Member Spotlight: The Gravity Vault

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in **CWA Blog**

Gravity Vault Founder Lucas Kovalcik was partway through grad school when he decided that New Jersey could use a climbing gym. Together with Tim Walsh, he opened the first Gravity Vault in 2005.

After four years, the pair launched a second location, and in 2013 the first franchisee-owned location opened its doors. Today, Gravity Vault numbers six locations in New Jersey, two in New York, and one in Pennsylvania. In the near future, Gravity Vault plans to open four new locations in four separate states.

We reached out to Lucas to learn about the challenges of managing locations numbering in the double digits.

CWA: *Are there any lessons you learned during those first years that you took into the later years of expanding the franchise and opening new locations?*

LK: If you think about the landscape 14 years ago, what people's perception was even of indoor rock climbing, it was certainly more of an extreme sport. One where the perception of our industry from the banking world, the real estate world was not one of favor. I tell the story that our first landlord asked me the question: "So if I lease you this space, how are you going to get the rocks inside the building?" I still laugh at it today.

CWA: *Were there any challenges that were unique to this area or to Gravity Vault?*

LK: I think that we were fortunate (or unfortunate, however you want to look at it) to be part of paving the way a little bit. We used the small business administration, the SBA, for some of our first bank loans to open our first few locations. There wasn't a lot of history, even on the national level, with the SBA. Once we got our first couple of deals, we had a number of people calling us as referrals and references looking to use our successful banking relationship (that was underwritten with the SBA) for other banks to look at as a model.

One thing that was unique to us in New Jersey was that we were originally governed by the Department of Community Affairs...we were actually considered amusement operators, and carnies, if you will. I had a "ride operator" license to operate the ride that we call indoor rock climbing.

CWA: *What's the biggest challenge in managing different locations in the current era of GV?*

LK: In having multiple locations around the east coast and in different markets, what is good for one gym or one market isn't always good for another. So it's really just continuing to find a balance of the right programming, which I use as an umbrella term for everything from our classes to camps to lessons to adult programs. There's not one widget that fits all.

CWA: *What do you think sets GV apart from other east coast franchises?*

LK: We strive to be as much of a customer service-based facility as a climbing gym. We try to be extremely welcoming, to that beginning climber or to that seasoned climber. We want to be able to be an un-intimidating environment while being a challenging environment to the climber. That's a delicate balance, and that's what we've strived to do and continue to work on.

CWA: *What projects are you most excited about for the future?*

LK: I have a vivid memory of a family that was there from day one just to check the place out. The daughter joined our climbing team after a few times and had a knack and a natural talent. She went up to competing at the national level, and the whole family moved to Colorado. From being in Chatham, NJ, having never experienced climbing and never touched a wall, to falling in love with this sport, finding a talent, and moving across the country...it's just exciting. It's something that's forever engrained as part of their life. In a way, we were part of it. So what I'm most excited about as we continue to grow and open more locations is exposing more people to the sport that I enjoy.

CWA: *What value does GV get out of its CWA membership?*

LK: I think having that peer-to-peer community to discuss, whether you're operating a gym in the northeast or the southwest or the northwest or southeast...we all face a lot of the same challenges on a day-to-day basis. I think having a group of individuals that are like-minded, and having that peer-to-peer interaction, is important for any industry to continue to grow. Yes, we've gotten to this point, and we've grown, and we have the Olympics coming in 2020, and the sport will continue to grow. I think the CWA continues to offer a platform of support for everything from group insurance carriers to overall advice.

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