

One Coney with video

By Craig Piechura
staff writer

When Sheldon Korn opened a video game arcade in the Farmington Shopping Plaza, many local officials and surrounding merchants feared the worst.

The word "arcade" is synonymous with "leazy" in many minds. All too often such establishments bring with them rowdy behavior and drinking and drug usage by youths who use the establishment as a hang-out.

Such fears don't seem to be borne out by the facts of things at the Great Getaway Family Arcade and Coney Island which opened for business on June 21.

Arriving unannounced at the arcade located next to Cunningham's Drugs, one notices a young man sweeping up gum wrappers and a stray cigarette butt from the walkway in front of the store.

Inside are about two dozen persons — all at least 16 years old or accompanied by a parent, in accordance with a city statute.

The arcade is divided in two sections. The front part is a Coney Island restaurant serving hot dogs, nachos and sandwiches along with juice and soft drinks. Arcade patrons aren't allowed to eat drink or smoke in the game area located to the rear.

The interior is well-lighted, unlike some other arcades, and the music, while it couldn't be called background music, isn't blasting from the speakers on the walls. The person in charge isn't a pimply-faced 16-year-old who makes change but co-owner Korn who surveys the scene from a shuttered office and then strolls through the game area passing out free tokens.

INITIAL REACTIONS to the business — even from early critics such as Edward Wumke who owns the Modern Men's Shop located two doors north of the arcade — are expressions of pleasant surprise.

"He seems to have opened a nice place," Wumke says. "If they control things outside the arcade, there should be no problem. So far everything's been all right. Let's hope it stays that way."

The day the arcade opened City Manager Robert Deadman told City Council members the business "looks like it's going to be run about as well as any arcade can be run, on the face of it."

City police, who've been instructed

to make periodic checks of the arcade to see if patrons are at least 16 or there with an adult, say they've encountered no problems so far.

"It's a family-run operation," says Councilman William Hartsock, who viewed the arcade last Saturday. "Korn and his partner (Alan Gottlieb, 33, of Southfield) were there with their wives working the Coney Island end of the business while they policed the game area. I was impressed by all the different age groups there at the time I visited."

PARENTS ARE encouraged by Korn to come to the arcade with their children.

"I've heard parents say this is the first time in a long time they had what you call a 'parent-child relationship,'" Korn said. "They'd done something together. You should see the kids and their parents. They go after each other (competing on the machines) and it's fun."

Sure enough, many customers pushing buttons Wednesday afternoon were adults with children. It was hard to tell which generation was having more fun. "I was worried, too, about this place," said Gloria Fultz, 39, of Farmington. "I live across the street from here. Most places let them (youngsters) in if they're not 16. But they don't let them in here. I know because they wouldn't let a neighbor boy in without his parents."

She sheepishly admitted "I enjoy these darn games as much as he does," meaning her 11-year-old son Michael. Her favorite video game is Ms. Pac-Man — "my daughter introduced me to it and now I'm hooked."

Pat Kaloustian, 38, says she welcomes the arcade because the only place games used to be found were bars.

Inspecting the arcade's cedar and etched-glass facade, Theresa Stratford, of Garden City, explained she once went to school on the site when Our Lady of Sorrows operated a four-room schoolhouse at the location.

"I'M ALL FOR IT," she said. "They're not hiding anything. They've got these nice, open windows in front. We had our soda fountains, our jukebox and pinball machines. These kids need something too."

"Today everybody says to kids, 'Go away, go away,'" Stratford says. "Well, where are they going to go? Kids



Shelly Roth tries her hand at Donkey Kong in the Getaway's main video game room.

staff photos/RANDY BORST

need a place to meet and enjoy themselves without some adult telling them to go away."

To demonstrate a commitment to the community, Korn says he and Gottlieb are participating in a benefit for the American Cancer Society and lending machines to the Farmington Area Jaycees during the upcoming Founders Day Festival. Half of the take of the machines will be donated to Jaycee projects, Korn says.

He admits the games get expensive but tries to help kids out by rewarding them with a free token every so often.

There are 37 machines in the arcade — 27 video games, six pinball machines and four football games. The owners pay the city \$35 currently for a one-year arcade license, \$10 for the first machine and \$1 for every additional game.

Next year the fee will be raised to a \$100 arcade license and \$50 for every machine.

Councilman William Mitchell unsuccessfully tried to levy a \$100 fee per machine and then tried to get a \$75 fee for each machine arguing that the nature of the business requires more police patrols. He failed to win council support for the high fee structure.



Sheldon Korn (left) and Alan Gottlieb are co-owners of the Great Getaway.

An artist was commissioned to paint the futuristic murals that decorate the walls of the eating area.



Hot dogs are served up by Arlene Gottlieb. She shares the kitchen duties with Gale Korn.

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