

If you had asked Earl Stalter 10 years ago whether he would someday own a youth sports training facility, he would have said no.

But life doesn't always go the way people think it will.

Stalter has never publicly discussed the story, though friends and acquaintances know it started the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, when he got on a plane from his home to go back to business in Minneapolis. He had done it countless other times.

Stalter had joined Arthur Andersen and Co. in 1979 and was eventually a partner in Andersen Consulting, which later became Accenture. As part of his job, he traveled all over the world. At the time, he was living in Minneapolis and coming home mostly on weekends to see his wife and three children in Bath.

But his trip Sept. 11, 2001, was life-changing.

"I'm probably the only person I know of who was in the air who landed at their destination. They did not take us into the terminal. We stayed on the tarmac with no explanation. We finally moved and were told there was a national emergency. We were told to get our bags and leave the terminal. Just leave," recalls Stalter.

It wasn't until Stalter got to his hotel that he watched the second World Trade Center tower in New York City collapse.

Stalter spent the next week frustrated that he was in Minneapolis and his family was in Akron.

"That became the final straw, that it was time to be home. There was no plan," said Stalter, who called his boss in Chicago a few days later and flew there to turn in his resignation.

Stalter would eventually stumble upon the empty Pinnacle Sports complex on state Route 18 in Granger Township a few months later, but when he quit his Accenture job, he had no idea what the future would bring.

"I'd like to tell you I had a lifelong dream to run training for kids," he said.

Instead, at the time he just knew, "It's time to get out.

"Suddenly, I find myself back here with no idea what I'm going to do," he said. "It was a very introspective time in my life. My mother had passed in February 2001," he said.

He started thinking about a book his church Sunday School class had recently studied, called *Halftime: Moving from Success to Significance* by Bob Buford. The premise, Stalter said, is that you spend the first half of your life trying for success and at some point you wake up and say, "Go back and play the second half of your life for significance."

"That rang a real bell for me. I was richly blessed having been a partner [at Accenture]. I didn't have to find a job. I was struggling with the question of why God has blessed me," said Stalter, who took some time to get more involved with the area Boy Scouts.

Stalter said in 2001 he would not have considered himself a "religious person." He attended church regularly and thought of himself as a person with integrity.

But the Sept. 11 experience "allowed me to look back on my track record and career. I was far more successful than Earl was capable of. There was something else going on. I started to awaken to God's role in my life and being a steward of what God has given me," he said.

Life-changing sign

On the last day of October, Stalter was driving down Route 18 when he noticed a sign saying a bank was directing an immediate sale of the closed Pinnacle Sports.

"I had been in this facility many times as a soccer dad. I never thought about it as an investment," said Stalter.

But something made him call the bank.

Asked why he decided to buy the building, Stalter paused.

"It was God. In that introspective period, I thought, 'What did I learn? I've got all this success and where did I learn that?' A lot of what I learned was on sports teams as a kid," he said.

"I was never a star. I was one of those kids with the natural ability to ride the bench. I was first-string nothing and second-string everything. Winning is a unique event that's defined within the context of a game. Success is a long string of wins while maintaining your character and development."

But Stalter said he blames "us parents" for teaching kids the idea of "winning at all costs. We've destroyed the opportunity to build our kids."

Stalter the businessman thought the Pinnacle complex was too nice of an asset to the local community to see it go away. That's when it occurred to him that he could create an environment where coaches would have a positive influence on kids in a positive environment.

Stalter readily admits he had the vision of helping kids, but had no idea how he was going to do it.

"It was my faith far more than my business ability here," he said.

New mission

Stalter first re-opened Pinnacle as a rental facility in 2002, but in 2004, he decided to change the operation from what he called wholesale to retail.

"We decided to go upstream and go straight to mom and dad and training the kids."

The new business model is more profitable and also allows Stalter's staff to concentrate on a mission of training kids in athletics and life skills through their sports involvement.

Stalter, who did have a partner when he first bought Pinnacle but is now the sole owner, is in the business office five days a week, but says he leaves the day-to-day operations to Rich Garbinsky, his general manager.

But watching kids learn about sports and becoming good people through sports is what keeps Stalter going — and gets him choked up.

"The opportunity that I have to walk out the door and see these kids and families is tremendous. It gets me out of bed in the morning."

Stalter said the "idiocy of people flying planes into buildings is enough" to make one think that a life is not just about making as much money as possible.

Thinking back on his Andersen and Accenture days in making a good living, Stalter said he was "a very lucky man."

"Somewhere there's the recognition that, 'Yes, I'm going to go do something significant.' Once I stopped and got off the train and started listening, I asked God, 'What's next?' He showed me."