

Sean Sullivan's four-decade streak in gambling industry rolls on at Live! Casino in Hempfield

Written by Administrator

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For years, Sean Sullivan has played a hand in the gaming industry, taking part in casino openings and spending decades managing facilities across the country.

His storied career led him to be part of the opening of MGM Grand and The Stratosphere Tower, two Las Vegas casinos, and sent him to cities and towns across the country, all while allowing him to make a name for himself in an industry that has continued to grow during his 40 years in the business.

Now, Sullivan, 62, is playing a critical role in the opening of a new casino at Westmoreland Mall in Hempfield. [Live! Casino Pittsburgh](#), owned by The Cordish Companies in Maryland, will bring 750 slot machines and 30 table games to the region, as well as restaurant and entertainment facilities. [It opens Tuesday](#).

"I've always enjoyed the business. I enjoy going in and working to make people have a good time, to help people have a good time," Sullivan said. "I don't think I've ever set an alarm clock. I wake up and I'm excited to go in to work. ... I've never considered going into another industry, never thought about it twice."

Lifetime of gaming

Born in Inglewood, Calif., Sullivan knew from a young age the hospitality industry was a business he wanted to be a part of, with strong influences coming from family vacations spent at Lake Tahoe, located on the California and Nevada border, and from watching the 1983 television show "Hotel."

"It was all about this family that lived in the penthouse suite, and they got room service and they got their laundry done and they had their room cleaned," Sullivan said. "I thought, 'That's the life

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for me.' ”

Sullivan studied business administration at the University of the Pacific, where he also earned a minor in marketing. After graduating, he moved to Reno, Nev., and landed a job as a market analyst at the former Howard Hughes Summa [Harold's Club](#) .

Sullivan eventually moved to Las Vegas, where he continued with the company, serving as vice president of marketing and entertainment for [The Sands Hotel, Casino and Resort](#) , the once-iconic hotel on the Las Vegas Strip that hosted groups such as the Rat Pack.

The hotel closed in 1996 and was demolished to make way for The Venetian Resort.

Sullivan then moved to Lake Tahoe, Nev., where he worked as vice president of casino marketing, marketing and entertainment at Harvey's Casino Resort. From there, he moved back to Vegas, where he worked as the vice president of grand garden, theme park and slot marketing at MGM Grand Casino, Hotel and Resort.

He stayed in Las Vegas for several years, eventually helping to open The Stratosphere Tower, where he worked as vice president of casino operations. He later served as chief operating officer at Olympia Gaming and Southern Highlands.

By that point, more states had begun legalizing gambling, giving Sullivan more opportunities outside Nevada and New Jersey. After Vegas, Sullivan moved back to California, where he worked as vice president and general manager at Morongo Casino, Resort and Spa.

By 2004, Pennsylvania had legalized gambling, with Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs in Wilkes-Barre being the [first casino](#) to open in the state in 2006. The following year, The Meadows Racetrack and Casino opened in Washington County. Sullivan eventually would serve there as vice president and general manager.

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After almost a decade at the facility, he left Western Pennsylvania for Minnesota to work as general manager at Treasure Island Resort and Casino, located in the Prairie Island Indian Community.

During his time there, Sullivan was contacted by officials with The Cordish Companies, asking if he would want to run the property to be built in Westmoreland County.

"I had always admired the organization. I'd always watched it," Sullivan said. "I had been talking with them for quite some time, so when they called and said, 'Do you want to come back to the comfort of Southwest Pennsylvania?' I said, 'Absolutely.' "

Opening a casino

Officially accepting his [appointment in February](#) , Sullivan took the project head on, leaning on his past experiences but remembering that each casino opening is different.

"Casino openings are always energetic and crazy and rewarding and stressful," he said. "I think you go through every emotion that you can imagine, the whole gamut. But it's also an opportunity to assemble a team of good, hardworking people and work together as a team to put together all aspects of an opening."

That team, Sullivan said, is key for a successful opening.

[Craig Clark](#) , former general manager of Rivers Casino in Pittsburgh's North Shore, was recently named director of finance at the Hempfield casino. Clark, who had been working as president of Hard Rock Ottawa, now has a direct reporting relationship with Sullivan.

"He's assembled a great team around him of both people who have worked with him in the past and people from the industry and then new people from the community introduced to the casino for the first time," Clark said. "It's fun to see such an exciting project in an area we can revitalize

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with our being part of a larger mall facility.”

Michelle Ravetta, human resources manager for Live! Casino, said Sullivan's leadership is more like that of a head coach.

“Anytime that anybody asks me about him, the most immediate words that come to the forefront are ‘he’s just so approachable,’ ” Ravetta said. “He’s really inspiring.”

As the casino opening inches closer, Sullivan's days are filled with documents, contracts and purchase orders, ensuring that all the bases are covered in terms of staffing and back-of-house operations to ensure guests have a full experience once opening day takes place.

He works with local lawmakers, the chamber of commerce, police and members of the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board to develop necessary relationships. Sullivan also utilizes his position to perform community service work with the Westmoreland County Food Bank and Sage's Army, a nonprofit aimed at fighting drug and alcohol addiction.

“You'll go to bed exhausted at 11 at night, and you'll wake up two hours later with a bombardment of things that you had forgotten about or that you're thinking about,” Sullivan said. “So in my case, I'll jump up and work for two to three more hours, and then I'll try to grab two or three more hours (of sleep) before I go into work.”

He added, “It's a new experience. It's not the same as the MGM, it's not the same as The Stratosphere. They're always different, but some companies understand it much better than others, and I think the Cordish family does.”

Changing industry

During his years in gaming, Sullivan has been mentored by top names in the business such as [Kirk Kerkorian](#)

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, who was majority shareholder when MGM Grand opened 1973, and has seen a changing market that has moved toward more entertainment-based competitors.

The dazzling lights and sounds of slot machines that feature pop culture icons like Britney Spears and Michael Jackson or television shows like "Wheel of Fortune" are a far cry from the "old, electrical, mechanical device where it actually had physical wheels," Sullivan said. "You used to see cherries and lemons and plums."

Today, increased technology has led to competitors offering other entertainment such as movie theaters, golf courses and outdoor activities such as kayaking.

"It's truly an entertainment business more than it was 40 years ago," he said. "It's for people to sit down and enjoy themselves. Like they're going to the movies, they want a friendly environment, they want a clean environment, they want a chance to win. And if you treat them right, you appreciate them and you respect them, they'll come back."

But what distinguishes a casino from those other activities, Sullivan said, is how it provides a form of entertainment for people looking for an escape.

"It's interesting because when we had tragedies, whether it was 9/11 or other things, I'd go out to the casino floor and I'd talk to people and I'd think, 'Why are you here? This is a scary time.' And they said, 'I couldn't take the news anymore; I couldn't sit home. I wanted to get out, get to what I'm comfortable doing and enjoy myself,'" Sullivan said.

For Sullivan, it's that energy and excitement that keeps drawing him back to the industry.

Today, Sullivan lives in Greensburg with his wife, Tammy, with whom he raised two sons.

As he reflected on his career so far, Sullivan said, "I've enjoyed it from the day I started. I had no motivation or reason for second thoughts. I've always enjoyed the business."

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Megan Tomasic is a Tribune-Review staff writer. You can contact Megan at 724-850-1203, mtomasic@triblive.com or via Twitter .

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