

Creation of Virgin River all started with chance stop 20 years ago

Perhaps one of the most fascinating elements related to the development of hotel casino properties is how they were created.

The creation of the Virgin River hotel actually started when Jim Black stopped to find a restroom in Mesquite in 1988 while heading to Las Vegas from Utah. Considering that Mesquite had very little, Black envisioned a bar.

Thus, the creation of the Virgin River hotel casino, which opened in May of 1990; and is now celebrating its 20-year anniversary. If ever there was an example of “Build it and they will come,” the Virgin River is it.

The Virgin River opened with 10 employees, 76 rooms, and the immediate success of the hotel casino led to the addition of a 16,000 square-foot casino, a restaurant; and 76 more rooms.

One year later, 115 more rooms were added along with two movie theaters. Expansion continued in 1992 and 1993 when the casino was expanded again and a buffet was added.

In August of 1994, a race and sports book was added along with the seventh building. One year later, a bingo center took the Virgin River to yet another level.

In 1998 a 24-lane bowling center with pro shop and arcade was added. In 2005, the coffee craze was met with the addition of a Starbucks.

Now with more than 700 rooms and more than 700 employees, the Virgin River is a hot spot all year long.

Hotel General Manager Lex Hall and Black Gaming Vice President of Hotel Operations Marleen Szalay have been with the Virgin River since the establishment’s first days, and neither of them have any plans of leaving anytime soon.

“I moved to Las Vegas from Idaho in 1966,” recalled Hall. “Things were slow in Idaho. There were no jobs, so I decided to go south. My brother lived in Las Vegas.”

Hall went to work for a bar in North Las Vegas where he worked until the call came asking him to join the Virgin River.

“The Virgin River was under construction at the time,” said Hall. “The Black brothers wanted someone to open it. They asked me if I knew where Mesquite was, so I came up and visited. I spent the night there, liked what I saw and went to work.”

To Hall, the Virgin River represented a smaller area with friendly people and good old down-home country fun. He packed his bags never looking back and the Virgin River suddenly became a hot spot for everyone from the locals to residents from several other states.

“I think what made the Virgin River so successful was its Western feel,” said Hall. “Everyone knows your name, and it’s very close-knit. There are many nice people in Mesquite, and I know of several people who come here each year for their vacation.”

Szalay started three months before Hall. She was living in Las Vegas working at the Mirage Hotel and Casino when she received a life-changing call from Black Gaming CEO Randy Black of Black Gaming.

“Randy told me that I should come to work for them at the Virgin River and that it would be an adventure,” said Szalay, a native of Las Vegas who has lived in Mesquite for 20 years. “And no question about it, this has been an adventure.

“Randy is such a great genuine, family guy. It’s a pleasure working for him. The only reason Mesquite has become what it has is because of Randy. Because of his foresight and willingness to take a chance on a very small town and know in his heart it was all one big gamble, it’s a great story. He put everything he had into it and it turned out very well.”

“When we opened the River, we were one big family – and we are still one big family. “

Black also has fond memories of the creation of the Virgin River; along with both Szalay and Hall. In fact, Black Gaming has a total of sox employees who have been with the company since its inception also including Bertha Sandoval, Juan Delgado, Marina Munoz, all three in the buffet; Maria Galindo, the bar/lounge; and Ned Blackmon, security.

“Back in the old days, there were only 1,200 people in Mesquite,” Black recalled recently. “Jim stopped there and said that there really needed to be a hotel casino at that location.

“We actually turned a big mountain into a flat area so that we could build the Virgin River. We were in the earth-moving business at the time.”

The fact that both Hall and Szalay relocated to Mesquite and remain with Black Gaming is considered a big reason for the Virgin River’s continued success.

“I remember when Marleen was renting rooms before the casino was even open,” Black recalled. “She had a little office for a month of so.

“Lex has been voted Mr. Mesquite. He’s really the St. Peter of our organization. They are both awesome people.”

The memories of the creation of the Virgin River are further symbolized by the fact that Black’s uncle, Arthur Black, was the commissioner of the Arizona Highways Commission and was an integral part in the creation of the highway through the gorge between Mesquite and St. George thereby opening the route.

Things have not stopped since Day One either as evidenced by continued improvements and additions such as; all 700 rooms were remodeled earlier this year; swimming pools were also remodeled; and meeting space has been added for small meetings and family reunions.

In addition, the coffee shop is now being enlarged and remodeled.

Recreational facilities which are part of the Virgin River include the Palms Golf Club and the Oasis Gun Club where trap, skeet and sporting clays shooting are offered along with five stands.

CAPTIONS:

RANDY-MARLEEN-LEX: Black Gaming Vice President of Hotel Operations Marleen Szalay and Virgin River General Manager Lex Hall, right, are shown with Black Gaming CEO Randy Black. Hall and Szalay have been with the Virgin River since its inception in 1990.

MARQUEE: Shown above is the Virgin River's first marquee more than 20 years ago.

CONSTRUCTION: A mountain had to be leveled to make way for the construction of the Virgin River more than 20 years ago.

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