

Special education parties full of skating, music and fun for all

By Melanie Oyster

When Roller Dome North hosts a skating party for special education students, some things about the party are the same as at any other school party, and some things are different.

"They want a regular session, like anyone else," owner and operator Margorie Wall said of the students, who have physical and/or mental disabilities. Wall and her son Kim own and operate Roller Dome North as well as Roller Dome South, both in Fort Wayne, Ind., and Wall leases USA Skate Center in Mishawaka, Ind., to her son Ken.

At the special education sessions, the deejay plays the same music as the rink uses for any school party, the lighting and special effects are the same, and the students seem to request the same favorites, asking for the Macarena and different slide dances, Wall said. Wheelchairs and walkers don't put a damper on the children's fun. On the contrary, Wall said she has found this group of skaters "very grateful" for the opportunity to have their own skating parties at the rink. Children arrive in buses four times each school year for the 9:30 to 11 a.m.

sessions.

"A lot of times, children will put skates on their feet—and skate with their

"They'll run around the rink, which we allow because everyone looks out for them. They're not racing, they're just having fun,"

-Margorie Wall

walkers," Wall said. Although some individuals with special needs must avoid flashing lights, which can trigger seizures, Wall said flashing lights have not been an issue at Roller Dome North dances. Neither has safety.

"So far, we've never had anyone get hurt," Wall said, noting that safety is always a consideration at any roller skat-

ing session. However, a standard safety rule that Wall does not enforce at the special education session is the rule that says children cannot run in the rink.

"They'll run around the rink, which we allow because everyone looks out for them. They're not racing, they're just having fun," Wall said.

Although most students who come to the parties will use skates, Wall bends another rule for the special education parties by allowing children who do not want to skate to simply walk around the floor or dance without skates.

Schools handle promotion

Other ways that the special education parties differ from regular sessions include party promotion, pricing, concessions and staffing.

Promotion couldn't be simpler for Roller Dome. In the 15 years the rink has been hosting the special education parties, the rink has never been involved in promoting the parties. Wall said the school district takes care of everything. Originally, a teacher from a special education school contacted Roller Dome about a party for the students at her school. The rink offered the party at no

charge to the school or students.

Now the rink hosts four special education parties each year, with each party involving 200 to 250 students, ranging in age from 7 to 18. Students come from 15 different public schools. A teacher who works with the district office takes care of publicizing and coordinating the events, and Roller Dome offers the parties at the reduced rate of \$3.50 per student. Skate rental is included in the reduced rate. Teachers are not charged. Helpers, who accompany some students, pay the reduced rate if they skate but otherwise are admitted free. Parents are welcome at the special education session, Wall said, but because the sessions take place during school hours, not many parents attend.

Rink closes other attractions

Another big difference in the special education sessions is fewer activities at the rink.

"We don't open concessions, games or novelties," Wall said. Not only do the students seldom have money with them, but she said teachers don't want students

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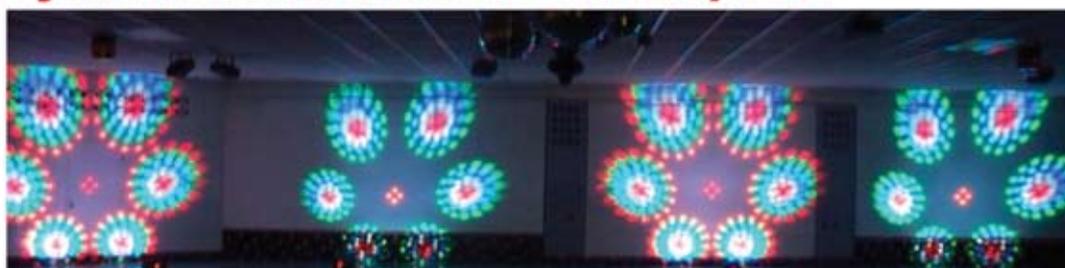
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to have access to activities other than skating.

Hosting a special education skating party does not involve any special staffing for Roller Dome. In fact, by closing its added attractions, and because the school brings so many helpers, Roller Dome can cut staffing. Wall said a deejay, one floor guard, and she and her oldest daughter are all the staff that's needed for the special education parties. Ordinarily, a group of 200 to 250 skaters would take at least five or six staff, Wall noted.

Wall and her late husband Jim opened the rink in 1950. Having 12 healthy children of their own figured in the original agreement she and her husband made to host a party for special needs students.

"One of the reasons we started [the special education parties] was we were so thankful we didn't have any special needs," she said.

Wall said that hosting the parties has been gratifying to her and beneficial for the students. She would encourage other owners and operators to consider approaching their school districts about a similar arrangement.

The challenge came with a warning: "I will say this, when we finish with that session, we are worn out."

But the veteran rink owner said she "can't wait for the next one."

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options also increase the rink's draw for birthday parties and groups because non-skaters will find something they can enjoy, Warner said.

Stoney Creek charges an admission fee of \$3 for 3 and 4-year-olds and \$4 for those five and older. Kids 2 and under are admitted for free. Adults with children also are admitted for free, although they pay for the other activities. Charging admission prevents the center from becoming a hang-out, but free admission for adults helps make Stoney Creek a good fit for the whole family, Warner said.

Guests buy fun tickets at 50 cents each and can choose from any of the other attractions, paying for them with the tickets. For example, kids' skate rental is four tickets, bumper cars are six, and laser tag is five. Guests can choose to stop skating, take off their skates, get a hand stamp and come back for more after they try the other activities.

Roller skating remains a large portion of the business, but Warner said bumper cars and laser tag also are very popular. The variety of activities also helps the center appeal to a wide range of ages. The bumper cars appeal to eight-year-olds on up to adults, while laser tag is popular with the elementary and junior high crowd, Warner said.

Depending on the time of year, some of the attractions aren't open on



Stoney Creek's attractions now include a soft play area.

week days, but all are open on the weekend. The play structure operates the most hours because it is so popular for guests with young children. "I have people that come in and bring their kids in that never touch the skate rink floor," Warner said.

Staffing was another consideration in the expansion. The new building originally offered a bounce house/obstacle course and a climbing wall but the Warners removed those attractions because of the staff required.

Stoney Creek employs about 12 people part time in the summer and

up to 20 during peak times. The same employee that works the skate rental booth takes tickets and hands out the golf clubs and balls for the miniature golf course, making it an efficient use of labor, Warner said.

She contracts out maintenance of the bumper cars, arcades and laser tag, and that costs about \$20,000 annually for one day a week during the summer and up to two days during the winter.

The play area requires continual cleaning and monitoring because of its size and amount of use. It receives a deep cleaning about twice per year.

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