

Louisiana couple's skate-a-thon fundraisers bring phys-ed class to the rink

By Connie Evener

Deb and Frank Torries have tried all sorts of promotions at Skate Zone in Lafayette, La. Some worked, some didn't. But their Skate-a-thon has proven perennially successful for everyone involved. Eight years ago Frank presented his idea for a fundraiser to the physical education teacher at their children's school. Since then, that school has earned \$133,000.

"Because of their success, it's been easier for us to recruit the other schools," said Deb. This year, the physical education departments at five elementary schools in the Lafayette area will have Skate-a-thons at Skate Zone.

"It's really positive for the community and the schools," said Deb. "And it utilizes some of the daytime hours when nothing's going on at the rink." It's a simple concept: elementary students, armed with pledge sheets, collect donations. Typically, each student is asked to collect a minimum of \$15 in pledges for the skate. Those who bring in \$25 earn a tee shirt, provided by the school.

"Because skating is a physical activity, working hand in hand with the physical education departments has



Elementary school children learn the basics of roller skating by attending a skate-a-thon at Skate Zone in Lafayette, La.

worked well," said Deb. Over the course of its Skate-a-thon week, each school transports students, by grade, to the

rink during regular school hours. When they arrive, Skate Zone staff provides a quick basic course on skating.

"We tell them how to fall, how to get up, and how to skate because many

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Good advertising: Kids participating in a skate-a-thon at Skate Zone receive a tee shirt with their school's name on the front and Skate Zone on the back.

of them have never been to a skating rink before. By the time they leave, most of them can skate around the rink, at least a little bit," said Deb. "The kids get out of school, and get their PE class at the rink. They love it."

With fundraisers where kids sell candy bars or other products, kids may well end up wondering, "Why am I doing this?" When the reward is an opportunity to go skating – during regular school hours – they get very enthusiastic – and persistent – about collecting pledges. "The kids themselves benefit," said Frank. "That's why we do so well with this fundraiser."

And the schools – of course – love it. "Elementary schools don't get a lot of funding in our state for their programs," said Deb. "With most fundraisers, it's a fifty/fifty split. But when they sponsor a Skate-a-thon, they keep the bulk – probably 70 to 80 percent – of the money they raise. That's what they really like."

Skate Zone charges the schools a flat rate for use of the rink, generally from \$1,500 to \$2,000, depending on how many days their event runs. Concession sales for those weeks, said Frank, generally bring in another \$1,000 for Skate Zone.

"It's good advertising for us, advertising that we couldn't buy, because every kid who goes out and collects money will be telling people about skating," said Deb.

The tee shirts are screen printed with the name of the school – and Skate Zone's name and logo. "And we'll hand each and every kid a coupon to come back free or for a holiday skate," said Frank. "On the other side of the coupon is our birthday party information."

"Of course we play the normal games, do the hokey-pokey, have little races. We entertain them while they're here," said Deb. The Skate-a-thons provide a great opportunity to introduce skating to kids in the area, starting with

kindergarteners. "A lot of kids who may never have skated before will go skating for their first time, so it helps build new skaters," said Deb.

Frank is still working at adding more Lafayette schools to his Skate-a-thon list. He and a buddy who owns a pizza restaurant called Cici's are pitching a new fundraiser for schools further away. Kids will sell cards that entitle

the buyer to 5 free kids' buffets at Cici's and 5 free skate admissions. It's a three-way collaboration. "The school makes \$5, Cici's makes \$5 and Skate Zone makes \$5," explained Frank. "And the people who buy the cards get \$75 worth of product for \$15."

Deb Torries, like those Skate-a-thon kindergarteners, began skating at an early age. "My father and mother bought the first skating rink in Lafayette when I was six years old," she said. Seventeen years later, "Frank and I signed the papers on the rink on a Wednesday, then got married that Thursday." During the past 35 years, Deb and Frank Torries have seen skating and the business go through many stages. They saw the glory days of the disco era come and go and adjusted their marketing to reach a younger crowd. These days, one of their biggest challenges is competing with family entertainment centers.

Last year, a new pizza place with go-karts and bumper cars siphoned off a lot of their business. But this year, now that the novelty has worn off, their numbers are back up. Skate Zone is "land-locked," said Deb. No room to expand. But if they were to build a new facility, they'd definitely add some extra attractions. "But of course, we'd always keep skating as the basic core of our family entertainment center," she said, "because that's still our biggest draw, (providing) a social place for kids to come and hang out, have a good time, be with their friends, and get a lot of exercise."



Students from Prairie Elementary in Lafayette, La., let loose while raising money for their school during a Skate Zone skate-a-thon.

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