

IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR

MILESTONE: Whiting's Foods celebrates 60 years of amusement park fare



JAMES CLARK/SENTINEL

Margie Sisk (center) stands with family members, from left to right, Ron, Nik, Jeff, Dan and Ken Whiting at one of the family's many franchises on the boardwalk, Wednesday.

Business has been growing since 1953

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SANTA CRUZ — Dippin' Dots sticking to your tongue, the gleeful screams of people riding the Giant Dipper and the feel of sand between your toes are memories that many Santa Cruzans hold forever.

The children of Ted Whiting Jr. have those memories in spades.

This year the Whitings are celebrating 60 years as the family behind the Boardwalk's food concessions, with three generations now having served up summertime amusement-park fare to the masses.

It's not often families stay as close as the Whitings. All eight of the children of Ted Whiting Jr., who died in 2011, still live in Santa Cruz County, and Whiting's Foods remains a family business, owning and operating about two-thirds of the Boardwalk concessions.

"This business teaches me new things every day and each day is different," said Ken Whiting. "It's never boring."

Delivering milk to concession stands on the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk was where it all started for Ted Whiting Jr. He was in his 20s, a World War II veteran working as a milkman for Meadow Gold Dairies, when in 1953 he learned that the owners of the Bright Spot restaurant, near the bumper cars where the Pizza Hut concession now stands, wanted to retire. Whiting saw a golden opportunity, and with help from his father, optometrist Les Whiting, Ted bought the business.

Today, Ken, Ron and Margie Whiting, three of Ted Whiting Jr.'s children, and three of the founder's grandsons, own and manage Whiting's Foods, but almost all members of the family are involved in the business in some way.

Growing up in the Whiting household, involvement in the family business was a given.

"When we were younger, we were the first to arrive at the



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Ted Whiting Jr. bought his first Boardwalk concession stand in 1953.

job and the last to leave," said Ron Whiting.

Ken notes that the family was the beneficiary of a booming economy in the '50s and '60s. Recreation-centered businesses began to thrive after World War II, with theme parks like Disneyland and Coney Island, and the Boardwalk in Santa Cruz, becoming popular vacation destinations.

The '80s were also a boom time for the business. Whiting

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said a healthy economy combined with the rising popularity of finger food fueled the company's biggest expansion, jumping from about seven to 15 concession stands.

The company would eventually give birth to Whiting's on Wheels, or WOW, which now serves food at Central California fairs, festivals and special events, and most recently at the Kaiser Permanente Arena, home of the Santa Cruz Warriors.

"The arena is a great new area for business for us, though it's a completely different crowd. It's Santa Cruz residents, rather than tourists," said Ken Whiting, adding that the company is planning to add some healthier options while retaining arena staples like corn dogs, fries and nachos.

Ken, Ron, and Margie say they are determined to keep the values their father instilled in them in the family business: integrity, innovation, family spirit and teamwork.

The Whiting siblings also aim to instill those values to the many employees that have rolled through the company over the years. Ken estimated the company has provided summer work for more than 5,000 young adults, from the ages of 16 to 21, over the course of the past 60 years. Yes, the young workers are the lifeblood of the operation, but Ken says the company aims to give the workers an experience in the workforce so they can excel in whatever they might do in their lives.

Kris Reyes, director of community relations at the Boardwalk, expressed his gratitude for the Whiting's family and their business.

"The Whiting family has been a vital part of the Boardwalk's success for many years. They bring a positive approach to their work that can be infectious."

The company focuses on training and educating their employees, as well as listening to their ideas.

"Most people around that age just want to be part of the solution, and we like to help them help us," said Ken Whiting.

Ken Whiting developed WAVES for Success, a program that provides training ideas, recruiting and motivating tips, and retention strategies for companies to engage and inspire a teenage workforce. WAVES being an acronym for Way of life, Attitude, Verbal, Video, and Visual communication, Edu-

cation ... not just training, and Style matters.

Ken also has developed WAVES University, an online training program for teens. He and his siblings said they remember what it's like to work in the food industry at a young age and know how hard it can be to balance work with other activities.

"We are successfully training the next generation," said Ken Whiting.

T.J. Kauker, 19, a two-summer Whiting's employee, said he likes the interaction with his coworkers: "Since it's a large company, there are all kinds of people I get to work with, which makes it an interesting experience, getting to learn about where they came from and how they ended up at the Boardwalk is always cool."

Ryan Falge, 19, now in his fourth stint with the company, worked at various concession stands his first two years, and now runs a funnel cakes stand.

"I think this job will help me in the future," he said. "It's a good start-up job that teaches you good customer-service skills, money handling, and various other skills that can help you with later more serious career jobs."

Laura Worrall, 19, started working summers for Whiting's three years ago, and has been promoted three times. She's now operations supervisor.

"They go out of their way to recognize employees," Wor-

rall said, "and they've created a very welcoming and fun environment to work in."

Ron Whiting said that workplace atmosphere mimics his own family: "There are some people who don't even want to get together with their families during holidays because they work with them, but with us that's not the case at all."

Trying new things is a must in this family business. Although Whiting's sticks to traditional amusement park favorites like soft-serve ice cream, french fries and pizza, the business also likes to take risks and try new things.

Some work.

Think Deep Fried Twinkies and the Slush Puppie, which lets customers make their own slushie, said Ron Whiting.

Some don't.

"We've tried things that don't work at all, like our Chili Cones," he said.

Those lasted a year.

"Some people think in a vacuum and aren't willing to try new things, but with that mindset, people might miss something," said Ken Whiting.

With around 250 employees during the busy months, April to October, Ken, Ron, and Margie aim to keep employees happy by being flexible with scheduling. But the company also generates 80 percent of its yearly revenue in just six months, so these are the busy times.