowns, right. Um, mm-hmm. , not many reasons to have to move lanes. So there's a lot there.

Yeah. Yeah. That, that's really exciting. And I think you're onto something anyway, is that, I mean, at least from the people I've talked to, there's definitely less of the sanctioned leagues and more of those like kind of social leagues like you're talking about, um, usually a little bit shorter and more, you know, not as quite as competitive.

So it seems like that would work really well for the, the string machines. It, it does. And, you know, we would like to get some of the more competitive business eventually too. Mm-hmm. , but. , you know, this was just an unusual situation. The center that we bought had been closed down for almost two years. It closed during, um, the covid shut down and then the owner passed away and it didn't reopen.

So by the time we, people were already not bowling. So it's not like coming into existing right. Hey, we're gonna put in strings next week, right? . Yeah, . Right. That helps a lot , so, right. It was easier to start, right? Yeah. They're probably just thankful to be able to bowl. They are in the center. It looks a lot better than it did when they were coming there, right?

Yeah. So they're appreci. Yeah. So, um, you got strings you were saying that you have today and maybe some of the non sanctioned social leagues. What else is, uh, working for you guys? Um, you know, you're a couple or what about eight months in? Um, what are some of the other things that are, are working for you at the center?

Um, I mean, honestly we're doing a lot of things that we just have kind of always done. You know, we're mm-hmm. doing, it's in a small, a smaller community, so mm-hmm. . More traditional experience, you know, we're just doing, you know, um, office parties and birthday parties and moon labels. Yeah. All those things we find in a traditional center, so mm-hmm.

Um, something that we are doing that's different than our other centers is we have a, um, a better kitchen with an expanded food service. So that's a first Nice. Yeah. Thing that we're trying mm-hmm. . and then we're also getting ready to reopen. Um, the bar aspect in this new, we've had bar sales, but we, um, remodeled the bar area and we actually we're trying something really interesting.

Um, we left eight of the original, uh, lanes with those pin centers. Okay. So it's a 24 lane house. We put strings on 16, and then the other eight we left with the traditional pin centers. Okay, well actually seven now because you can't, the, the kickbacks don't fit next to each other. Oh, okay. , you lose, you lose a lane

Interesting. Yeah, we've learned something every day. We lost, um, we put our new strings on lanes nine through 24, which have become one through 16 and then yeah, we lost Lane eight . Okay. Of naming our bar area, the lost lane. Oh, I like that. I like that . Yeah. Lanes one through seven have become A through G.

Okay. And we, um, we actually pulled out all the scoring and everything down there and are just offering it as an extension of the bar for parties and things. Um, keep grow? Yeah. Oh, okay. Like, like old school. Yes. Very cool. Mm-hmm. and. Um, like, it's actually getting ready to reopen in November, so we'll see what happens.

Yeah, I'd be, yeah, I'd be curious to hear, uh, if people, how people like that. Cause I know there's still centers out there. Not many, but still people who do that. And it's kind of like a, you know, old timey experience kind of thing, right? So we're definitely going hear, you know, this'll be a fun thing. Um, you know, come out with your friends and, you know, drink some beer, drink some bourn, have some.

This, this is not for your competitive bowler. This is for fun. Mm-hmm. . So we're gonna try this new thing and see how it goes. And we've got, that's really cool. You know, I've got a pool table in there and just going for a real nostalgic feel down there, right? Mm-hmm. . Yeah. Yeah. I think that's really smart. I mean, that's, , you know, we're, I, I think most centers are seeing a pretty good wave this year and, you know, just kind of a upward trend.

And I think that kind of retro theme is, is one of the driving factors. Just people like that. There's just not many things like that you can do today. They don't, and you know, it's really interesting in bowling centers because people aren't necessarily looking for, you know, a real sterile feel. They, they like them to be personal.

Mm. . They want them to be updated and clean and nice, but they also want them to have that hometown. Yeah, the character. Yeah, exactly. Mm-hmm. . Yeah. You, when they really, people tend to become attached to a particular house it seems like. So, you know, they get used to having in their, oh, you know, my kid had their birthday party there at , know they're very attached to their specific place and Right.

But not too much change. Right. Just yeah. , right? Yeah. You gotta do it slowly. . Yeah. No, that, that's really cool. And I, I like that you guys are going, um, bigger on, on the food offering, because that seems to be a trend too, where people want like a real meal, not just like, you know, soft drinks and a pretzel.

They want like an, an actual quality meal at the, when they're bowling, I've seen, right? Mm-hmm. , right? So we're keeping sort of. You know, typical things that you would expect. Nothing too fancy, but really good, really, you know, cooked fresh. Mm-hmm. . Yeah. Yeah. And then, so then I guess,

and you said the bar hasn't started yet, or you're still doing some things at the bar, but the bar area's not open.

Part of the bar has been open, but we haven't opened our retro lanes or our, um, pool table yet. We're getting ready to open those in November. Cool. So, you know, you can go down there and get a drink, but it hasn't. The extra entertainment aspect added yet. Right. Okay. And so what would you say right now is your biggest challenge, um, at, at your center?

Um, pro, well, you know, most people would say staffing and yes, we've actually been really lucky with, with staff to an extent. Mm-hmm. I am lacking in, I, I actually break them down into two categories. I know a lot of people have, you know, hourly workers and managers, but I basically have all adults and kids.

Yeah. Right. I kids, college kids, and I have a lot of those, but I'm lacking in the adult. I see. Mm-hmm. , um, you know, assistant managers and things like that. Right. So that's, that is. What we really have struggled with since we've opened that aspect. But you know, we do have a lot of younger people working for us and you know, that is good.

In some ways they're outgoing and enthusiastic and happy to be, there's limitations to what they can do. Sure, yeah. And their experience. Their life experience. Yeah. You, you need that when dealing with customers, so, right. Yeah. So what's been, what's worked well for you for having some of the younger people?

Because I, I've, you know, some people find that they can make it work. Some people are just like, oh, these kids are just on their phone and they don't do any work. So what are some things that you've done that to be able to get them to get a good stuff with that? Um, I think the key with the younger kids is just keeping them, you have to keep them engaged.

You can't really. Leave them. They can be independent, but you have to find ways to keep them working together and working with you. You, I talk to, you know, we have three different locations and I talk to my staff in those three locations multiple times a week. Mm-hmm. every single person. I know what's going on with them.

I just try to stay engaged with them. Yeah. And then, you know, you can't be too rigid either. If they wanna have Friday night off to go to homecoming, well mm-hmm. , you find a way to let them have Friday night to go Right. . Exactly. So you Exactly. You, it's a give and take, you know? Mm-hmm. ,

you, you've got them and they're willing to work for a little bit less money, , but you to be able to give them the time off that they need as well.

Sure. Yeah. So it's, it's always sort of a matter of. Finding that line and staying right on that tightrope. Mm-hmm. . Yeah. That's, that's really, I, I like that you say that about like, uh, engaging them. Cuz you're right. If you can like, keep them intention and make almost like, make it a little bit fun or like some kind of, like, I, I guess like you said, engagement, then you, you get a little more attention then.

Yes. And, um, you know, I've encouraged all of them to join a league. Um, they, that's a really effective thing. Get them actually interested in bowling. Yeah, that's a good idea. Smart. That's an easy thing too for you to offer as a perk, you know? Mm-hmm. . Right. You know Ohk, but you . Right? Right. Exactly. That's really cool.

And then so do, do they do like their own leagues or what kind of league do you have 'em join? Um, well actually they all, most of them now are involved in an existing league, which is great. Although we, we did try an employee league over the summer and that was a lot of fun. We haven't kept it going.

There's just been a lot going on. Yeah. Gearing up for winter season and everything. Right. They, they've all pretty much found a league that they like and it interesting. It didn't watch them get competitive. Right. Yeah. Get good. Yeah. Yeah. So that's really cool. Mm-hmm. . Yeah, that, that's actually a really good idea.

I like that. Right. Um, cool. So, um, I'd, I'd imagine then also with the, you know, having them engaged, you probably have a pretty good retention rate too, since you're sta talking to them. I find like that, that's another big piece of it for staffing. It is. Everybody wants to feel like they belong somewhere and, mm-hmm.

you spend a lot of time in your job. Um, you know, even if you have a high school kid that's working for you 15 hours a week, well, you know, if they're in school, a large portion of that, and then they're giving up three or four weeknights or a weekday after mm-hmm. , you know, they, they wanna feel like they enjoyed their time there.

Right. They, they can't just be going to work. They, you know, they need to have another reason to be there and, you know mm-hmm. have become friends with the. The other team members, you

know, they all get along. That's important too, is making sure that only can they do whatever job you're asking them to do, but do they fit as part of the rest of the team?

Yeah. It's like a culture fit. It, it is. It's a whole culture. Mm-hmm. . So yeah. That's best thing that you can do for a retention, in my opinion. Mm-hmm. is a company culture that they're proud to be a part of and enjoy. Mm. , you know, is that something that you do intentionally to create that culture? Or is that something that just kind of happens because of, you know, the principles you guys live by?

Or how, how does that come about? Well, I mean, I'm not sure that we went out trying to create that. It's just kind of happened. Um mm-hmm. , we are a family business, so that was already sort of our, our culture. You know, we. Pretty tight-knit group. So as we've gotten a little bit bigger, that's just spilled over into the, the newest and yeah.

You know, there's a lot of push now to keep things personal and local and, and all that. And it really Yeah. Does work. Right? Yeah. I'm sure that plays right into your hands. It's, it's a good thing. Yep. Yeah. , that's cool. Yeah. That, yeah, that's, that's a a good point you make about the, the culture. Cuz you know, like the people who have problems with staffing, usually the first thing I I look into when I talk to 'em is what's their retention?

Because it doesn't matter how many new candidates you get in the door, if you can't keep 'em for more than a month or so, then fix that problem first. That's the real issue. Oh. And that's just terrible because you spend so much time. Right. Everybody. Someone that's, that's your time that you're investing in them, right?

So the better do, the better job you can do, getting your culture, you know, into a happy team environment, the easier it's gonna be, right? Yeah. You get, you get a higher output, right? You know, people are happy. They want to do their best for, for the, the company versus someone who's disengaged, right? Mm-hmm.

Yeah, absolutely. So, uh, I wanna jump to the, the next one is, um, the future. So where do you see things going in the next, you know, two, three years or so? Uh, for the, the bowling industry? Oh goodness. Well, hopefully onwards and upwards . Um, I feel like the last few years, and especially since Covid things, It's been pretty good for bowling centers.



Um, yeah. You know, despite all of the gaming and you know mm-hmm. options that there are for people to stay home and not leave their house, it seems right in home. Mm-hmm. Entertainment. Right. It seems like people are really still loving bowling centers because of the, you know, it provides an easy way to socialize.

It's something. Most people of any physical capability can participate in mm-hmm. , you know, it's inside, you're free from worrying about the weather. So, you know, I hope that just continues. Mm-hmm. . Um, we also have been experiencing sort of an increase in bowling in the sport itself, just because of, um, high schools adding, yeah.

Um, that's been kind of a nice grassroots thing. It's, it's improved our youth bowling leagues. Mm-hmm. , um, it's, I think, brought us in a lot of new families just because, you know, they may not have been thinking about bowling before, but all of a sudden their kids on the bowling team and Right. Oh, they realize, hey, you know, I'm might come here for my, uh, you know, girl's night out and sit in the bar.

Yeah, absolutely. I would drink or, you know, it's just brought in, it's brought in, um, different kinds of business that you wouldn't expect just for mm-hmm. bowling. Yeah. And that, and that's something that you started, it went to the school or they just happened to have a team? Or how does that get kicked off?

Um, we started at several years ago. Um, we have in, in our town we have four different high schools and they, we had some parents that were really interested. School started, so, mm, okay. It involved us actually meeting with the athletic directors at the schools to explain to them, you know, how, how it would work logistically since it's, since that's not happening at the school, like right.

That for football they've gotta use our facility. So it just took, having a few conversations with them about getting the kids there and you know, timing and all that sort of thing. To, to make the program happen. Mm-hmm. , but it's been really positive thing and um, it seems like it's getting bigger in different parts of the country.

I it, yeah, absolutely. It was in high school, so, right. Yeah. Me neither , but yeah, you're right. I, I have heard that from a couple different places that high school bowling is on the rise. Yes. Mm-hmm. . Yes. And it seems like you're seeing bowling in a lot of national, you know, advertisements. You know, you're flipping.

And see people at the bowling center, you know? Mm-hmm. , part of the, I don't know, it's just, it, it seems like it's more in the public eye than it used to be. Mm-hmm. . Yeah. There's definitely like a trend or like a wave at the writing, it seems, you know? Definitely. And we're like, we've been improving our image for ourself.

You know, you're not, That old smoky place that your dad and grandpa went, right? Yeah. I was, I call it the big Lebowski . Right. So absolutely as a whole has made a real effort mm-hmm. To turn that image around and yes, you're actively participating. People are seeing you as a family destination and not Right.

Not that skeezy dark, right. Smokey. Exactly. Yeah. Like more the, the family entertainment. Right. Mm-hmm. . Yeah. I've definitely, yeah, definitely is a better, uh, um, connotation with it. Yeah. And yeah. Bowling alley is less of a pejorative now, it seems. . Yes. Yes. Most people are saying Bowling center, right. Or Family Entertainment Center.

Hmm. Whatever, right? Yeah. Whatever you want to call it. . Whatever you wanna call, don't call it fully . Right? . Um, okay. Well, the, the only other thing I wanted to ask you is actually, it'd be very prudent or relevant for you is, you know, say you have a new, um, first time proprietor, um, what would be your top piece of advice to them?

You know, you just went through it. What, and you've grown up with it, just went through it yourself. What would be your top piece of advice to that new proprietor? Oh my. That's a really hard one. . Um, oh, I, that's hard to say. Um, mm-hmm. , I, speaking from my personal experience, what I just went through is, you know, and, and I have experience in the industry, but I think trusting your instinct, even if it is a new field, do you, um, mm-hmm.

you know, you try something new and you wanna, you wanna try new things? Kind of branch out, but if something sounds like it's just too good to be true, it probably is . Sure. Yeah. , you definitely try new things, but also trust what you know as well. Mm-hmm. , don't be afraid to stick to your guns, so to say.

Right. Um, that, that would be my biggest piece of advice is just to, to do what you wanna do. Trust your instinct and try it wholeheartedly. Mm-hmm. don't let, don't let too many people try to talk you out of it, or you just do what you think is best. Right? Conviction. You, you've got all these people sort of telling you what, what they think you should do.

He wants to sell you something and obviously influence you, but ultimately, You know, your money invested and Right. Your so right. You gotta be able to live with what you decide. Mm-hmm. . Yeah. I like that. A lot of, I, I actually just had this discussion yesterday. My phone popped up with a, a memory from a year ago when we, I said, I'm so glad

all of the decisions that were made over. How overwhelming it was and yeah, I keep outta that stage. , I could imagine, right? Mm-hmm. , yeah. Good to be business and mm-hmm. , you know, doing more of the fine tuning instead of, oh, are we gonna put in strings and how many lanes are we gonna put 'em in on? And what version of scoring should we get?

And, mm-hmm. , do I need two fryers or four? It just was overwhelming, so, Yeah, I could imagine. Yeah. Just the decision fatigue. Yes. That I love that term I'm gonna use, yeah. Decision fatigue, , it's tough. Yeah. Just, you know, so many out there and you're trying to do the best for each one, and you don't know, you know?

Right. You don't know until you try it. So you've gotta just make, make your best decision and then just kind of run with it, because you can overthink it. Years if you want to. Right, right. Yeah. And And it's not very productive. Right, right. Exactly. I like that. Yeah, I like that you go with conviction is the the top piece of advice cuz especially for someone at first time, you know, there's a lot of that uncertainty.

Is it gonna work out? So you're saying trust your gut. I like that. Yep. Mm-hmm. definitely. Awesome. Well, I want to, uh, respect your time, Natalie. I've, I've really enjoyed this conversation. Um, you know, if anyone wants to reach out to learn more about, uh, diamond Lanes, what, what's the best way to get in touch with you?

Um, they can email me, they can message us on Facebook or mm-hmm. , anything. Sure. Yeah. Yeah. No, I appreciate that. I, like I said, this is, you know, goes out to other proprietors out there to learn the lessons of what's working for for others. And I really appre appreciate you sharing, uh, that with us today. Oh, well I appreciate you having me.

I certainly dunno everything, but, uh, just keep at it every day. That's right. A little bit better each day. That's what I'm going for. Awesome. Well thank you so much, Natalie. I'm sure we'll talk. Okay. Thanks so much. Bye bye-Bye.