

An *Island* In The *Sun*

Island Waterpark celebrates 20 years of being the summer fun spot in California's Central Valley.



Island Waterpark, of Fresno, California, is celebrating its 20th Anniversary this 2018 Season. But what makes this family owned park special? Island Waterpark truly is an island, an oasis and an anchor for Fresno's growing west side.

It stands alone among a sea of homes and apartment complexes, all of which were built by one entrepreneur known as Richard Ehrlich. Seeing a need for affordable housing on Fresno's West Side, he took it upon himself to develop the land with the help of his company, Rexford Development Corporation.

At the end of the development, there remained just 43 acres perfectly placed between all the newly built homes and California's Highway 99.

"So what are we going to put there?" asked Construction Manager Mark Stewart. With a sparkle in his eye, Ehrlich confidently declared that the land should be home to Central California's newest waterpark. Located on Hwy 99 near Shaw Avenue, this park would provide up to 300 jobs for the community and provide entertainment to hundreds of thousands of guests from all over California.

Stewart realized that neither he nor Ehrlich had any experience



By Dan Dodge

ISLAND WATERPARK

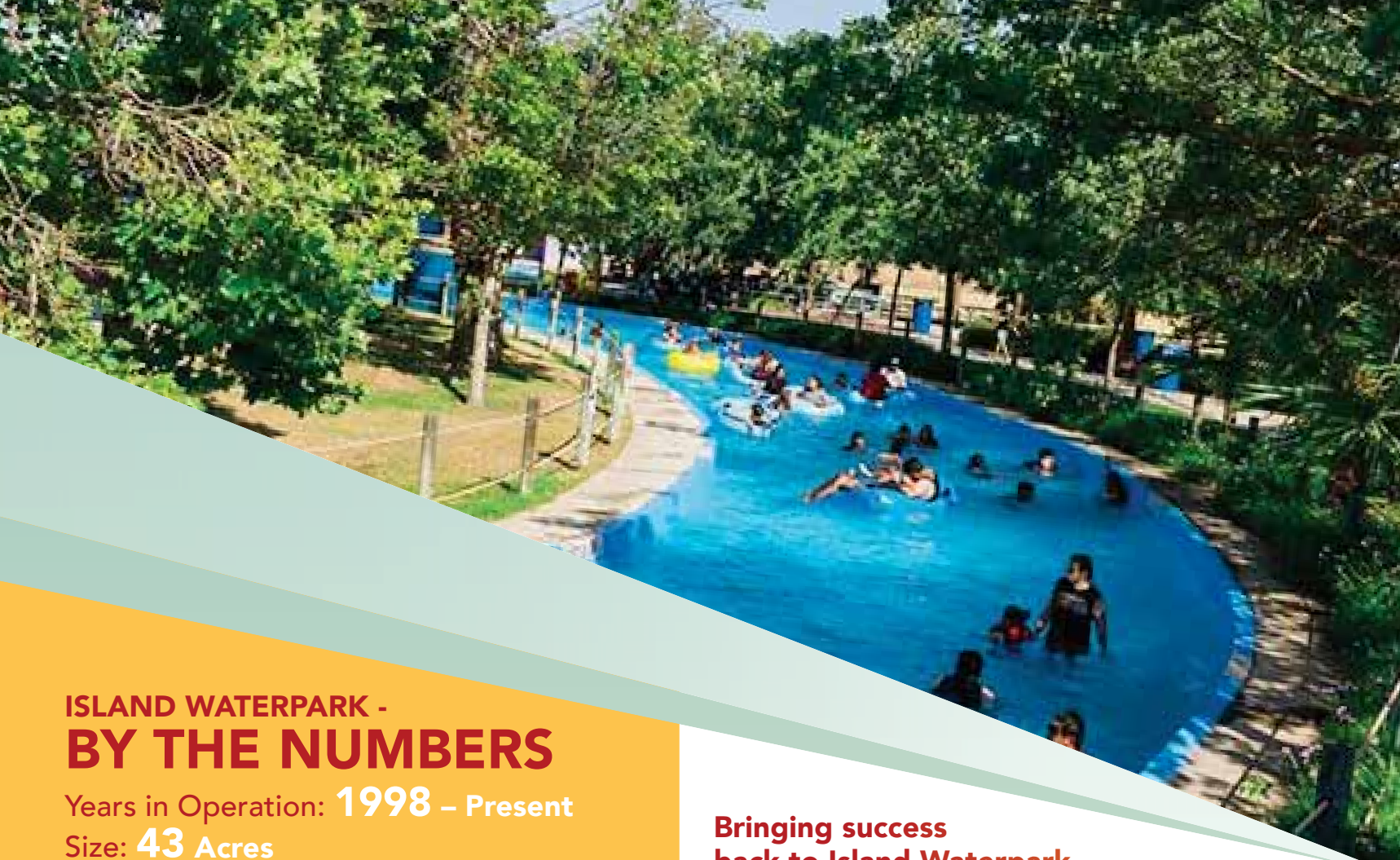


in the waterpark industry at the time, but that they quickly jumped on board with the World Waterpark Association and IAAPA. The park would be designed and built to last. Ehrlich even had the foresight to build the park with fiber optic cables connecting all the buildings. Keep in mind this was planned out prior to 1998 when no one could imagine that a private business would ever have a need for fiber optics.

Construction began in January of 1998 and ran into one of the worst El Niño seasons ever experienced in California. Delays beget delays and the park did finally manage to open very late in the

season, but still, it did open. Stewart remembers that first day, and with a chuckle recounted that the park only had 250 guests on opening day and at the time was still called Splash Island.

When the park opened, it had Hollywood Hall of Fame Promoter Don Branker to head up its sales and WWA Hall of Famer Steve Rodgers as its General Manager. After these two luminaries eventually moved on to other projects, the park began to struggle. Things only got worse after the economic crash of 2007. It was then that Ehrlich decided to hire industry veteran and consultant Terry Mackey to turn the ship around.



ISLAND WATERPARK - BY THE NUMBERS

Years in Operation: **1998** – Present

Size: **43** Acres

Number of Days in the Operating Season: **20** days for private events and 80 days open to the general public

Attractions: **3** tube slides, **3** body slides, **1** family raft ride, a **500,000**-gallon wave pool with **4**-foot tall waves, a quarter mile endless "lazy" river, **3** high altitude speed slides, **4** headfirst racing mat slides and, of course, the recently constructed family area now known as "Ohana Bay."

Food and Beverage: **1** main restaurant, **3** food cart areas, **1** dedicated facility for catering large events, **1** dedicated facility for employee purchases and a menu filled with dozens of popular items.

Bringing success back to Island Waterpark

Mackey quickly got to work. He fixed the systems that needed to be fixed and did numerous small upgrades. This included "The Bermuda Tunnel of Terror" attraction which featured a water screen projection system, the first of its kind in California. Through sheer force of will, he took a park that had been losing money the last few years, turned it around and made it profitable again. "Crystal Blue Water! Great Food! Rides Are Always Open!" was his oft heard battle cry.

Sadly, just one year later Ehrlich passed away, leaving his park and legacy to his daughter Lisa (who was also his company's attorney). The tragedy did not end there, as the following year Mackey himself became ill and would within a short period also pass away. But with what could only be described as his last breath, he told Lisa that he should be replaced by his long time second in command and highly sought-after consultant, Amber Watson.

Over the next seven years, Watson not only provided leadership and vision for the park but also stability and eventually substantial profits. She took the park from approximately 125,000 guests a year to nearly 250,000 guests a year. Watson was instrumental in developing the park's "Splash Back" return ticket program, creating an employee-focused work environment that has a year-over-year retention rate exceeding 60 percent and installing a massive new kid's area in 2016 that was built by WhiteWater West. She also designed and implemented an After Dark program that allowed the park to be illuminated and operating from 8 p.m. until midnight on select summer nights.

Eventually, in 2017, Watson decided to pursue other opportunities in the concert promotion industry. As was her way, Watson wanted to make sure her people and her park were taken care of by a General Manager who could lead and grow the business in a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 48





ISLAND WATERPARK

6099 W. BARSTOW AVE., FRESNO, CA 93723

WWW.ISLANDWATERPARK.COM

(559) 277-6800

OWNERS: REXFORD PROPERTIES, LLC

ADMISSION PRICES: GENERAL \$34.99 JUNIOR \$25.99

DATES OPEN: MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND THRU LABOR DAY WEEKEND

SIZE/ACRES: 43

CAPACITY: 7,000

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: YEAR-ROUND: 8 ; SEASONAL: 320

CLIENTELE (PERCENT LOCAL VS. TOURIST):

90 PERCENT LOCAL VS. 10 TOURIST

FUTURE EXPANSION

PLANS: 35 ACRES
AVAILABLE FOR
EXPANSION

ISLAND WATERPARK
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 46

style that complemented what she had started. She managed to capture her crosstown waterpark rival, Bob Martin, and bring him on as the Revenue Manager so that there would be a smooth transition to his taking over as General Manager.

Martin brought more than 13 years of waterpark management experience to the team, in addition to his extensive background in managing various professional teams in both football and hockey. He has spoken at the annual WWA Symposium for the last four years on topics ranging from cabana rental programs to corporate sponsorship opportunities.

This past 2017 season, Island Waterpark hosted nearly 250,000 guests and had days where attendance often exceeded 6,000. After pouring over the original blueprints and designs, Martin asked Stewart if any of the original team could ever have imagined the park as it is today.

With a chuckle and a sparkle in his eye, Stewart simply replied that no one ever thought the park would host more than 3,000 guests at a time... except for possibly Richard Ehrlich. •

DAN DODGE HAS A MASTER'S IN BUSINESS FROM FRESNO STATE AND SERVES AS ISLAND WATERPARK'S FULL TIME FINANCE MANAGER AND PART-TIME HISTORIAN.

Suppliers

DEVELOPMENT/DESIGN: WATER TECHNOLOGY INC.

CONSTRUCTION: MARK STEWART (GENERAL CONTRACTOR)

WATERSLIDES: WHITEWATER WEST

TUBE/RAFT /RIDE CONVEYOR: VAN STONE CONVEYOR

WAVE POOL: AQUATIC DEVELOPMENT GROUP

WAVE GENERATOR: WAVETEK BY ADG

RAFT/TUBES/MATS: Z-PRO; ZEBEC; TUBE PRO; CPI

CHILDREN'S INTERACTIVE PLAY STRUCTURE: WHITEWATER WEST

CHILDREN'S EQUIPMENT: NBGS; WHITEWATER WEST

FURNITURE: TAYLOR & ASSOCIATES

LOCKERS: SMARTE CARTE; BEST LOCKERS

POOL AND/OR DECK COATINGS: TUFF COAT; NATIONAL PAINT

FILTRATION EQUIPMENT: SAND FILTERS

PUMPS: STENNER/LMI

CHEMICAL: SIERRA CHEMICALS; LIQUID CHLORINE; MURIATIC ACID

CHEMICAL CONTROLLERS: STENNER; LMI; ACUTROL

SHADE SYSTEM: UMBRELLAS

ADMISSION SYSTEM: CENTEREDGE SOFTWARE

FOOD/EQUIPMENT: GOLD MEDAL

