

# Young gun stuns

ENTHUSIASM MEANT ONE OPERATOR DIDN'T WAIT TO GET A JOB OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL. HE CREATED A COMPANY WHILE STILL THERE, WRITES MIKE KAVANAGH

**H**e says: "I'm quite sure I could write a book, even now, on the past four years ..." That comment from Raymon J Land III, 21-year-old president of Branford, Florida, based Fabulous Coach Lines. Do not adjust your lenses, you read correctly. Ray is possibly the youngest motor coach owner-operator in North America.

Branford is a central Florida rural town with a population of about 800. It is approximately 185km south east of the state capital, Tallahassee, and 250km north west of Orlando.

Fabulous Coach Lines currently has a fleet of 14 vehicles — a mix of Prevost, MCI and Van Hool.

'Fabulous People, Fabulous Coaches' is the company motto. Ray and his team place interaction with their clients as the most important distinction from their competitors.

To understand why Ray has a passion for his customers, it is necessary to go back to his Year 8 middle school experiences. His

school had won \$5,500 for being the only Category A ranking in the district for the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. The prize money was spent on a trip to Universal Studios in Orlando.

As class president, Ray bought the entry tickets, and chartered a couple of motor coaches. Although he was disappointed by the turnout of the motor coaches, after the trip his class loved going on excursions. He was class president all through high school and organised several trips each year. He also arranged a few charters for the Future Farmers of America.

His first commercial venture was arranging a retreat for the First Baptist Church. But the \$100 charged, ended as a \$300 loss because of complaints about the condition of the chartered motor coach.

Ray gave up trip planning during his junior year at high school, but that didn't last long. He set about finding a way to keep his customers happy. He felt that things

would go better if he had his own coach. He spotted a 1990 Van Hool motor coach on the internet. Aged 17, and with no credit record, he called his mother to seek her help, telling her that he had put a down payment on the coach. Her first question was, "Well, okay, but what exactly is a Van Hool?"

It took a couple of weeks to convince his parents before they signed the loan. Their confidence in Ray was justified, and they have never been called upon to make a payment on any of his fleet.

The Van Hool came with problems, and he spent day and night with his best friend, Laura Fowler, working on the air conditioning. Telephone calls to the manufacturer from a couple of school kids must have had the technical support staff wondering.

Ray set about looking for a name for his operation. After repeatedly hearing Laura's expression "that's fabulous", and knowing that he wanted to operate an exceptional service, 'fabulous' became the name.

Laura is now Senior Vice-President of



Fabulous Coach Lines, and in charge of one of the company's divisions, Fabulous Tours, specialising in luxury escorted packages.

Eight months after his initial coach purchase, Ray bought a 56-seat Prevost H3-45. The third acquisition was a newer 2000 H3-45. At about this time, he obtained his CDL and could finally drive. He also bought two Prevost Mirages, but Floridians did not go for the classic silver-side look, preferring modern-looking vehicles. Newer equipment has made the operation more efficient. The aim is to soon have no motorcoaches built before 2006. Recent arrivals feature iPod jacks, Xbox 360 and in-dash navigation.

Ray admits that he has learned from hard knocks and his own mistakes. His age has never been an issue, although employees sometimes have trouble working for a boss younger than their own children. Occasionally, customers comment that they thought 'Mr Land' would be driving; Ray loves the reaction when they discover that *he* is Mr Land.

Interaction with customers is what Ray sees as being the difference from Fabulous' competitors. Ray contacts every customer after a trip to ensure that the experience was pleasurable. He's using the feedback to make improvements in the company's 10-plus page checklist for the perfect charter. For example, the driver has 56 steps

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to follow from arriving at the depot, until clocking off.

These standard operating procedures (SOP) ensure a consistent level of service across the operation. For example, drivers wear long sleeve shirts and ties; once passengers have disembarked at their destination, SOP is 'Change from uniform top to enjoy destination'. The next SOP advises the time to return to full uniform.

Fabulous Coach Lines doesn't cut corners; this, along with luxury motor coaches, means that they can attract higher rates for work.

Fabulous Coach Lines uses a reward system to improve driver performance. Points are added or subtracted based on set performance indicators such as customer feedback, driving record and following protocol. Each positive point has monetary value and drivers in credit are presented with a bonus cheque at a quarterly employee barbecue or party.

One Fabulous driver, Alfred Wesley, has been nominated for the BISYS Insurance Services 'Safe Driver Hall of Fame'. Starting as a school bus driver when he was 16,

Alfred has never had a reportable accident during his 41-year career, having driven over four million kilometers.

With the increase in petrol and diesel prices hitting the American public Ray plans to launch Fabulous Express, an inter-city scheduled service between major Florida destinations. A recent study conducted by the Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development at Chicago's DePaul University, concluded that evidence points to a major resurgence this year in inter-city bus travel. Fabulous Express publicity will highlight the environmental efficiencies of motor coach travel.

Fabulous Coach Lines is a member of the American Bus Association, United Motorcoach Association and other industry organisations. Ray, currently Secretary-Treasurer of the Florida Motorcoach Association, says attending shows and talking with owners from other parts of the country has opened his eyes and given him a better perspective. He tries to look at what other companies are doing right — especially those that have stable growth.

Fabulous Coach Lines was chosen as one of *Metro Magazine's* 2008 10 Innovative Motorcoach Operators.

"My team and I constantly strive for excellence, and most importantly, make keeping people happy our number one goal. We aren't perfect, but I tell you what, we sure will try to be nothing less than ... fabulous," Ray says. ■

