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BOWLING INDUSTRY

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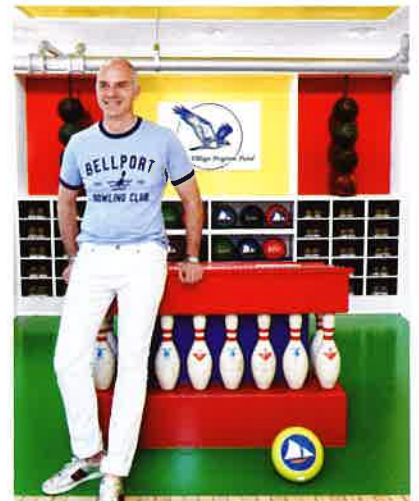
By Evan Henerson

The Bellport Community Center breathes fresh air into its 90-year-old lanes.

“There are a lot of similar characteristics,” Phillip Thomas contends, “between designing something for an individual in their private residence and a design for a more public space.”

This was a lesson recently learned by Thomas. A renowned New York City-based interior designer with a string of innovative projects throughout the east coast, Thomas made his first foray into recreation center designing earlier in the year with an endeavor that was close to his heart: the refurbishing and restoration of the basement recreation room of the Bellport Village Community Center.

Thomas has been going to Bellport since the age of four and, as a child, he spent portions of many summers with his siblings in the Community Center and its rec room. In that regard, he’s hardly alone. The community center has been a popular gathering spot for close to 100 years in the seaside community located on the south shore of Long Island.



Designer and Bellport Community Center board member Phillip Thomas



The lanes before the renovation began.

Since the centerpiece of the facility is a two-lane antique bowling alley containing Brunswick equipment installed in 1929, the rec room restoration required the expertise not just of designers, but of bowling specialists as well.

The mechanisms for the manually-operated pinsetter – which is operated by a foot lever – had broken more than 20 years ago, rendering the lanes inoperable except for groups of summer camp kids who would set up plastic pins and knock them down with rubber balls. The wooden lanes themselves were distressed, and

there was no usable equipment. The room’s pool tables were in poor condition and the rec room had therefore been “in a sad state,” as Thomas describes it, for the better part of two decades.

But because of the room’s history and popularity, the restoration of the rec room to its former glory was a project long on the to-do list of the Bellport Village Program Fund (BVPF), a 501c3 nonprofit created expressly to fund projects that improve the community. Thomas, who still weekends in Bellport, is on the BVPF’s board of directors.

Now, cleaning up a beach or putting in new picnic tables and benches is one thing. Getting the balls rolling again along antique lanes is a different matter entirely. For this public-private endeavor, the BVPF worked in partnership with the Bellport Village, sharing the costs. The team had Thomas’s design expertise which meant the final product – as the accompanying photos attest – was going to be eye-popping.

But design was hardly the only



Let the renovation begin!



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concern with a team comprised of people who had little knowledge of how the lanes operated or what would be required to get them working again.

"None of us had any clue what we were doing with respect to bowling," said Michael Foster, president of Worldwide Realty Solutions and chairman of the BVPF. "We didn't have any idea, and I mean I didn't even know that bowling balls didn't come with the holes in them. So we started contacting people who actually are bowlers."

Their search led them to bowling pros and experts at AMF Babylon Lanes in nearby West Babylon. Foster, who had originally envisioned hiring a carpenter and contractor to do the renovation, was told he would be better served by using a bowling alley restoration company, which led him to Gold Crown Bowling Service of Massachusetts, a company that not only knows bowling, but had familiarity with the Bellport lanes specifically.

"It was phenomenal," Foster said. "They're a family-owned business, and they remembered working on these lanes a long time ago when they were still operational. They still had some original stock for the mechanism in their warehouse. So I said, 'OK forget the carpenter. We're using you.'"

While his father and grandfather had experience with a foot-operated manual pinsetter, the Bellport lanes mechanisms were a first for Gold Crown co-owner Steve Shomphe who remembers



The lanes as they underwent renovation

hearing stories from his father of bowlers slipping the pin setters some cash to set up an easier shot. During a recent upgrading of a center in Maine, Gold Crown's workers came across a set of pegs that go underneath the pins. That vintage item could be put to immediate practical use in Bellport, said Shomphe, who characterized the restoration/preservation of the Bellport lanes as a way of celebrating the history of the sport.

"It's a neat thing in the industry to keep bowling alive in a way that people know where it started," said Shomphe. "I've

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Original Brunswick plaque

seen a lot of different bowling alleys, and you're always moving toward the newest and greatest thing, but sometimes the synthetic panels and all that aren't as authentic and nice as a restored bowling alley. Customers are few and far between that actually want a wood lane, to really keep it to that style. Someone nailed all those one-inch boards together to make that whole place. It's pretty impressive."

The lanes themselves needed refinishing and repainting. The ball return required repairs and new pads needed to be installed for the ball-catch. A new look calls for new gear, so the BVPF bought 16 customized balls and 36 pairs of shoes.

The work was not limited to the lanes themselves. The entire rec room got a face lift with a new scoring table, working pool tables, expanded storage, and vibrant color everywhere. For the blue checkered floor, Thomas looked to evoke the colors of the Great South Bay which the city abuts.

"We used light blue and dark blue to represent the varied shades of the surf on the Great South Bay and red to remind us of the buoys," Thomas said. "We also chose green for the grass and yellow for sunshine, all



The pool table is another draw to the newly renovated community center recreation room

obviously very primary but they all kind of sate the imagination. There's very little natural light in there, so we wanted to create the feeling of natural light by the finishes and the colors we chose."

From approval to unveiling, the project took about five months, and the revamped alley got its first visitors in time for Memorial Day and the start of the summer day camps. As word of the project spread, several longtime community residents contacted Bellport officials to express their enthusiasm and to wax nostalgic about their history with the rec center



The new lanes

bowling lanes. Two longtime area residents, Anna McLure and Joan Prybazerski, and former mayor Bob Wallen – all in their 80s – were on hand at the grand reopening to christen the center by rolling out the first balls. Thomas himself even took a turn operating the now-functioning pinsetters, a task that he reports is harder than it looks.

"It's a challenging job," the designer reports. "Not only do you have bowling balls whaled at you from the other end, there's the noise of pins being thrown in all directions. Resetting those pins is not an easy feat."

Although the lanes got use during the summer camp season, the Village is in the process of figuring out how local residents will be able to use the rec room on a regular basis. Because a staff member is needed to set the pins, the center currently needs to be secured via an advance reservation.

"Bowling has been around for a long time and, even though everything changes around it, there's still a lot of people out here who like to just go out and have fun," said Shomphe. "I think that's kind of what Bellport was trying to do: create an environment that really encompasses the whole idea of getting everybody involved and creating this whole feel good place."

And Thomas, who spent his childhood in the center has now been back with his nieces and nephews.

"We've given the community a new space where they can congregate and be part of the community, and that's just so wonderful," he said. "I am over-the-moon thrilled." ❖



Evan Henerson is a features and lifestyle journalist who lives in Los Angeles. His work has appeared in *TV Guide*, *American Theatre*, *Orange Coast* and the *Los Angeles Daily News* where he was a staff writer and critic for nine years.