

PEOPLE

STORIES BEHIND INDIVIDUALS WHO MAKE ALBUQUERQUE GREAT



IN THE GAME

Mezel Mods may be settled in Rio Rancho, but it enhances the playing field of pinball machines all around the globe (p. 188).

PHOTOS BY DON JAMES/ATM



Pinball Wizards

After realizing the game of pinball is alive and well today, Tim Mezel and his wife created a business that caters to pinball players in ABQ—and around the world.

Tim Mezel turns on his 2013 Metallica pinball machine in his Rio Rancho shop. As he clicks the flippers, Mezel's eyes light up nearly as much as the lights on the machine. "Enter Sandman" blasts, accompanying the twinkles and clicks emanating from the machine. A snakehead waits to swallow the hard, silver ball.

The fangless snake is part of the reason Mezel is here today, at the home of his nearly-two-year-old pinball modification business, Mezel Mods (333-8019, mezelmobs.com). Ten other pinball machines, ranging in models made from 1992 to 2015, line the wall. These are part of Mezel's personal collection. They are also part of his pinball laboratory, where playing pinball is considered research.

"I had no idea this would turn into a business," Mezel says.

Pinball wasn't much of a love for Mezel growing up in Illinois. But he dabbled in it while attending the University of Illinois in the late 1980s.

Mezel moved to New Mexico after college to work at Intel, where he stayed for 25 years before retiring. While he was employed there, a coworker turned him on to the world of pinball. Previously a RC airplane hobbyist, Mezel began collecting pinball machines.

He learned that pinball had experienced a fandom rebirth, though more so in living rooms than in bars and bowling alleys. He entered the world of the game. "You

know, the guy that runs the Duke City Pinball League is a hundred feet from me," Mezel says. "There were six pinball machines 150 feet away from me for years, and I didn't know it."

Mezel found the online pinball forum Pinside, where other pinball devotees gathered to chat about everything pinball. Problems were a forum topic. Mezel had a problem: his "High Speed 2: The Getaway" machine didn't have a

"Donut Heaven." "When you play, the image of it comes up on the screen," Mezel says. "But it's not on the play field." Apparently others had the same problem with their machines. Someone on Pinside had tried making a cardboard Donut Heaven mod—a tiny doughnut shop toy within the pinball machine—and Mezel wanted to try, too. Donut Heaven was made to cover an "ugly as ugly can be" metal bracket, where the balls line up for "multi-ball," Mezel says.

Mezel visited a hobby shop, pulling stuff off shelves until he had what he needed to erect a crude looking Donut Heaven. Not too long after, in August 2013, Mezel invested in a MakerBot 3-D printer to do the mod building.

Today, two 3-D printers sit on a desk in the shop's corner. Jared Villalobos, Mezel Mods' creative director, has one at work. Filament, which resembles weed-whacker line, goes through the top and is melted down to a desired thickness. Through an "additive process," the mod—designed on a PC using a computer-aided drawing (CAD)

program—is built “layer, by layer, by layer,” Villalobos says.

The filament twirls, building a toy the same way a soft-serve ice cream cone is formed. What looks like a piece of a totem pole sits inside the MakerBot. Villalobos pulls a finished version of this piece, named “the idol,” off a shelf behind him. It’s for the “Ripley’s Believe it or Not” pinball machine. Pieces will go through up to three prototype phases before being sold.

After Mezel designed and created the Donut Heaven mod—which included an inner LED light—with his then-new 3-D printer, he showed it off to his fellow forum friends. They loved it. They wanted to buy one. Mezel, who started off using Etsy, sold it to them.

Then came the fangless snake of Metallica pinball fame. “This snake, it looks like a turtle now, but when they first made this game they had teeth,” Mezel says. “And the ball would hit the teeth and you’d have a one-tooth snake.” The Metallica machine manufacturers, Mezel says, decided to forgo the fangs.

Mezel noticed a problem similar to the Donut Heaven fiasco. The Metallica game has a callout referencing fangs on the snake. “So I designed these and they just slide in like dentures,” Mezel says, slipping the small, white teeth in the snake’s mouth. “And believe it or not, we have very little breakage.”

The Pinside people loved the fangs, and Mezel soon had nearly 100 fang orders to fulfill but none fabricated.

This is when Mezel’s wife, Kristin Browning-Mezel, left her job as CEO of Albuquerque courier company Hot Shot Services to become CEO of Mezel Mods. “It was right before Christmas and I said, ‘You need to get these out,’” she says.

Browning-Mezel helped get the business in order so her husband could pump out the fangs.

Mezel continued using the same process. He plays the machines, looking for fun features to add. He visits Pinside to see what people need. “We try to make after-market accessories for the most popular games,” he says. “We have about 50 products now.”

Products range from LED lights that flash underneath the machine to the mods—most affixed with LED lights—that enhance the playing field. These parts are shipped to customers around the world.

The business grew, and Mezel



PHOTOS BY DON JAMES/ATM

moved his business from his house to the Rio Rancho shop. Villalobos, who started working on a contract basis, was hired full time.

A whirring sound comes from the shop corner where Villalobos works.

“What are you doing with that?” Mezel hollers across the room.

“I’m softening up the fingers on the ‘Thing’ hands [Thing T. Thing from ‘The Addams Family’ fame] to get the ball in,” Villalobos says.

Apparently the hands, part of the shooter rod, serve to hold the pinball. But they were a little too hard. Villalobos learned he could soften them using the heat gun.

Browning-Mezel sends Villalobos to

check the mail. Once pieces are made, those that need it are sent to someone else for painting. They’re shipped back to Mezel Mods before orders are fulfilled.

Some of these just arrived. All three Mezel Mod staffers stand around a table as the boxes are opened. There’s a tornado for the *Wizard of Oz* machine. There are cemetery arches for the Metallica machine.

Mezel never thought he’d own a pinball machine, much less a collection and a thriving business whose livelihood depends on them.

“It’s a fun, social event,” Mezel says. “It’s people that are now our age and look back and go, ‘Wow, I remember playing those games.’” —ADAM R. BACA 🍀