

FUN WORLD



Sealed with a
KISS

MONSTER MINI-GOLF
ROCKS OUT
IN VEGAS DEBUT

ALSO INSIDE:
SPECIAL FEC
SECTION

SOCIAL MEDIA
POLICIES

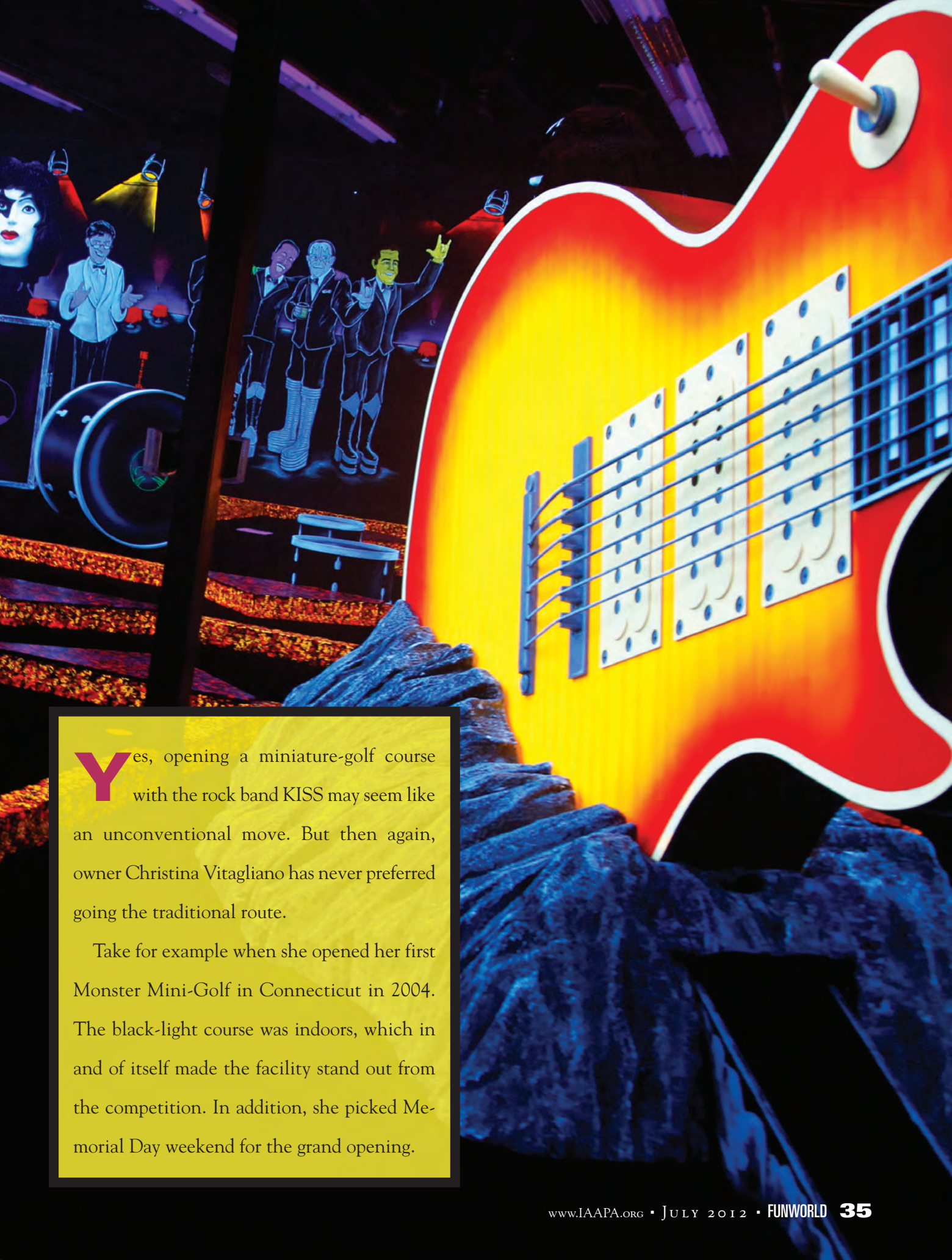


Sealed with a

KISS

LEGENDARY ROCK BAND
ADDS ITS BRAND
TO NEW MONSTER
MINI-GOLF IN
LAS VEGAS

Story by Mike Bederka
Photos by Isaac Brekken



Yes, opening a miniature-golf course with the rock band KISS may seem like an unconventional move. But then again, owner Christina Vitagliano has never preferred going the traditional route.

Take for example when she opened her first Monster Mini-Golf in Connecticut in 2004. The black-light course was indoors, which in and of itself made the facility stand out from the competition. In addition, she picked Memorial Day weekend for the grand opening.



The black-light course is filled with KISS iconography, including a giant replica of Paul Stanley's giant boot.

"In most people's heads, that's a day you want to be outside," she says. "My landlord said, 'You'll probably get eight people.'"

Vitagliano surpassed the landlord's expectations many times over. In fact, that first insanely busy summer nearly 10 years ago culminated in regular conversations with the multiplatinum music act KISS, creation of a 14-foot-tall head of the group's iconic singer/bassist Gene Simmons as a course obstacle, and the eventual completion of KISS by Monster Mini-Golf.

Featuring the largest KISS gift shop in the world, a wedding chapel, and a VIP room, the Las Vegas facility debuted in March with a glitzy party (see sidebar). Just one month after opening, 10,000 guests had entered the front door, above which hangs a sign that reads, "We've put a whole lot of rock in our roll."

"It has not been a dull ride," Vitagliano laughs.

Job Hopping and a Brainstorm

The 47-year-old took a long, roundabout career path to end up owner of Monster Mini-Golf and schmoozing with KISS, an internationally recognized rock band with a 30-year history of hit albums (see sidebar).

She was a district manager for a retail chain and then



Christina and Patrick Vitagliano, owners of Monster Mini-Golf

"We risked everything to get where we are now. Not a lot of people would do that."

—Christina Vitagliano

spent 10 years managing and marketing restaurants and nightclubs. This eventually became tiresome. "One day I woke up and said, 'I don't want to see another drunk person at 2:30 a.m. again,'" she recalls. "I needed to get out of that business."

Her next move led to opening an antique auction house where she traveled the world looking for valuables, which would then be sold on site at her auction, housed in an old mill building in Connecticut. Although the constant stress and greed she encountered also made for a temporary career stop, it did provide her with something crucial: a venue.

The only problem was what to put inside this large space "in the middle of nowhere." After some soul searching and brainstorming, Vitagliano had her moment of clarity. She wanted to open an indoor, glow-in-the-dark mini-golf course, an idea readily panned by her friends and family.

In spite of their misgivings, she was resolute: "I just wanted to see happy people."

KISS Army in Full Force at FEC Grand Opening

It was a family entertainment center grand opening like no other.

On a beautiful mid-March afternoon in Las Vegas, the four-man group walked into their namesake, KISS by Monster Mini-Golf, for the first time. Their enthusiasm for the project became instantly apparent.

Band cofounder and singer/bassist Gene Simmons hammed it up for the group of onlookers, which included press, VIP guests, and staff, putting golf balls over his eyes and posing with his animatronic self on the mini-stage in the back.

After seeing the Marshall speaker-lined fish tank with the KISS logo inside, cofounder and singer/guitarist Paul Stanley joked about its fast-swimming occupants, "It's not only beautiful but something you can eat."

"If you're a kid, this is heaven on earth," remarked guitarist Tommy Thayer, the first band member to putt the course.

Following the group's initial walkthrough and ceremonial ribbon "slashing," much of the crowd exited the building to the carnival-like atmosphere outside.

Tribute band Speed, who won a contest to participate, blasted KISS hits in the parking lot, while the first couple to be married in the "Hotter Than Hell Wedding Chapel" arrived (they spent more than \$15,000 on eBay for the honor). The groom—dressed in full KISS regalia—had lots of company. At least two full sets of KISS-costumed characters wandered around speaking with fans, including one Elvis impersonator with KISS makeup, pompadour hair, and a red cape. Others sported vintage band T-shirts and proudly showed off their KISS tat-

toos. Kids went up to the face-painting station to become the newest members of the KISS Army, the nickname for the group's ferociously loyal followers.

Simmons, Stanley, Thayer, and drummer Eric Singer, along with Monster Mini-Golf co-owners Christina and Patrick Vitagliano, re-entered the facility via the black carpet to a horde of photographers jostling for prime position.

Celebrities like the cast of the TV show "Pawn Stars" and comedian Andrew "Dice" Clay as well as local performers joined them back inside for the VIP event, where they mingled, ate and drank, played some video games, and broke in the black-light 18-hole mini-golf course.

As the sun started to set, the hundreds in attendance began to filter out. The tribute band finished their set with KISS' biggest hit, "Rock and Roll All Nite," and the FEC opened its doors to the public for the first time.

While Patrick Vitagliano knows there will still be some long days ahead, he seemed somewhat relieved the grand opening was behind him. "I'm going to sleep for 1,000 hours," laughed the mohawked co-owner.

"It was a completely crazy day—in a good way," added Christina, who started to work on the opening a year ago.

For other FECs considering a large event, she suggested focusing on the pre-promotion. "Having the press and all these people here didn't just happen by accident," Christina said. "The sweat equity that you put into your place before you open is invaluable."





KISS band members were on hand in March for the grand opening of the mini-golf course that bears their name.

As good as her intentions were, the money to bring the idea to fruition remained elusive. Vitagliano picked up a part-time job to squirrel away cash; at the end of each week the goal was to create something that could be used as a mini-golf prop. Through pure creativity and a bit of old sculpting talent, she created monsters. She admits these first props were a little rough around the edges, but by creating abstract creatures for obstacles, she could get away with it. Who would question what a monster *really* looked like?

After months of saving and building, she finally opened on that fateful Memorial Day weekend in 2004.

As business began to boom, Vitagliano started to plan her next step. "People kept telling me, 'This is a gold mine,'" she remembers. "I got concerned. Someone was going to run in with a lot of money and steal my idea. I first thought to open a second location, but before we signed the lease, I said, 'This is wrong.'"

Vitagliano did not want to spread herself too thin. She began to research franchising as a better option, a decision that led to a game-changing meeting. She and her husband, Patrick, flew out to Chicago to meet with a company that guides mom-and-pop operations through the franchising process of legalities, necessary paperwork, marketing, etc.

Vitagliano gave her pitch: an 18-hole indoor, black-light mini-golf course, with party rooms for birthdays and corp -



orate events. Each facility would feature special effects, pumping music, and video and redemption games. Both adults and kids would love the funky glow-in-the-dark atmosphere, and the same goes for the humorous monsters that adorn each hole, she proposed. "They're ageless."

The company's response?

"You're not leaving here without franchising this business," the owner told her. "We haven't seen anything like this, and an original idea doesn't happen that often."

The only hitch was the company's requirement of \$150,000, which Vitagliano did not have. Fortunately, the two sides were able to work out a loan and signed the deal, but it did take some sacrifice. Patrick sold his production company to join Monster Mini-Golf full time, and the couple sold their apartment and lived in their course's office with their dog for nine months while they worked to pay off the loan.

"We risked everything to get where we are now," she says proudly. "Not a lot of people would do that."

The Inspiration for KISS

Monster Mini-Golf—now headquartered in Providence, Rhode Island—grew substantially over the next few years. There are currently more than 30 locations across the United States and Canada.

As part of the build-out package fee, her team provides the props, animatronics, sound equipment, artwork, displays, and games. Vitagliano also teaches new owners how to be successful with marketing, public relations services, training, and product development. "I look at them like they're my kids," she says of the franchisees.

No two courses are the same, leading to a lot of fun and variety in the prop creation. In fact, one particular monster prompted the genesis of the KISS course in Las Vegas.

For the last hole at one location, she created a giant clown head where guests putt up the giant tongue into its mouth. Everyone started to kid her that it should be Gene Simmons' head. (The rocker is known for having a particularly long tongue, which he shows off during concerts.)

Obvious trademark issues prevented that prop from becoming reality at the time, but the topic did become a running joke—and eventual aspiration—during meetings. Partnering with a major rock band could move her already bustling business up the charts.

"I would always ask people if they had Gene's cell phone number," Vitagliano explains. "One person finally said, 'Oddly enough, I do have his attorney's contact info,' and I took it."

So one day in 2010 she e-mailed the lawyer. Within a mere 15 minutes he called back. In the hour-long conversation, she described the company's history, how it had grown in such a short period of time, and why it might be beneficial for the band to work with her. Realizing Vitagliano and her mini-golf concept could help KISS reach the next generation of fans, the attorney gave his blessing, and conversations with the group began.

"They have so much passion for what they do," she says. "I have never questioned if I picked the right band."

She's with the Band

The band has shown similar support for Vitagliano.

"People come to us all the time with ideas," says Paul Stanley, KISS cofounder and singer/guitarist. "But you need resources to implement it. You need a vision. We thought it would be a great marriage."

While liberal about licensing the KISS name (there is a KISS burial casket, for instance), the band must have final say in the branding and use of their image. As such, every single design piece for the par-39 course—from Paul's towering boot to Gene's aforementioned head and tongue—had to go past the band for approval.

"They're four complete individuals," Vitagliano says. "You

About KISS

KISS formed in 1972 in New York City. The band has recorded 37 albums and sold more than 100 million records worldwide. Popular hits include "Rock and Roll All Nite," "Detroit Rock City," and "Black Diamond." Known for their stage makeup, costumes, and elaborate shows, the band has performed for international audiences including Super Bowl XXXIII, the 2002 Winter Olympics, and the 2009 finale of the TV show "American Idol." Their forthcoming album is appropriately named "Monster."

had a lot of 'love this, don't like that,' but that's what makes it that one-of-a-kind place. I like them because they're challenging, and they're challenging because they're passionate."

Other facility highlights include:

- The KISS gift shop, the biggest of its kind, featuring a wide assortment of officially licensed products, such as T-shirts, golf balls, clocks, animal crackers, sculptures, fragrance, and hats.
- KISS products line the redemption area: magnets, bandanas, and toy cars.
- The "Hotter Than Hell Wedding Chapel" (classic Vegas!), with theatrical lights, sound, and a fog machine. The stage is fashioned after the KISS album cover for "Love Gun."
- Myriad band photos cover the walls, and televisions show KISS concert footage.
- And, of course, the official KISS scorecard mobile app.

The day after the opening party, both Paul and Gene sent personal notes to Vitagliano thanking her for "doing exactly what you said you would do."

"It's nice when you earn their respect as well," she beams.

She and the band already have begun preliminary talks about taking the KISS mini-golf concept international. In some countries, the band has an equally rabid following to that of the United States.

"Now that we realize it's going to work," Vitagliano says, "we have to work hard." ■

Contact Contributing Editor **Mike Bederka** at mbederka@IAAPA.org.