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Elite's CEO says philosophy is to make every event special

By Michael Kinsman
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

John Kontopuls says he never knew he would grow up to be a business executive, let alone one with a clear sense of purpose.

At Grossmont High, he had his mind on becoming an attorney, but a friend suggested he'd make a better teacher who would enjoy helping others.

Kontopuls wonders how someone could have known him better than he did himself.

"That guy had it right," said Kontopuls, 41.

Kontopuls is president and chief executive of Elite Show Services, the largest provider in San Diego of security and other support staff for sporting events, conventions, trade shows and other special events. With 200 full-time and 2,500 part-time employees, Elite had revenue for fiscal 2005 of more than \$12 million.

Elite has been built around a vision that event security is a customer-service business.

"Ten or 15 years ago, this was a business that was made up of guys who played on the high school football team," Kontopuls said. "But it really is a service business, about answering questions and finding solutions to problems. You don't need a bunch of big, strong guys to do this job. I think our work force should reflect the type of people who go to games and events that we staff."

Elite's list of customers includes the Chargers and Padres, the Holiday Bowl, the Buick Invitational Golf Tournament, the Del Mar Fairgrounds, Cox Arena and the San Diego Convention Center. The company also handled security for the 1998 and 2003 Super Bowls at Qualcomm Stadium.



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John Kontopuls, president and chief executive of Elite Show Services, at Qualcomm Stadium during the Chargers-Raiders game. The company's customers also include the Padres, the Holiday Bowl, Cox Arena and the San Diego Convention Center.

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"I love this job because there's something magical about making someone's experience different," he said. "That's what our employees have the chance to do every day on the job."

Kontopuls joined his older brother Gus in starting Elite in 1995. Gus Kontopuls was working for another security firm, Western Entertainment Services, while John Kontopuls had been a banker and was running his own financial services company.

They sensed an opportunity in the security industry, recognizing that it often focused more on responding to problems than in anticipating and defusing them before they developed.

Targeting the Padres

Perhaps naively, they sought the San Diego Padres as one of their first customers. Though Elite was only three months old, the Kontopulses believed their concept of guest services would be welcomed by the Padres, who had recently been bought by John Moores and Larry Lucchino.

The new owners had expressed their interest in building a closer relationship between the team and the community. Elite's pitch – to upgrade security to a guest-service function – won them over, and the young company was chosen for the contract over 12 competitors.

A decade later, the Padres have moved from Qualcomm Stadium to Petco Park, and Elite crews in red shirts continue to handle the team's account.

Under Kontopuls, Elite became one of the first security companies in the state to provide extensive employee training, offering programs to help workers improve their skills and advance in their careers. It also has been a leader in putting senior citizens and disabled individuals on its payroll.

"I have a chance to impact everyone who works for me, and they have the chance to affect the lives of everyone they come in contact with," Kontopuls said. At any point in time, there's going to be a moment of truth that our employees face where they can help someone or not help them. I want to have a culture that makes them want to help every time. I sometimes ask them, 'How do you want to be treated?' and hope they remember that when that moment of truth comes."

Kontopuls said he started thinking of how to help others when he read Viktor Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning" in an eighth-grade class. Frankl's influential 1946 book is an account of the five years he spent in Nazi concentration camps, where he pondered man's deepest desire for meaning and purpose.

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Kontopuls said it was evident that doing things for others was the way to a more satisfying life.

"It was really something that made an impact on me," he said. "I thought a lot about that."

A couple of years later, his role in student government at Grossmont High afforded him the chance to participate in a leadership conference.

"The instructors were MBA students from Stanford and USC," he said. "They taught us about management theories, and while I don't think they expected us to get much of it, I think they thought they'd just throw it all out there and hope something stuck.

"I don't know what the other kids got out of it, but I was fascinated that I'm a 15-year-old kid and I get to be exposed to these innovative management theories."

John Kontopuls

Personal: Age 41. Single. Lives in Rancho Santa Fe

Education: Bachelor's degree in finance, San Diego State University, 1988; master's degree in executive leadership, University of San Diego, 2003.

Professional: Lending officer, Great American Bank, 1988-1991; owner, Kontopuls Financial Group, 1991 to present; president and chief executive, Elite Show Services, 1995 to present.

Hobbies: Travel, surfing and tennis.