

For promoter, Comedy Castle controversy isn't funny

By JUDITH BERNE

For the public, it's a laugh a minute in West Bloomfield these days.

Currently there are two houses of comedy, two miles apart along Orchard Lake Road.

Comedy Castle has relocated from Friday's in Pine Lake Mall to the banquet room of Stafford's Restaurant in Orchard Mall. Tuesday was opening night.

Comedy continues at Friday's, where owners Cory Hanson and Timothy Busch have taken over their own comedy bookings. "We're booked for the next couple months," a Friday's spokesperson said.

But for Mark Ridley, the promoter of Comedy Castle, the situation's no joke.

Last week he won a temporary injunction in Oakland County Circuit Court to stop Friday's owners, Cory Hanson and Timothy Busch, from capitalizing on the Comedy Castle name.

They were continuing to advertise as Friday's Comedy Castle. Following the temporary restraining order, the restaurant answered to Friday's Comedy.

RIDLEY'S ATTORNEY, Arnold Weintraub, said the suit against Busch and Hanson is for trademark infringement. "It is my position that he is owner of all exclusive rights to the name 'Comedy Castle,'" Weintraub said.

Weintraub said he will base his case on the following analogy: "What if Hughes and Hatcher vacated the Pontiac Mall? Would the Pontiac Mall then be allowed to take over that store and call it 'Pontiac Mall' Hughes and Hatcher's?"

"I think it's pretty clear — the name is Mark's. The real problem is what the public is going to think if there's 'Comedy Castle' and 'Friday's Comedy Castle'?" It's public deception and it's ludicrous.

"There's nothing inherently wrong for them to run their own comedy out of there. I just want them to change their name," Weintraub said. "There's plenty of room for competition. I haven't seen West Bloomfield hit by the recession."

He believes the township can support two comedy houses, just as it could

support two bowling alleys or movie houses.

Tuesday afternoon, neither Hanson nor Busch could be reached for comment.

STAFFORD'S RESTAURANT owners Ted and Dennis Vatsis are taking a two-week gamble with Ridley.

"Mark really got into a squabble. He was looking for a place temporarily. He tells me he's in the process of purchasing his own place," said Dennis

Vatsis, who serves on the West Bloomfield Township Board.

"Stafford's is going to try it out for two weeks. If it works, he'll stay for a while. We have to figure out how to make a profit on it."

"We're going to lose a few seats," acknowledged Comedy Castle spokesman David Gladstone. "But we've been taking lots of reservations."

Stafford's banquet room holds 100 compared to Friday's 200. Also, Staf-

ford's has only a tavern license to serve beer and wine compared to Friday's liquor license.

Going from two to three shows on Saturday night might add to the gate.

"All the local comics are behind us," Gladstone said. "Mark's heart is in it. He treats performers as artists, not

just as a commodity."

Ridley originally opened the Comedy Castle in the Meeting Place Restaurant, north of Friday's on Orchard Lake Road, in January 1979. Four months later he moved into Friday's, where the Comedy Castle operated until last week.

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