

# Texas rink celebrates successful first year

By Kathy Bergstrom

The Rink Family Fun Center in San Juan, Texas, has lived up to its name since opening a year ago.

Owned by brothers Benjamin and Eric Pena, all but three of the roller skating rink's 12 employees are family members. The Penas' father, Arnulfo, helped finance the new rink.

"It's a family business, all of our kids work there," said Benjamin Pena, 38. His wife, Jessica, and Eric's wife, Marlene, work at the rink, while Benjamin's oldest daughter, 17, is a birthday party hostess. Eric's daughter, also 17, works in the ticket office.

Each brother has four children, and even Benjamin's 10-year-old son helps out. "They always want to be here," he said.

Running a skating rink seems to be in the brothers' blood. Their father, now retired, worked nights managing a bowling alley that had a skating rink. Arnulfo Pena also worked as a middle school teacher during the day.

The brothers started working at a skating rink as teenagers, and Eric Pena, 34, eventually racked up about 19 years in the rink business, while Benjamin Pena worked at a rink for nine.

Eric Pena started his rink career at age 15 as a floor guard at Fantasyland Skating Center, formerly in McAllen, and learned the ropes from former owner Beverly Morelius Baron. While his older brother decided to leave and attend college, Eric stayed at the rink and was eventually promoted to general manager.

"I like interacting with the customers and the children and going into the schools and promoting the business," he said. "It's something different every day. It's not your nine-to-five job."

He stayed with the rink after it was sold and moved but eventually decided it was time to live out the dream of owning his own rink.

San Juan is a city of about 30,000 in the Rio Grande Valley area of Texas. Near the Mexican border, the valley's population exceeds 1 million, but the brothers say there are only three skating rinks in the area.

They bought skates and other equipment from another rink operator who had to close up shop. They stored the items in a backyard until they found a

former supermarket building for lease.

The Rink Family Fun Center opened on Sept. 26, 2010. In addition to the roller skating rink, the facility includes



Brothers and rink owners Benjamin and Eric Pena pose with mascot Rolli the Rinkster in front of The Rink Family Fun Center in San Juan, Tx.

a large indoor playground, snack bar, arcade and pro shop.

A year later, 2,000 to 3,000 people attended their first anniversary celebration, which included a car show.

The rink promotes itself heavily in the community to attract skaters, Benjamin Pena said.

Mascot Rolli the Rinkster attends multiple parades and school celebrations, and friends distribute thousands of free admission tickets during the events.

The rink also has given 30,000 to 40,000 free admission certificates to area school districts. Teachers use the certificates as rewards to recognize students for good grades, attendance, accelerated reading and other achievements.

In addition to regular sessions, the rink offers an "after party" on Saturday nights from 10 p.m. to midnight when patrons take off their skates and dance for an additional \$3.

Other promotions include \$1 Wednesday when admission is \$1, and the snack bar has \$1 specials. Thursday admission is \$2, and hot dog meals, slushies and glow sticks are available for \$2 each.

On Sundays, a family package is available for \$20 and includes admission and skate rental for four plus popcorn and pitcher of soda.

"We've had a good response from the community, from the schools, from the businesses in the area," Benjamin Pena said.

Birthday party business has grown, particularly since the rink started offering a package for \$6.95 per person. The skating rink also promotes itself through Facebook, and its page is approaching nearly 5,000 friends.

The brothers attribute the rink's success to a number of factors.

"I think it was one of the newest things here, and I think they needed something like that," Benjamin Pena said. "We're just so much involved with the community that they've embraced us and taken us in."

Eric Pena said the family's experience and dedication to the business also are important elements. "What you put into your business is what you're going to get out," he said.

The families have given different members varying responsibilities too. Eric handle operations and the financial aspects of the business, while Benjamin and Eric's wife, Marlene, handle a lot of the marketing and public relations. Benjamin also acts as a DJ at times.

Benjamin's wife, Jessica, handles booking parties and events.

But everyone works behind the counters and cash registers and helps with events.

The business venture also has benefited the family relationships, Benjamin noted. "Working together has brought us closer together, and now we do everything together," he said.

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