

# New Ill. rink operator trusts her gut, wins award for best business

By Dionne Obeso

When Karen Foster walked the streets of her small town, she could see the local youth hanging out on the streets. "They were literally standing around on the side of the road and getting into mischief," she said. The kids of Harrisburg, Ill., population of about 10,000, had nowhere safe and fun to go since the roller skating rink in town had closed three years before.

As a real estate agent, Foster had shown the old rink - shut down by bankruptcy brought on by poor management - several times. Her ideas for the rink, compounded by the need she saw in her community, made Foster put her own offer on the dilapidated building. The work she put into it resulted in her receiving the 2008 Saline County Chamber of Commerce Business of the Year award less than a year after opening.

The process of getting the rink ready to open was anything but smooth sailing for Foster and her family. Only eight days after she signed the final paperwork, a flood hit the area that destroyed anything below four feet. The skate floor, which already needed repairs and attention, was a complete loss. So was the entire skate collection, which had been laid out on the floor for sorting

Far from the three weeks that they had projected, Foster and her family spent the next three months and about \$100,000 renovating the rink and replacing the skate floor and all of their equipment. The rink had its grand opening on June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

"I really felt that getting this rink operational was going to be important to the kids in the community," Foster said. Her skating rink is the only one in four counties, and provides a vital place for children and teens to hang out in a way that is fun and supervised. She runs the rink with the help of her four daughters, one of whom is still in high school. "Her friends come to hang out, and I put them to work," Foster said. The teens get free admission in exchange for a little time at the concession stand or the admissions desk - something that is still just fun and games for them. Her 14 year old grandson also works at the rink, and is in charge of the skate rentals.

Foster wanted a place for kids great and small, including the littlest of her grandchildren. "Kids have always been my soft



Young skaters at Fosters Family Fun Center in Harrisburg, Ill., teach owner Karen Foster to dance the Pop Lock and Drop It to Soulja Boy songs. "Dance time lasts 10-15 minutes, with everyone dancing to short parts of various songs," said Foster.

spot," she said, which is why her rink also includes a tiny tot area. The toddler play space includes wall-mounted toys, jump houses and a miniature party room, with everything sized for her littlest customers. "I wanted something that kids could enjoy before they are big enough to skate," Foster said.

For older children, Foster supplements the skate floor with an arcade, and invites everyone out onto the new "snap-together-plastic-type" floor for a very unique form of entertainment during her skate sessions.

"Kids would go out onto the floor in their shoes and start dancing," she said. Concerned for their safety, but also intrigued by how many kids were enjoying the dance moves, Foster told her staff to pull the skaters off the floor for a little break. The shoe and sock dances have become a regular feature of their skate nights.

"Those crazy kids! They make up their own dances out there, and try to outdo each other." The dances start about two hours into a skate session, and for up to 15 minutes, skates are banned from the floor to allow the kids to dance their hearts out. At the end of the dance, the skates go back on and the rink returns to normal.

It may not be a conventional rink event, but the sock hops have gotten the neighborhood kids excited and engaged since they started.

Whatever she is doing must be working, however, because Foster was described by the Saline County award committee as "the essence of a business person, taking a building that was just a building, and turning it into a business."

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