

SUBURBAN
BUSINESS
LEADERS

Rockwell International Corporation's Automotive business in Troy has promoted Michael J. Berta to the position of Manager Engineering, Door Systems - Americas. Berta has responsibility for all engineering, design, test and prototype activities as related to window regulators, door modules and complete door assemblies for the Americas.



Berta

John J. Hollern has been appointed vice president, Western Sales for Nylok Fastener Corporation in Rochester.



Hollern

Hollern has sales responsibilities for all Nylok fastener products in the aerospace, electronics and other "high tech" industries.



Patroske

Schmalz & Company P.C., Certified Public Accountants and Consultants, are pleased to announce that Vice President and Partner Gene M. Patroske has been named a certified financial planner by the International Board of Standards and Practices for Certified Financial Planners, Inc.



Conway

Van E. Conway, president of Conway MacKenzie & Dunleavy, in Birmingham has been issued a Certified Insolvency and Reorganization Accountant (CIRA) certificate from the Association of Insolvency Accountants. The newly created CIRA program recognizes those individuals who possess substantial expertise in insolvency and reorganization practice.

Competitive? Valet parkers claim it's cutthroat out there

■ A business that requires little in start-up costs tends to attract a lot of players. But starting up and prospering are not the same success as two brothers in valet parking will tell you.

BY DOUG FUNKE
STAFF WRITER

The brothers Wittenberg are business survivors.

More than five years now they've gradually made their mark in what they say is a ruthlessly competitive service enterprise — valet parking.

"Our business is cutthroat," conceded Kenny Wittenberg, president of Classic Valet headquartered in West Bloomfield. "Anyone can drive a car, park a car," added David Wittenberg, vice president.

What is especially impressive about the brothers' success is their relative youth.

Kenny is 24 and a full-time student at the University of Michigan-Dearborn majoring in finance. David, 23, is pursuing a history degree at Oakland University but taking this semester off.

The Wittenbergs cut their teeth in the business as teens parking cars at private parties for other valet operations. They concluded that they could do better financially working for themselves.

"I had a partner then, Danny Klein," David said. "Our moms were actually the ones who got us our first jobs. They told their friends, their friends told their friends they were happy. It was like a domino effect. It just took off."

Klein eventually went off to college and sold his share of the business to David for a pittance. Kenny took him when David went off to school. Now the brothers work together, the only full-time staff.

They took a big plunge last fall when they moved the firm out of their parents' house and into a small office in West Bloomfield. That showed they were serious about expanding.

"It's a huge step. When you're in the house, everything is taken care of," Kenny said.

Although reluctant to reveal specific financial figures, Kenny said they bill from \$126 to \$2,500 per private party and do almost 500 parties annually.

About 60 percent of their business volume arises from private parties — charity galas, bar mitzvahs and weddings — and half from commercial accounts. They do the George Burns Theatre in Livonia and a country club the brothers declined to identify for competitive reasons.

"You can have a contract one year and lose it the next because someone underbid you," Kenny said. "If I hear of a valet account out there, I'll write them a letter."

Competition is keen. Nearly a dozen valet firms are listed in area telephone directories. Little capital is needed to get started.

"It's an easy entry business," Kenny said. "Someone can enter with a couple thousand dollars and a couple of guys."

Classic Valet's inventory consists of a computer system, telephone and fax, furnishings, boards on which to post keys at job sites, cones, umbrellas and jackets.

"We have a payroll service, accountant, tax attorney," Kenny said. "We operate as a full-time corporation."

The Wittenbergs pay their part-time parking attendants, mostly high-school and college age, \$5-\$7 per hour.

Payroll is their biggest expense. Liability insurance on their attendants now exceeds \$10,000 per year, Kenny said.

"We got to the point where we're good, terrific in party planning," David said. "We're expanding to commercial accounts."



JIM JACOBFIELD/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Valet service: Kenny (foreground) and David Wittenberg have carved a niche in the dog-eat-dog business of valet parking.

"Every day you're looking for new places," Kenny said. "The biggest challenge today is making it in the commercial aspect of the valet parking business."

They leave few stones unturned from parking lots in downtown Detroit, to restaurants, banquet halls, clubs and office complexes in suburbia.

"Basically, we're everywhere, Oakland County, Ann Arbor. We go to Toledo, Grosse Pointe," Kenny said. "How do you compete? Better service at a better price."

There are no textbooks or formal schooling to train a person how to succeed in valet parking.

"Basically, it's experience," Kenny said. "The first year in the business I

worked every party that happened. I was watching, constantly studying what could be done better next time. Why do we do things this way?"

Almost all of their private party clients take up the Classic Valet's offer to include tips in their base price so that guests don't feel compelled to dip into their pockets.

"The sticking points are if we take tips and are you insured," David said of prospective customers.

The brothers figure there's still demand for their service, whether a party host picks up the tab or an individual pays extra at a restaurant or business stop.

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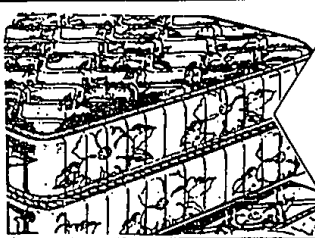
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