

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, please [click here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#) »

June 12, 2005

IN PERSON; A Businessman With Lots of Balls in the Air

By LAURA MANSNERUS

SELLING cars has been a more-than-respectable career for Steven B. Kalafer, especially the part about building 30 dealerships from a fading franchise in Frenchtown with a showroom fleet that consisted of a single orange Ford Pinto.

But a businessman with that record should also be able to finance other, more romantic franchises, right? So about eight years ago Mr. Kalafer, the chairman of a huge dealer network known as Flemington Car and Truck Country, began to put together baseball teams.

Rejected by organized baseball because a minor league franchise in Trenton was considered too close to the one he wanted to put in Bridgewater, "we started a league of our own," Mr. Kalafer said.

And the independent Atlantic League of Professional Baseball found a market in New Jersey for small-ballpark charm.

"I call it my night job," Mr. Kalafer said in an interview the other day. "Years ago everybody had two jobs: they had the day job and pumped gas at night. I sell hot dogs."

He conceded the exaggeration -- "I have fun, listen, I did it once" -- but he attends 50 to 60 games a year, most of them at the county stadium in Bridgewater, home of the Somerset Patriots, the first team he bought.

Indeed, a good share of the league belongs to Mr. Kalafer, who is principal owner of the Patriots and co-owner of the Newark Bears; he also has a smaller interest in the Camden Riversharks. The fact is, the only New Jersey team he has no stake in is the Atlantic City Surf.

And now, with a fourth team, the Bergen Cliff Hawks -- which at the moment exists only as a business plan and a post office box -- Mr. Kalafer has secured a place on the state's most valuable piece of real estate, the site of the \$1.3 billion shopping-entertainment-hotel-office-amusement compound known as Xanadu that is rising in the Meadowlands.

In a large way, his small role in Xanadu reflects the melding of business, politics and sports in

New Jersey. When the Xanadu developers were slow to produce a construction schedule for the 6,500-seat ballpark, Mr. Kalafer had Acting Gov. Richard J. Codey on his side.

Soon Mr. Codey started twisting arms, and last week Mr. Kalafer met with the developers and came away satisfied.

Mr. Kalafer's determination is perhaps not surprising for someone who became a Fuller Brush salesman at age 12 and started reading *Variety* at 14 to follow the finances of the movie industry.

"My father had to go out every day and hustle," he said. "That's what I learned."

The 55-year-old Mr. Kalafer is hardly a rapacious personality. He is soft-spoken and courteous, coming across as more of a hand-holder than a backslapper, with a modest smile and an avuncular gaze through gold-rimmed glasses.

His record of community service could fill a small bound volume: A survivor of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, he counsels newly diagnosed cancer patients. He has been honored by Somerset County's Resource Center for Women and Their Families for his support of programs to prevent domestic violence. And he and his partner in the Flemington dealerships, Byron Brisby, donated the land for the Flemington Jewish Community Center.

Mr. Kalafer has a third career, as a producer of documentary films, three of which were Oscar nominees. This year his film "Sister Rose's Passion" -- about Sister Mary Rose Thering, a Dominican nun who spent much of her life in New Jersey fighting anti-Semitism -- was nominated.

The film did not win, but Mr. Kalafer did come back from Hollywood with a story about bringing Hilary Swank to a halt on the red carpet for a moment by stepping on the train of her dress.

Mr. Kalafer grew up in North Caldwell the son of small business owner, as he says, "before it was fancy," and graduated from Rider University. At 26, he bought the one-car showroom in Frenchtown.

"I spent more on light bulbs in all the dealerships we have today than I spent to go into business in 1976," he said.

Today, he and his wife of 34 years, Suzanne, live in Annandale in Hunterdon County. They have two sons, Jonathan, 29, who teaches high school English in Jersey City, and Joshua, 27, who manages an Infiniti dealership for his father.

Mr. Kalafer is a Republican -- though he shows exasperation with the party's right wing, and especially its opposition to embryonic stem cell research -- and was interested enough to have spent Tuesday evening at county party headquarters following the primary results.

But his friendships and business partnerships cross party lines, and they include some of the

state's most moneyed and influential businessmen. His partner in the Bears is Marc Berson, a real estate developer from Millburn, and the two also have an interest in a \$2.5 billion waterfront development in Bayonne.

And for Mr. Kalafer, baseball is not just a game. He relentlessly pursued a home for the Patriots, and started looking for a park for the Cliff Hawks six years ago. He and a few other franchise owners sunk a lot into the Atlantic League, which was given little chance of survival in the late 1990's.

The Patriots are profitable, though Mr. Kalafer will not say how profitable; his business interests are all privately held. Of the Bears and Riversharks, he will say only that they have a great future.

Yet despite his vast investment in minor league teams, Mr. Kalafer says he remains uneasy about the brutal end of careers for most of the players, who are taking a last shot at the majors.

"In the business world, longevity is valued, loyalty is valued," he said.

And because the baseball world does not work that way, he said: "I don't go into the locker room very often. I cheer them but I also understand that this is a very different business than I'm used to. It's uncomfortable for me."

Mr. Kalafer was in the locker room one afternoon, however, when he spotted a player who was supposed to be on the field for the Sunday ritual of signing autographs. As Mr. Kalafer tells it, he told the player that the exercise was a job requirement, "and he said, 'I don't do that.' I said, 'Our fans come first.'

"The next day, he was gone."

Mr. Kalafer grasped the importance of the customer at an early age. As a middle-school Fuller Brush man -- "I didn't want to work for a dollar and a quarter an hour, and I couldn't get a real job," he said -- he understood that the customer might not always be right but always does like free stuff; he walked in each door with the gift of a vegetable brush, which cost him 1 1/2 cents.

He would ask to demonstrate the "clean, dust and wax" spray. Then, especially in the big houses, "I'd ask them if they'd like a case so I wouldn't have to come back so frequently," Mr. Kalafer said. "They bought a lot of them."

Photo: Steven Kalafer owns almost enough minor league teams to start his own league. In fact, he has. (Photo by Jill C. Becker for The New York Times)