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## Checkers owner earns top award

By [Amber Jurgensen | Associate Editor](#) on October 24, 2013



Chances are, patrons of Plant City’s Checkers Drive-In have enjoyed a sandwich made by the owner himself.

Craig Joy works besides his employees on the food line, takes orders and mans the cash register — all while doing what his name suggests: spreading a little joy. It’s this management style that earned him the company’s Franchise of the Year award earlier this year.

Joy received the award at Checkers’ annual national convention last month, in Orlando. The company chose Joy from about 120 other franchisees, representing a combined 460 locations, to nab the delicious title. There are 30 franchise locations in the Tampa Bay area alone.

“I was extremely surprised and taken aback,” Joy said. “That was special.”

Joy wasn't expecting the award, because he has won three other times. He has been operating Checkers franchises since 1989, opening his first in 1990, in St. Petersburg. Now, he owns restaurants in Brandon, Seffner, Plant City, Winter Haven and two in Lakeland.

"We're lucky to have him," Vice President of Franchise Development Jennifer Durham said.

Joy began his career in fast food at Taco Bell before meeting Checkers founder Jim Mattei. Joy loved the Checkers brand and food, so he jumped aboard as a franchisee, along with his wife, Janice.

Joy opened the Plant City location more than 20 years ago.

"Plant City is just a wonderful community," he said. "We try to stay as involved as we can with the (Florida) Strawberry Festival and the schools. The people are really nice and support local business."

Some of Joy's employees have been with him almost the since he started. One of these employees is Plant City Checkers Manager Gail Gentry. When he visits, he notices Gentry's excellent customer service. She knows customers by name and ends up talking with them at the pick-up window.

"She is such a great lady," Joy said. "That's the key. You have to really take care of your people, because then, they will take care of your guests."

In addition to working alongside his employees, Joy keeps a high retention rate and gives them opportunities to climb the company ladder.

Joy recently recommended Gentry to start her own franchise in Buffalo, N.Y. Because of his recommendation, plans are underway to launch the new franchise.

"Crew members look to him as an inspirational leader," Durham said. "He gives them an opportunity to grow more than the average fast-food job. He cares about his people and really gives them an opportunity to grow professionally."

Joy also implemented technologies to align with Checkers' "Peak 150" strategy. The goal of "Peak 150" is to give customers a quality product and dining experience within 150 seconds. To do this, Joy has installed drive-thru timers that clock vehicle time from the menu board to the pick-up window. At the Plant City restaurant, he also has utilized an outside employee, who takes orders from cars behind the menu board. The order is registered through the use of a tablet.

"We want to create a really good experience with our guests — from the time they look at our menu board to when they get their food," Durham said. "Craig's restaurants do a really good job with that."

Besides operating his franchises, Joy serves on the Franchise Advisory Council, the submarketing committee, and president of the Tampa Bay Advertising Cooperative.

Joy lives in Clearwater with his wife. He has three children, one who also works for Checkers as the senior director of brand development.

“I wear a lot of different hats,” Joy said. “I’m busy and very actively involved in operations. I have an incredible team.”

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