Community center owners continue daily commutes to Illinois

You'll have to excuse the new owners of the Belgium Community Center if they are showing signs of culture shock.

The atmosphere in small-town Belgium is a lot different than the buzz they are used to in metropolitan Chicagoland.

New owners Randy and Donna Mathias, Donna's brother Jack Haas, and partners Bob and Julie Dvorak all hail from Antioch, Ill. and still live in the community just south of the Illinois border.

"We are all friends and I think our friendship is strong enough that it can survive us working together six days a week," Donna Mathias said.

The partners have owned the community center at 548 Park St. since early June.

"To be honest, we didn't really know what to expect. But the community has been great, very welcoming," Randy Mathias said.

"It is surprising to a lot of people back home in Illinois, because they usually think anything north of the state line is wilderness. I had friends say, 'You have to be careful about those people living out in the country up there. They are different.'"

Mathias takes those good-natured warnings — and just about everything else — in stride.

Displaying a ready sense of humor, he has already heard his share of jokes about being a "flatlander," but dishes the playful trash talk right back.

"I've joked with people that when the Packers are playing the Bears and the game is on the TV in the bar, when Green Bay is about to score and a touchdown pass is in mid-flight, I am going to switch the channel to 'SpongeBob,'" Mathias said.

"I would say 90% of the people here know I'm kidding and laugh, but some say, 'Oh, that's cold.'"

What drew the Illinois ownership to the business is simple — a love of bowling.

“I’ve always wanted to own a bowling alley, and when this opportunity came along we jumped at it,” Mathias said.

“Bowling is a passion for all of us,” his wife Donna added.

Haas and Mathias have been bowling coaches at Carthage College, and virtually everyone in their families are avid bowlers.

“To be honest, I haven’t had a chance to bowl since we bought the center, but Jack has been helping a group of young people work on their games,” Mathias said.

Donna Mathias said a new emphasis at the center is going to be encouraging youth bowling.

“Our greatest focus is going to develop this as a family-friendly place, which is very important to us because our kids are working here,” she said.

“We want to make some updates and do some painting, freshening things up a bit, but still keep it so our old-timers feel comfortable here.”

The bowling center will be closed for one week this month when lanes are refinished.

Jack Haas said another goal will be to help local bowlers polish their games.

“I know we have bowlers here who have the talent to compete in state and national tournaments,” Haas said.

The group had no prior knowledge of the community center, which has long been the hub of activity in Belgium, but they were surprised to find out what great shape the building was left in by previous owner Pat Bodus.

The 27,000-square-foot building which opened in 1964, features 16 lanes for bowling, a full-service bar and grill and an expansive banquet hall.

The multi-faceted aspect of the center meant the new owners have had to also get used to the idea of running a banquet hall.

“We’ve honored all of the reservations made with the previous owner, and want to reassure everyone that it will be just as nice,” Donna Mathias said.

Retaining virtually the entire staff at the center has made the transition in ownership relatively painless, although not without its challenges.

“A lot of this is learn-as-you-go for us,” Randy Mathias said.

He has a business background in technical support, last working for W.W. Grainger Inc. in Illinois. Jack Haas heads the auto service department at the Sears store in Brookfield.

As the new owners settle in with their new responsibilities, they are looking forward to changes in the near future.

Those enhancements include opening a pro shop, and reopening the once-popular family restaurant. If things go as planned, both of those moves will be in place this fall.

One thing that won't be changing anytime soon is the long commute the new owners face at the end of the day.

"I have enjoyed every day I have had to come to work, which tells me this was the right move," Mathias said.

"Of course, closing up and driving home two hours, getting home at 1:30 a.m., can be tiring, especially when you know you have to come back the next morning. Luckily, there isn't much traffic between here and Antioch that late at night. I know people who have to drive two hours every day to get from one end of Chicago to the other."

Those kinds of traffic headaches are unknown in Belgium.

Image Information: A LOVE OF BOWLING led the new owners to purchase the Belgium Community Center. Getting comfortable on the lanes (top photo, from left) are owners Jack Haas, Donna and Randy Mathias. Photo by Mark Jaeger