

IN PERSON

# Career in high gear

For the founder and CEO of Sunset Parking, it's not rocket science

By Jennifer Davies  
STAFF WRITER

Michael Harth can thank Coors beer for his success, at least in part.

The founder and CEO of San Diego-based Sunset Parking thought he had lined up an after-college job as regional campus representative with the beer company. When Harth didn't get the position, the UCSD graduate had to come up with an idea quickly to support himself.

He had heard parking was a problem in Del Mar during the busy summer months, so he approached some of the local restaurants about valeting. While he had little experience in the parking business, having spent one summer valeting back East, Harth said, "I always had a propensity for figuring out how to make money."

Harth told the Brigantine, Jake's and Poseidon that he'd supply a couple guys to park cars for \$35 a night. The plan worked out well.

"I went from living on \$400 a month to making \$400 a week," mostly from tips, he recalled.

About 25 years later, Harth is still providing valet service to those same restaurants, but the business is slightly different now, to say the least.

Harth has built that summer job into a \$15 million-a-year business with 350 employees, with more than 100 locations throughout San Diego and Orange counties, Los Angeles and Palm Springs.

While Sunset Parking plays David to the Goliath that is Ace Parking — a San Diego company with more than \$200 million a year in revenue — Harth said he has never wanted the company to grow too fast, shooting for

SEE Harth, E5

## PROFILE

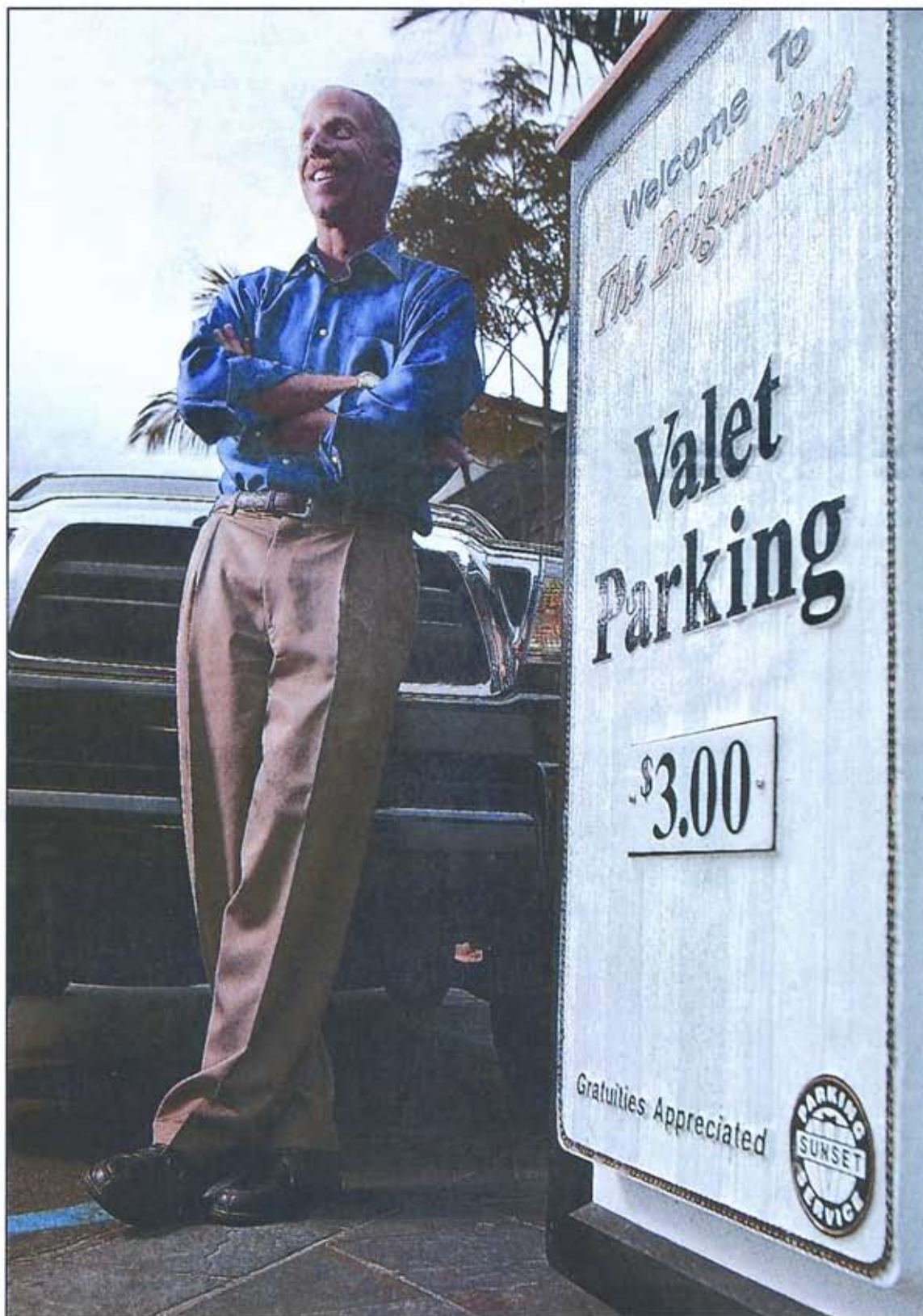
### Michael Harth

**Career:** Sunset Parking, founder and CEO, 1981-present

**Education:** University of California San Diego, B.S. in psychology, 1981

**Personal:** Age 47. Married to Elisabet for 21 years. Two sons: Nikolas, 16, and Sander, 18.

**Hobbies:** Surfing, sailing, skiing and adventure travel



Michael Harth's first parking operation was at The Brigantine restaurant in Del Mar. Now his Sunset Parking has more than 100 locations and brings in \$15 million a year. Scott Linnett / Union-Tribune

▶ **HARTH**

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**Figuring out the angles on how to make money**

15 percent to 20 percent growth a year.

"Your hearse doesn't have a trailer for all your money," he said.

That approach is vintage Harth, say those who know him well. The married father of two is devoted to creating a balance between work and his personal life, said Jeff Karp, one of his best friends since middle school.

"Michael is not the type of guy who is going to work 75, 80 hours a week," he said. "He's the guy who is going to figure out how to work 30 hours a week and be just as effective."

Although Harth may make things look effortless, he has faced his share of adversity. When he was 10, his father died from a heart attack and his mother went back to work to support the family.

Because of his father's death, Harth had a different childhood experience from many of his friends who had a "typical suburban background," growing up Connecticut, Karp said. While other kids were playing ball until dinner, Harth often

left early to make dinner for himself or his mother.

"He had responsibilities at that age that we didn't have to think about," Karp said.

Harth shrugs when asked about the impact of his father's death on him.

"When you are a child, whatever happens to you is normal," he said.

Still, at a young age, Harth was figuring out the angles on how to make money. He had wanted to have a paper route but soon realized that with the local newspaper paying at a penny a paper, it was going to take a lot of time and effort to make it worthwhile.

One of his neighbors mentioned to him that people in their apartment complex would pay a premium to have *The New York Times* delivered. So Harth found a place nearby that stocked *The New York Times* and would go out and buy 10 of those papers early on Sunday mornings.

Harth estimated that he ended up making the same amount of money as the kid who had to

deliver the local paper to hundreds of homes.

"Honestly, I think that had a big impact on me," he said. "It taught me to look for ways to do something better."

Clients such as Peter Wagnener of Hotel Parisi say Harth has brought that skill to the parking business.

Harth repeatedly told Wagnener that he could run the parking operation better, using a new approach to revenue management, and improve the business by 50 percent.

"All of a sudden there was an increase in business," Wagnener said.

Al Lazowski, another of Harth's friends from middle school, said that while Harth seems laid back, he can get obsessive when he approaches a problem.

"It's interesting because when he puts his mind to something, he wants to get it 100 percent right," he said.

Harth himself said that in the first years of Sunset Parking, he was too laid back, saying, "I was basically a guy with a bunch of

friends who were parking a bunch of cars."

He decided he had to commit himself to the business and create a culture that not only valued individuals but also helped boost profits.

"We had a year where revenue was growing but the margins were shrinking," Harth said.

To change that, Harth installed a manager in each location who was to run the operation as if it were a separate company. In addition, Harth said, he created a clear mission statement and list of values that include honesty, integrity and teamwork.

"When you have the right environment, people want to work with you. They are drawn to you," he said.

Kynn Knight, vice president and director of valet operations, said Harth is able to engender enthusiasm and loyalty with the staff because he takes the time to get to know everyone individually and respects their personal lives.

As an example, Knight re-

membered when Harth took over an employee's shifts during the Thanksgiving holiday so the employee could fly home with his pregnant wife and tell their families the big news.

"I don't think there are too many people who run a decent-sized company who'd be willing to do that," Knight said.

Harth said he is passionate about the company — investing in new parking technology to boost the business — but he's the first to admit it's not rocket science.

"We can say we do all these complicated things, but what we do is park cars," he said.

Still, it's a business that is made for his personality.

"I just think it's fun to meet people and figure out ways to make money."

**Jennifer Davies:** (619) 293-1373; jennifer.davies@uniontrib.com

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