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Kenilworth Lodge sign quickly becoming a local favorite

Matt Murphy
News-Sun

SEBRING - The Kenilworth Lodge hotel has been around for 91 years. The sign in front has been around for more than 20. But over the past few months, the sign, and by extension the hotel, has drawn lots of new attention.

It only took a few jokes to make it happen.

The Kenilworth sign was used mostly to welcome groups of golfers or to make announcements, but that all changed once General Manager Don Elwell took over creative duties in February. Now, the sign has become known for providing laughs to drivers traveling in and out of downtown Sebring on Lakeview Drive, and it's become something of an unlikely local staple. This newfound attention came as quite a surprise to Elwell.



News-Sun photo by MATT MURPHY
Kenilworth Lodge General Manager Don Elwell stands underneath the hotel's sign, while the men — Johnny Bland (from left), Bill Dixon and Larry LeGro — who put the letters up every day sit above him.

"We're getting a lot of comments every day," Elwell said. "I didn't think it would be as popular as it has been."

The decision to shift the focus of the sign to something more humor-oriented was a conscious marketing decision, designed to increase attention for the hotel. That decision appears to have worked.

"We were under the impression that a lot of people didn't read them," Elwell said. "We saw it as an opportunity to do something more novel for marketing, something that people would actually read."

Attention-grabbing signs are nothing new in Highlands County. The Wild Turkey Tavern in Avon Park garnered lots of attention for its controversial signs regarding illegal immigration and other hot-button issues.

The Kenilworth sign, on the other hand, isn't meant to be nearly as controversial. Although the sign has featured references to current events, the statements have all been tongue-in-cheek, which is by design.

"We try to keep it light," Elwell said. "It's still marketing. It's just kind of a new philosophy of marketing."

Elwell makes up the list of seven days worth of jokes on Fridays. The signs still include welcomes to golf groups, but "now we're trying more humorous signs" for those groups, Elwell said. The group signs generally face north towards downtown, while the funnier statements are put on the south side because more people look at that side.

Elwell tries to keep the topics varied, and he's trying to include current events. As an example of this, the sign recently made a joking reference to the city of Sebring taking ownership in Harder Hall. In response to the city's \$3 million credit bid for the hotel, the sign read: "Attn: City of Sebring! We'll sell you this one for only \$2.9 million."

Other frequent topics include strange holidays and observances, such as Hypnosis Day and Psychic Week. Elwell especially likes to focus on food holidays, particularly "non-healthy ones" such as Cheesecake Day.

Elwell likes the signs to be "slightly suggestive," but not over the line. An example of this could be seen on July 31, when the sign simply said: "Last chance to make jokes about Baked Bean Month."

"That's as suggestive as we get," Elwell said. "We're trying to keep it clean, with nothing R-rated."

Elwell's tenure as sign-maker was briefly interrupted recently after a disagreement with the hotel's owners over two jokes they deemed objectionable. After two weeks and a number of citizen complaints, Elwell was asked to return as signwriter. And oddly enough, the brief vacation turned out to be productive.

"The break wasn't bad," Elwell said. "It gave the owners and myself a chance to see how many people read it."

As it turns out, lots of people read it, and the sign has managed to find its own little niche locally.

"We're probably marketing more than we have before," Elwell said, adding that he gets calls and visits almost daily from people who enjoy the signs. He especially loves to hear stories about people calling their offices to tell them that day's joke.

"We love the fact that people are taking that much from it," he said.

The Kenilworth sign has become so popular that the hotel's Web site (www.kenilworthlodge.com) has a special section devoted to pictures of some of the more popular jokes. Elwell is planning to add a "Hall of Fame" to the Web site, and the public can vote on their favorite signs now.

The task of putting up the text every morning falls on the hotel's maintenance staff, specifically engineers Johnny Bland and Bill Dixon and Chief of Engineering Larry LeGro. The signs are put up "first thing in the morning," Dixon said, and the process of putting up new messages on both sides of the signs usually takes around 45 minutes, he added.

In six months, the Kenilworth sign has vaulted into an odd position of fame in Sebring. So what's next for the city's newest landmark? Would the owners of the Kenilworth be brave enough to give Elwell an electronic sign to play with? Well, probably not.

"That would be the worst thing," he said. "I'd be like a kid in a candy store."

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