PHOTO BY PABLO CORRADI

Mike Newton, co-owner of Newton Shows, followed his father into the business. His biggest hurdle is not the recession, he says, but the weather.

Family carnival business still awhirl after 61 years

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Mike Newton, along with a brother and nephew, are traveling carnival operators who help church and other groups put on fundraising events.

Newton's father, Lewis, went into the business in 1949 when he followed a priest's suggestion and bought a Ferris wheel in Brooklyn as a way to make ends meet.

Hanging on the walls of Mike Newton's trailer office in East Northport are sample prizes for this peak season, which launched last weekend.

"The biggest thing this year: bananas," he says, referring to soft, stuffed bananas with faces. "You would not believe it. They love the bananas."

Newton is a certified financial planner for his company. He is 56 and married.

How has the recession impacted business?

"We tend to do better in difficult times. People always want to have fun. They always like the fantasy of the lights and the action on the carnival midway. You can take a kid, a 4-year-old kid, who's never known anything about the economy, amusements or rides, you bring them to a well-laid out and run carnival and they light up. Our biggest hurdle is weather."

What qualities do you look for when you're hiring?

"The staff that I hire, they have to be able to exude a good time when they're at work. You need to have fun with each and every customer that you're working with. I don't require a graduate degree . . . but they have to be friendly, courteous. Many of my employees have moved on to high positions in politics, very successful in running financial institutions on Wall Street, local mayors. It's such a great experience for youth."

Do you have plans for growth?

"For us, growth means just improving quality and maintaining our high standards of safety, upgrading of equipment. We really only want to do two events a week. In our business, unless our fingers and our bodies are there, the Newton family is there, we can't reach our promise to ourselves of always maintaining that safety and that quality."

What do you remember about the first time you were someone's boss?

"My first experience was when I was running the basketball game at the fire department fair in Bayville. I was so busy, my father said, 'Mike, you could really use some help in there, why don't you hire somebody?' I hired a neighborhood friend a few years my junior. He was standing next to me running the basketball game. I just remember teaching him all the tricks I knew to help customers play that extra time to win the bigger prize for their girlfriend."

How do you try to get honest feedback from your employees?

"I ask for it, any way, shape or form. I have a phone number here at the office that I tell all my staff — call that number anytime and just tell me what's on your mind. Or tell me a way we can improve things. Or even tell me that they like that banana," he says, singling out a smiling plush banana hanging on one side of the wall, "as opposed to that banana."

CORPORATE SNAPSHOT

NAME: Mike Newton
TITLE: Co-owner
COMPANY: Newton Shows
BUSINESS: Traveling carnival operators
LOCATION: East Northport
TYPE: Private
REVENUE: $2.5 million to $3 million annually
EMPLOYEES: About 75 at peak season