

Sports/recreation

Ice Lady of Vanessa Park



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Jean Connor: building ice rinks for 15 years

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She can be considered the Vanessa Cr. Ice Mom. Her name is Jean Connor and, along with husband Hugh, has been running the Vanessa Park ice rink for 15 years.

The rink, in the Lorne Park area, is used mainly for hockey now and most of the kids who used it when it was built in the mid-sixties are grown up now.

But the Connors continue to consider the rink as part of their life mostly because of the memories it holds. It's a neighbourhood tradition.

It all began back in 1965 when Jean approached the Township of Toronto Recreation Department for permission to build the rink using residents' water and equipment, for neighborhood children.

"It was a beautiful park and all the dear little things had nothing to do but sit in the park," she says.

When she got the go-ahead from the township, she rounded up volunteers and the rink became a community recreation area.

She remembers her son Hugh, then two years old, learning to

skate on the rink.

"We put a football helmet on him. I've still got a picture of that," she says. "You never know what can happen out there."

"We sawed off the legs on two kitchen chairs to help kids learn to skate," she adds.

But it wasn't just the children who got good use out of the rink. The parents used to get together

for skating parties on the weekends and afterwards, go back to someone's house for spaghetti dinners.

"And teachers used to call to ask if they could bring their classes over for a skating party," she says. "We all had a great time."

But the rink did have its problems. The volunteers who built the rink ran into bitter

temperatures and the Connor home was often filled with volunteers hoping to get warm.

"Their jackets would freeze and they would come in with icicles on their eyebrows and moustaches," she says.

In 1966, the Township installed a hose in the ground of the park and, while it saved the residents water, there was still problems.

"One night, the hose froze up and they came in to boil water in my kettle," says Jean. "They kept taking it out and pouring it on the hose which was down a hole in the park."

"They had trouble getting the ice out and on one trip, the handle on the kettle broke and it fell down the hole she adds. "I never saw that kettle again."

And the parents who supervised the rink became unpopular with shiny players. Hockey was allowed on the rink only twice a week to give the smaller children a chance to use it.

"We made a lot of enemies but more friends than enemies," she says.

The idea grew in popularity and soon lights, boards and change huts were put in.

But now that the original kids are gone, she is still proud of the tradition the rink holds and she cites one accomplishment that exemplifies that tradition.

"Most of the kids (who use the rink for hockey practice) play tripple A hockey," she says. "Think about it. I think it's because of the early start they had."

Tips for natural ice rinks

It's an ideal time to start work on that backyard rink.

The City of Mississauga and several community groups will begin work in early January on various natural ice surfaces in parks throughout the city.

"The ground is pretty cold now and there isn't much wind," says Bob Williams of the city's recreation department. "Make sure when you're spraying the rink, it isn't on a windy day or you're liable to end up with a ripple effect."

The first thing to do when

building a rink is to install boards or build snowbanks around the rink to contain the water says Wayne Claridge, parks manager for the City of Mississauga.

Once you've packed down the snow in the area either with shovels or by having people walk on the snow, start with a series of light applications with a garden hose.

"A garden hose with a nozzle usually gives the best results," says Claridge. "We suggest you start with a series of light sprays rather than a heavy application. It builds up the ice evenly."

But he adds that if it's an extremely cold night, you can spray a heavy dosage on because it freezes quicker. Williams adds that it's best to use hot water when spraying the rink.

"It's the reaction of the hot water combined with the cold ground and the cold air," he says. "All arenas use hot water when they flood the ice."

He adds that cold water will do the job, but slower.

Once you've built up a good ice surface, a light spray once or twice a week will keep the ice surface smooth.