

# Pennsylvania roller skating duo realize their fantasy

By Roberta Molaro

Allen Bell and Jeanne Sincavage were friends, then skated team dance, and later became business partners when they bought Fantasy in 2003. They married in 2011.

It all started for Allen at age 19 when he discovered skating in Philadelphia. Coached by Playland's Ted Hansford and George King, Allen is especially proud of his 1987 fourth place finish in Novice Dance at Nationals with Elizabeth Ibbotson.

Jeanne, however, admitted to being "a life-long rink rat." In her mid-30s, she discovered artistic skating at Rollerama (Levittown, Pa.), coached by Carol and John Heffner.

Both Allen and Jeanne were skating Novice Dance in 1986 (with different partners) when they met at Rollerama. Later they skated Novice together for Bob Carrier at Depford Skating Center (N.J.), then Steve Hinkle at Holiday (Delanco, N.J.).

At various times, they were coached by well-known teachers including, Phil Smalley, Charlie Kerchner, Bob Carrier, Kathleen O'Brien, Jodee Viola, George Maass, Elvin Griffin, and one lesson by Bill Graffe. "One lesson and Bill fired me," confessed Allen!

Asked what person, coach or event gave him the most inspiration, Allen reflected, "Looking back, I don't see one in particular. I wish I'd been a better listener. I might have been a better skater. But, they all loved what they did and did it well." After a moment he added, "I guess that it's the example they set for me."

The team continued skating Novice Dance, then Veteran Dance after purchasing Fantasy. They hadn't been in the rink business long and were sprucing up the facility, Allen shared, "when Jeanne was painting a wall and the ladder collapsed, leaving her with a broken pelvis. She was recovering well when she unexpectedly needed heart valve surgery!" Time to quit practicing for regionals? Not! Undaunted, the pair skated their event at regionals, then Nationals that season.

Allen shared his stubborn side: "When I wanted to skate and judge, I was told you can't do both." So he just went ahead and did both, spending several years on the national panel.

At first, Allen concentrated on running their rink. "I soon realized Fantasy was running me, and no matter how hard I worked, the bottom line came out the same." His solution: "Now I'm skating again, and listening to my coach (Jeanne), having fun skating AND running the rink."



Allen Bell (right) with some of the young skaters who frequent Fantasy Skateland in Pennsylvania.

***"Kids respond when we offer severe discounts, like a \$2 Cheap Skate"***

What influenced their decision to become rink operators? Allen was retiring from his engineering job, loved roller skating and wasn't ready for the rocking chair, so it was an obvious direction for them. They considered a total of four rinks. One had no air conditioning, another was in the middle of Pennsylvania, while still another needed serious repairs. Fantasy surfaced as the "no-brainer."

Even the perfect facility may need improvements. The Bells doubled their A/C tonnage for more guest comfort, and new carpeting freshened up the facility's appearance. They also updated speakers and amplifiers, then added a Hammond B3 for their live organ sessions.

At one point, the couple started upgrading their snack bar with a commercial hood, but stopped before

completion. "I still don't know what the right answer is there," Allen commented. "We'll revisit that project at a later date."

Fantasy offers a weekly live organ session, attended by about 50 skaters (and more for special events). A recent evening with Bill Clark officiating drew more than 150 skaters. They also hold two weekly "Coffee Club sessions for adults."

"Our Friday evenings had a slow start this season," Allen said "and dropped about 20 percent when school started, compared to other years." He added that Saturday nights are always about half of Friday's. To boost attendance, they've tried loyalty cards, "but that was a total bust with the teens. After all, it's not their money." By contrast, cards do work with adults.

"Kids respond when we offer severe discounts, like a \$2 Cheap Skate," said Allen.

The economy has probably had an effect, Allen said. "Since 2008 sessions and parties are down." When they raised prices in 2012 it didn't seem to make a difference either way.

On the subject of music, at most sessions they use edited Top-40 tunes from a DJ service, while on Sunday nights the organists select their own music.

It's well known that learn-to-skate classes help build faithful skaters. Fantasy's teaching program draws excellent crowds for competitions, test

centers and shows. Allen pointed with pride to Hector Pereira, a competitive skater who started his career at their rink and went on to win many awards in American and World Class Roller Dance.

Which tasks does each partner tackle in the division of labor? Allen claimed that he is "legally the operating partner." He added "Jeanne allows me to say that." He does most of the books, and orders supplies. Jeanne is their project manager, taking on once-and-done programs. She's also in charge of IT, while her previous career in nursing comes in handy when an occasional guest takes a tumble.

Fantasy keeps an average staff of 17 part-timers, with one long-time employee often hitting 40 hours. Allen said, "She's been with us from the beginning, while most of the other crew have each clocked over five years."

Allen said he has no problem with proposed increases in minimum wage. "It's something I believe in. Remember Henry Ford gave his employees a big raise so they could afford to buy a car. Our average hourly rate is already close to \$10, so we see nothing but a positive impact."

The couple may be "retired" from their previous jobs, but they don't seem to be planning to slow down any time soon.