

U.S. Bowling began operations last fall at 100 South Pickett Street in Alexandria, replacing Bowl America Duke after its lease expired. Jae Choi, 25, a CEO of the ownership group and lifelong area resident, became general manager of the facility he's known since his youth despite having no experience in the bowling business—a fact of which he's been keenly aware. He quickly learned that running a bowling center was not similar to some of his other business ventures that included an Internet café and family building properties management: "There's more work, more time [spent], and also a lot more different people you have to please," he noted.

The workaholic Choi recently slowed down for a few moments at his center to discuss his first season at the helm with editor Bob Cosgrove.

Some of your employees have mentioned that you have different titles. Is that true?

I'm the general manager but they all know me as the general manager "slash"

owner. I'd rather be the general manager than the owner, but when a customer complains, he always says, *I want to talk with the manager.* I say, *Yes, I'm the manager.* And then he says, *I want to talk to the owner,* and I have to say, *Yes, I'm the owner.*

You really don't want to show it to people that you're the owner because then they think that he's a cocky little guy—and I don't want to be like that! I really try to be there for my league members and my staff, even though it really gets hard sometimes.

But you're got to try to make everyone happy, and that's the hardest part of my job—to make everyone happy.

What members of your family work here?

I have my dad and my sister and my brother help me out once in a while. I really don't want to use them a lot, but they help me out when I need it. That really helps me out.

It's not only a family thing; my staff is

like a family to me. Berlin [Myers] is like a mother almost; she gives me advice and things like that. My mechanic guy named Tom [Patterson]—he's like the brother. We fight here and there, not like big stuff, but we argue. We're like a family. All of us are like family, and we try to do the best we can.

Even my cooking staff—they're all like sisters and they argue with me, so it's like a family thing, and we try to make it a family kind of business.

What values did your father instill in you?

To be responsible. Work hard. I come to the bowling center at 9 a.m., and I leave here at 11 p.m., maybe 12 o'clock. On the weekends, 9 to maybe 3 [a.m.]. I do it day in and day out. If I'm not here, I'm at the bank or at lunch or at a meeting. I'm here 24/7 almost. I like to [be here].

People ask me if I'm going to tire out. I've done this since I've opened the place in September. A lot of people are amazed to see me here. It's like, *Wow!* Even the holidays or snow days—we open at 9 o'clock. And that's the main point: We will open 365 days a year.

My dad has a great business sense, and I learned from him. My dad and me, we look alike almost, and I act like my dad. I'm still young and immature in certain things, but I think I have his best quality—the business sense.

What's been your best decision thus far?

My best decision was hiring Berlin Myers as my manager. She has experience and the knowledge of the bowling center, and I've never done a bowling center before. I'm trying my best, but having her experience next to me helps me out a lot.

And your worst decision?

Trying to open up so quickly. I needed time to do all the things, to check on the stuff, to make sure everything was running right. I opened way too quickly, just because I wanted to make the bowlers happy and everything, but it backfired, and man, the bowlers were *more* angry, and it made things worse somehow.

So if I could do this over again for the bowling center, I would take my time. I wouldn't try to rush my guys to put the installation in quickly—which they did and then they left too quickly. They didn't check over a lot of things—loose boards



here and there. But I was trying to help the leagues out. There was the pressure, and I was trying to get it opened on time, but I messed up.

And you would have preferred to wait how much longer?

Maybe a month, maybe more. To get the kinks out, it really takes time. We didn't get rid of a lot of the kinks in the beginning, and that was my fault. We've got a lot of them out now, but we still have problems—no bowling center is ever perfect. I'm trying to do the best; that's all I can do.

What "worst moment" had you wondering if you made the wrong choice of running a bowling center?

When I first opened and let the Tuesday night people practice on the lanes and the balls came back all scratched because the workers didn't install carpets on the ball wheels. That was the worst moment of my life!

Are you now satisfied with your staff?

We've got a good mechanic now. We still have problems, but we can't blame him for that. He's working his butt off for us. I've got a good cooking staff and a great front [desk] staff.

My teams are there. I only regret that the lanes broke down too bad and some stuff. I hope I can do that better. All I can do is try to get better.

Other than delaying your opening, what one thing would you do over again?

I really can't answer that. As I said, I'm happy with my staff. I'm happy with the people, and I'm really happy with the leaguers. I think it's really more of a family kind of thing. It's really kind of an "old America" kind of style.

When you think of America, you think about how compassionate everyone used to be—a family kind of style with everyone together. *Being friends*, you know?

You don't know each other that well, but you try to be friends with everyone in your league—you try to get along and have fun. That's what I like, and I think that's a great thing to have.

I regret the people who are not coming back. I regret that. I want them to be back here next year to see that we have improved. Please understand that, yeah, we



had mistakes—no one's perfect. Please just give it a try again.

There are things that you can't fix during the season; you've got to wait until the end of the season to fix, especially the lanes and the machines. I can't do anything about that, and I'm real sorry about that.

What's the one thing you've learned that's maybe been a surprise to you?

I've learned to do everything, almost. I'd never worked on a pinsetter before—especially a Brunswick A-2 machine—and I learned how to fix this and that, so that I can be a mechanic if I *have* to be one.

I'm still young, and I've got to learn a lot of patience. The hardest part of my job is to have great relationships and try to keep everyone happy. That's the hardest job. I want everyone to be happy, and if they're sad, I try to find out why.

How would you summarize your first year?

The first year was 50-50. I had good and bad, but the first year is the roughest of any business. What matters is next year: *What you can do? What can you improve?*

In June, I'm resurfacing the lanes and fixing up the lanes that need to be fixed, and I'm putting in a new scoring system to help out the leaguers. We bought a used system, and the people don't like it.

I'm doing this for the leagues. I hope they know the consideration; I hope they understand—really—that I'm not here just to try to make money. I'm trying to make money but also help everyone.

When they asked last year what we're going to do with this place, they asked if we'd stay open still, you know? I want to help out. I think it's a great thing for a community to have a bowling center, and I'll do the best I can.

But expecting me to be the best in the first year is really hard. I have no experience. I've done business, but I have no experience in bowling. There's a different kind of style, a different kind of way.

I work hard if I have to, and I worked those long hours if I needed to, but I just think that everyone expected a lot from me, and I kind of failed, and it really hurts bad that people think I've failed at this.

So this season serves as an inspiration to make it better this coming fall?

Yes, it does. It makes me want to make everyone happy so that they'll come back the following year. I have leagues coming back, and I'm very happy that [NCABA Past President, ABC Director-at-Large, and secretary of two leagues at U.S. Bowling] Tom Dale [Jr.] is helping me out. I learned a lot from Tom, from [league secretary] Jim Sealy—especially Tom. He's been there for me, telling me what I need to fix, what I needed help on, how to im-

prove the shot to make it more consistent.

And the shot we put out is consistent now—we figured out how to clean the [lane] machine really better now. We didn't know how to clean it in the beginning of the year, and I'm really sorry about that. That's all we can try to do.

Your center upgrades this summer surely will cost a good amount. Who determines when a particular project costs too much?

It's like this: We have a corporation style, and I have CEOs to deal with. I am one of the CEOs, but there are other CEOs, and we all agree upon it together.

The first year was 50-50. I had good and bad, but the first year is the roughest of any business. What matters is next year: What you can do? What can you improve?

We may have disagreements, but they watch what I spend; I give them the reports and everything.

They agree with me to upgrade. We are trying to put in the best we can, but it is very, very expensive—it's not cheap.

I try to put a good proposal in, and the

CEOs try to back me up on everything. It's like any corporation: You have to put in your say and give the advice of what we could do with the project and how much improvement there'd be. In any business, a CEO wants to see project ideas that see any improvement on the place.

Any final thoughts?

I blame myself for everything. Anything that happened here and is not fixed correctly, it is my fault. I can't blame my mechanics because ... they're at fault, too, but there's time when ... I'm the one in charge, so you've got to blame it on one person and that's me.

Anyone that's not happy about the situ-

ation and doesn't want to come back and blames it on someone, please blame it on me. I understand. I take the blame.

To blame me is fine, but give the center a chance again. It's nothing more than giving a place a chance. You can go to a restaurant and it may be bad one day, but

the next day it has the greatest food in the world.

What do you mean by saying about your mechanics, *They're at fault too?*

They're not doing the job correctly. I mean, if they were, then we wouldn't have any problems. But there are always problems at the bowling center. But ... that's why I tried to change it back to, *It's my fault.*

I don't like blaming other people—I shouldn't blame other people. I'll get mad at other people, but the responsibility is always the manager's or the general manager's. So as for me, I am the highest position—I take full responsibility for all my staff. That's why ... the mechanics are at fault, but I take the blame.

Was this because of all that happened more in the beginning of operations than now?

It's still once in a while now. The mechanics are doing the hardest job to do everything they can for the center. When people get upset, all I can do is say, *Sorry.*

I get really upset at my mechanics, but then all I can say is, *I'm real sorry* to my people and my customers and to the leaguers and just be sorry. I can't do anything about it.

If people are mad, I don't want them yelling at my mechanic if they see him. I'd rather have them yelling at me because then at least my guys aren't taking the heat too much.

The mechanics are doing the hardest job possible in the back, and all they do is get screams from everyone, you know, and it's not their fault all the time. They can't do anything about it because something really, really broke. A relay blew out; no wonder a relay blew out, *you're just going to blame the mechanic!*

That's why I said it's their fault *at times*, but I take full responsibility for everyone.

The U.S. Bowling staff is a good staff. We have a clean center. All that we just need to work on are the lanes and machines. We know what we need to fix, and we're going to do the best we can to fix it and see if we can become the best—the best in our area—and make everyone go, *Oh, I bowl at U.S. Bowling, and I love that place!*

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