

[ENTREPRENEURS]

By JOCELYN VOO

Effort to spare

For Harlem woman, alley brings it all back home

SHARON Joseph may have moved from Wall Street to 126th Street, but the investment analyst turned bowling-alley owner is still clocking 80-hour weeks and occasionally leaving at 4 in the morning.

"I don't know what normal life's like. All I talk about is bowling," she says.

Around the corner from the Apollo Theater is Joseph's new enterprise: Harlem Lanes, a 25,000-square-foot bowling alley almost hidden from the street. The lanes occupy the third and fourth floors of the Alhambra Ballroom building on Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, and if not for the narrow red sign jutting out from the side of the building and a nondescript arrow pointing toward the entrance, one might easily miss it.

It's not far from where Joseph got her first taste of entrepreneurship: Harlem's PS 113, where as a youth she got involved with Junior Achievement of New York (JANY), a nonprofit that

teaches K-12 students financial literacy and business skills. Kids growing up in Harlem generally mimic the occupations they see, Joseph says — funeral director, bodega owner, beautician.

"I never saw somebody who worked on Wall Street. I didn't even know where it was," she remembers. "Junior Achievement planted a seed."

Bolstered by JANY's support, Joseph graduated from Tufts and then Columbia Business School, and took a high-paying job. Still, she knew entrepreneurship was in her future, and while she and her aunt, Gail Richards, were strolling through Harlem in 2001, they hit on the idea of a bowling alley.

"The problem with Harlem was a lack of family entertainment," she says.

"We had movie theaters and restaurants, but there wasn't any real opportunity for people to gather."

Still, she had concerns.

"When most people think about bowling, they have this kind of 'Laverne and Shirley' old-school bowling idea," Joseph says. "I know I did."

But convinced the idea could work, she soon quit her job and, with Richards as a partner, launched what became a five-year process of finding space, securing funding and otherwise turning her vision into a reality.

Harlem Lanes finally opened its doors in April 2006, with a decidedly non-Laverne-ish variety of offerings ranging from live jazz concerts to disco bowling to televised boxing matches with \$10 pitchers of beer. Downstairs, a private room

hosts kids' karaoke birthday parties; upstairs a space outfitted with a bar and three flat-screen TVs hosts grown-up celebrations like bachelorette parties. And, of course, there are 24 bowling lanes.

The first local alley in 30 years, Harlem Lanes has gotten a warm welcome from the community. School children often send letters of thanks, and celebs such as Ja Rule and Bill Clinton have donned the signature blue-and-red bowling shoes.

Not that it's been easy for Joseph, who in the early days worked such long hours she took to keeping a makeup kit and a change of outfit behind her door. She retains about 50 employees, who are largely drawn from the neighborhood, and include former homeless people and high-school



Zandy Mangold

STRIKE FORCE: Lifelong Harlem resident Sharon Joseph opened Harlem Lanes on 126th Street last year.

dropouts.

"One of our biggest propositions is to inspire people within the community," she says.

In addition to overseeing operations, marketing her business and scrubbing the occasional bathroom (not to mention raising a 6-year-old daughter), Joseph has another task on her plate — learning to bowl. With the help of an instructor, the novice is working on raising her score past the cen-

tury mark.

"I'm competitive, so every time the ball goes in the gutter, I can't take it," she exclaims.

Whether she'll break 200 remains to be seen, but in the meantime she's got other achievements to point to. There was a time when, as a child, a schoolteacher told her class many of them wouldn't make it beyond 110th Street.

"I've seen the world now," Joseph says. "She's wrong."