

# 'Chaotic' by Design

Melanie and Jonas Helm on how four distinct revenue streams contribute to a profitable business model at Gutter Chaos.

*Russian playwright Anton Chekhov once observed, "Wisdom comes not from age, but from education and learning." If we're open to it, we can learn from everything we experience and everyone we meet, including newcomers to a business that we may think we know inside and out. Melanie and Jonas Helm say they got into the bowling business "by accident." But when they decided to take the plunge, they were willing to listen to others and adjust the original vision. Now, we have an opportunity to learn from this husband-and-wife team, whose venue is called Gutter Chaos in Broken Bow, Okla. (population in 2021: 4,244).*

WITH GEORGE McAULIFFE

**Tell us about your background, your other businesses and how you got to today.**

**Jonas Helm:** Our background is in the land and cattle businesses. We had a deal building vacation cabins in Broken Bow, a small vacation community in southeastern Oklahoma. We realized that there was a lot for folks to do outside but nothing to do indoors, so we started looking at that opportunity.

**How did your thinking evolve over the years to the bowling entertainment center model?**

**Jonas:** Our family would go skiing every year in Winter Park, Colo., in the Fraser Valley. It had the same issue: plenty of outdoor activities but limited indoor.

**Melanie Helm:** They did have The Foundry — a small center with eight bowling lanes, a few arcade games and concession-type food — where our family would go at night and on bad-weather days.



Jason and Melanie Helm say they got into the bowling business by accident. But they did their homework, are constantly evolving and have made a success of their venue in Broken Bow, Okla.

That was the inspiration.

**Jonas:** Our original thinking was just that: a few lanes, a few games and a snack bar with a bar.

**Gutter Chaos is a lot more than that. How did you get from the original idea to today's venue?**

**Jonas:** One of the first things we did was contact Brunswick and they set us up with Jason Dean. We met Jason in Kansas City and he took us on a tour of some modern-day bowling and family entertainment centers.

**Melanie:** When we told him what we wanted, he led us to reconsider. Jason explained that bowling brings them in, while the arcade, bar and restaurant keep them there. Together, those elements create a destination.

**Jonas:** The more we saw, the more we got it, and we realized that was more of what we wanted to do. It evolved into a whole different beast.

**How did that vision work out?**

**Melanie:** The best decision we made was to listen to Jason. Honestly, it's the perfect mix for up here.

**Jonas:** Jason, a bowling sales guy, actually opened our eyes to the arcade potential and convinced us to have fewer lanes so we could fit it in. Also, [he convinced us] to upscale the bar and restaurant.

**Melanie:** When we opened, people came in mainly to bowl. In fact, they thought we were a traditional bowling alley. While they might have come in to bowl, when they saw we were not your granddad's bowling alley, saw the plush seating, good food and beverage and nice, fun atmosphere, it all came together.

**So, ultimately, what did that look like? What are the components and why did you select them?**

**Melanie:** We designed it so that when you walk in, the six-lane bowling area is off to the left and the arcade is front and center, with one way in and one way out. We get a lot of young families. Our design makes it so parents are comfortable having a drink or something to eat knowing that the kids are corralled in the back.

**Jonas:** Plus, the arcade is a little bit loud and exciting. With it walled off from bowling and the restaurant, the sound is contained. One other thing we did design-wise was to put the restrooms in the rear of the arcade.

**Melanie:** That way almost everyone is exposed to the arcade and is more likely to stay and spend money there.

**What are the secrets to attraction selection? Any surprises up or down?**

**Jonas:** There's nothing that we'd eliminate. If anything, we wish we had more room for more lanes and more arcade games, and we're working on that. There are no real secrets, but maybe a few differences. We

couldn't really use industry numbers because of our unique guest mix and circumstances were so different.

**Melanie:** We built to the size we could and wish we had a little more space. There are times we've had up to five-hour waits, with two hours pretty typical at peak periods.

**Nothing surprised you?**

**Jonas:** Not really. We did our homework and were pretty prepared.

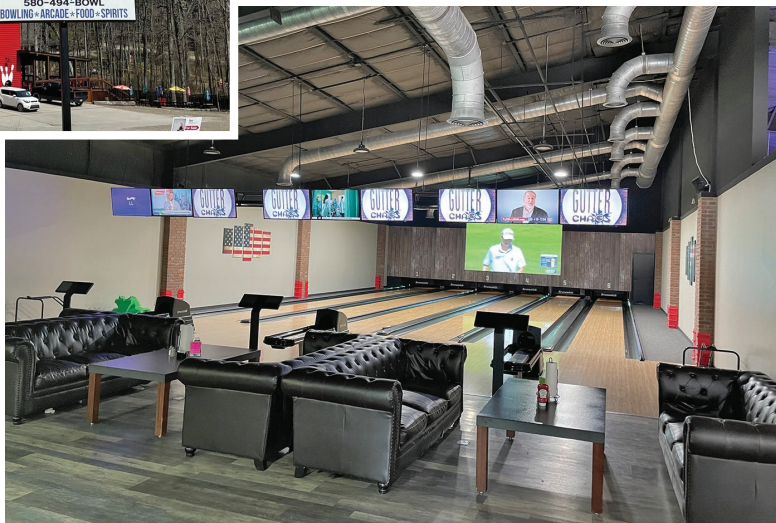
**Melanie:** We are big fans of our decision to go with string pinsetters. Most guests are intrigued with them and, operationally, they are pretty easy to maintain. We don't need a full-time mechanic just to keep the machines running.

**Any pushback from bowlers on the string machines?**

**Jonas:** Most guests like them because most guests are just out for a good time and are casual bowlers. We also shortened the lanes by a few feet and the approach by two.



Impossible-to-miss signage with a message board and a giant pin helps bring passersby into Gutter Chaos, where two-hour waits for the shorter-than-standard lanes are typical.



**Melanie:** Some guests do notice and comment — most think it's awesome. When we hear guests talking about their oil pattern we go, "Oh, no, a serious bowler!" But that's rare. Most of our clientele are recreational bowlers and have a great time.

**In the resort environment you talked about earlier, how does the seasonality work? Are there ups and downs month to month?**

**Jonas:** The fluctuations are not too bad. This January was great, February slowed a little, but we are getting ready for spring break in March (*Ed.: This interview took place on March 2*). We do some groups, we've

hosted bachelorette parties and we'll do some live entertainment. That all helps to smooth it out. Summer is our busiest time, but the off months have been decent.

**How is the labor market treating you?**

**Melanie:** It's tough, just like everyone you talk to. We are fortunate in that we have a great core group of staff, but we do have turnover.

**I've got to ask you about your approach to the food-and-beverage component.**

**Melanie:** We have a great general manager in Chad Mullins, who is a restaurant guy. Chad helped design the kitchen and bar and runs the entire business.

**Jonas:** He helped us to grow our vision from our original hot-dog-and-popcorn thoughts to today's food-and-beverage presentation. We are always changing menu items to keep people interested and coming back.

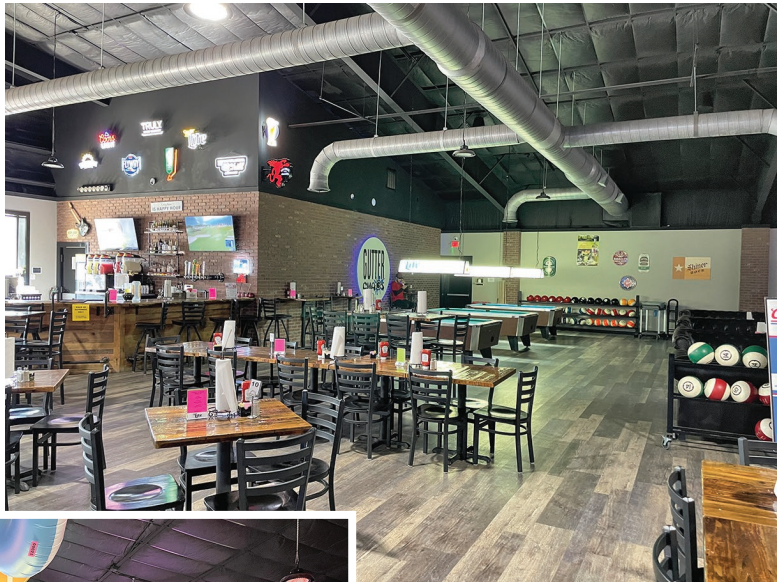
**Melanie:** We serve mainly bar-type food but at high quality with lots of shareables — appetizer items which are easy for bowlers to set on the table and share while they bowl. We also have burgers, wings, salads, sandwiches — stuff that can be picked up and eaten while bowling.

**Jonas:** The bar and restaurant really help with the wait times at peak; folks know they can relax and have a drink or meal while they wait.

**You mentioned that quality is important to your food-and-beverage program, and food prices in particular have risen in the last couple of years. How does that work out for you?**

**Melanie:** People want quality and are willing to pay for it. Since we're located in a tourist town, we haven't had much price resistance; people are used to spending a little more. We thought about automation or delivery only, but we've decided to provide full table service.

**Jonas:** We want staff to interact with customers and provide service. Automation is great, but you miss the service aspect — the ability to provide a personal touch.



Food-and-beverage sales provide two important revenue streams for Gutter Chaos, and guests (particularly the younger ones) also flock to the venue's arcade.

**Melanie:** And the ability to upsell.

**Any other wisdom you'd care to share with our readers?**

**Jonas:** One thing we do is that we never leave anything the same. We believe in changing it up; we don't want to get stagnant.

**Melanie:** We change the menu, add new games, have a drink special or add new redemption merchandise. We try to keep everything new and fresh to keep the guests from getting bored with us. We want them to see something new every time they come in.

**Jonas:** You do have to be careful adding to the mix and make sure you are complementing your brand, not conflicting. For example, we looked hard at adding pickleball outside, but then decided it was a totally different entity and just didn't fit. We also like that we have four outlets for income working together and not relying on a single attraction. We're diversified under one roof.

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