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## Spare Change

By Johnny Campos

# Vince Pollard making a difference as Landmark Lanes General Manager

Since taking over as the general manager of the bowling section of Landmark Lanes, Vince Pollard has had two goals in mind: Fix the approaches and improve customer service.

The first was personal, because three months before accepting the job, Pollard fell on the approach, which kept him off the lanes for a few months.

“The first time we were here for the Masters League last year, I fell and hurt my knee,” he recalls. “I said that if I ever owned the place, I would definitely address the approaches. That was in September of last year, and then the opportunity came up in December for me to be the actual general manager of this place. I said you know what? I want this challenge because I knew things that I could do to make a difference.”

Pollard has a solid background on the lanes, and he comes from a bowling family.

“My father bowled, my son bowls, my cousins bowl, my aunts and uncles bowl,” he said. “If I didn’t bowl I would have been the black sheep of the family!”

Pollard has 25 perfect games, eight 800 series and is part of three generations of 300 shooters. His son, Vince Jr., became the youngest bowler in Peoria to shoot a 300 when he did it at the age of 12 in 2010. His father, the late Darnell Pollard rolled his trey in 2018 – at the age of 69.

But Vince Sr., 53, had zero experience in running a bowling center. He was, however, well versed in customer service.

“I was working for Unity Point, doing substance abuse and mental health assessments,” he said. “I was there for a little over a year. That was a different avenue for me to be in, but I actually liked it. And when this came calling, it was something that I just couldn’t refuse.”

There were several candidates being considered for the position, including Kenny Combs, like Pollard a long-time bowler at the 50-lane center.

“Kenny and I both worked at the same place at the time, but he worked in Bloomington,” Pollard said. “When he was telling me he was presented the opportunity, we both went back and forth about the pros and cons about taking the job. He told me he didn’t think he had the energy for it and that I did. So we switched. He actually took over the job that I had in Peoria, and I took this job.”

And Pollard jumped right into it.

“The first thing I did was work 45 straight days,” he said. “I take pride in that because I wanted them to know that I was dedicated to being here and to making a change.”

One of the first things he did was work on the approaches to prevent any more mishaps.

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But even though Pollard was a frequent visitor to the lanes (even when he was unable to bowl), he still had to introduce himself to most of the Landmark employees at the first team meeting.

“The funny thing is that none of my employees besides Corrie (Broberg, the Landmark League Director) knew me, as much as I’m here,” he said. “My boss, Jason Lanzotti, didn’t even know me. But I was able to retain pretty much everyone who was working here at the time. Corrie actually recommended me for the job. I certainly wasn’t on the radar for this. She said that I was the best candidate because I cared enough about Landmark. That meant a lot coming from her.

“There were growing pains, of course. I was someone new coming in, and they did not know exactly what my expectations were. But I made it known in my first meeting that I wanted to make sure customer service was up to par. I have a very strong customer service background, coming from AFNI (a company that deals with customer service). I was a supervisor there for 10 years in the call center before they closed. So customer service was second nature to me, and I wanted to definitely improve that at Landmark. My slogan was ‘Treat everyone like it’s your grandmother.’”

As far as dealing with other employee issues, Pollard also has had to deal with finding qualified mechanics to work the machines and training new staff members who have very little knowledge about bowling – and trying to limit cell phone usage.

“One thing I’ve learned is being more transparent,” he said. “For today’s generation, cell phone usage is probably at an all-time high. Everyone needs to let people know they’re here, so they’re all on social media. They have to check that. That’s a vice that’s really got this generation in a frenzy. That’s probably the most challenging thing with employees, keeping them off their phones. So I’m trying hard not to put a cell phone ban in place for the employees.”

Pollard also wants to develop plans to retain leagues at Landmark.

“I’m trying to come up with new ways to get more bowlers in here,” he said. “It’s almost like all the crops are gone and now we’re trying to plant new seeds for a new crop. And that’s the hardest thing.

“Bowling is in so much competition now with other sports, but we’re trying to be creative in getting people back after COVID (which shut down the bowling centers for a while). We want people to come back and enjoy themselves. We still have tons and tons of things that we need to do to even get the community back, saying that this place is definitely a place that we want to be a part of and frequently go to. That’s been the most challenging thing.”

Another challenge was dealing with the rumor that was spreading a few months ago that Landmark was closing.

“That whole thing ran a lot of people off,” Pollard said. “My first two or three months here, people were asking me why I would take a job at a center that’s potentially going to be closing. I tell them that I would not have left a good job if I knew Landmark was going to be closing in the next few months. That was one of the obstacles that I had to overcome.”

Pollard also believes that people could return to leagues if they went away from the traditional five-person teams, which sometimes take three hours to bowl.

“The reason we’re losing teams is not because of the price of bowling,” he said. “More teams really need to think about going to four-man teams. Five-man teams just don’t work, especially during the week – except maybe on a Friday night. We’re closing at 9 o’clock now during the week because there’s really nobody open bowling. There is no demand for it, so financially it just works.”

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Pollard also wants to revive the Landmark youth bowling program, which is all but non-existent.

“We just put something together to try and start it back up,” he said. “I’ve talked to other proprietors where youth bowling is still huge, and they said they don’t do the typical Saturday morning bowling for youth. They said they have gotten creative.

“They’re having youth leagues on Tuesday nights or Wednesday nights starting at 6 o’clock, when kids are done with practicing in another sport, they might be in. There are a lot of youth bowlers that come out, but they’re the occasional bowlers. We’re trying to grab them to be every-week bowlers.”

While Pollard is happy with how far along, he’s come in his new position, he said there is still a long way to go. He also would like to see the center return as the showplace of the Midwest, the way it was when Landmark hosted 20 PBA national stops and launched the careers of some PBA greats.

“I’m never satisfied, but I’m OK with my process right now,” he said. “I have goals that I want to meet and exceed. One of the things is maybe getting a PBA50 regional, then going big-game hunting as far as the old PBA. If I can prove to them that we’re capable of just running that kind of tournament, I think that’s a step in the right direction.”

Pollard had knee surgery in June and recently returned to the lanes. He knows that when he bowls in leagues he will be interrupted with questions and complaints by the other bowlers.

“I’m ready for that,” he said. “It will be a little difficult, but I have good people in place that will buffer that for me. I’m still going to get the ones that are not bowling good tonight. They’re going to come to me while I’m bowling and say, ‘Hey! What did you do different?’ I’m actually prepared for that.”

Overall, Pollard said the support he has gotten in his new position has been very positive.

“The community has been very helpful to me,” he said. “Everyone has reached out asking if there’s anything they can do to help. Even ex-employees who would probably throw rocks at this place have messaged me or gotten in contact with me somehow saying that if there is anything I need help that they could help with, they’re just a phone call away.

“That’s probably the most inspiring thing about taking the position.”



**Corrie Broberg (left) and Vince Pollard  
on the concourse at Landmark Lanes**