

New York City 'Skate Guru' keeps skaters rolling at local Salvation Army gym

By Suzy Weinland

Lezly Ziering, a.k.a. the Skate Guru, has taught hundreds of people to skate over his long coaching career. In addition to being the skate coach at The Roxy in New York City for 13 years, he trained the stars of both Broadway's Starlight Express and the 2008 remake of the movie "Xanadu", and he has sold skates for 30 years. But these are some of his claims to fame.

Ziering is best recognized for his Central Park roller skating group, which has entertained hundreds of spectators in New York City's Central Park since the 1970s. In 1995 he and friend Bob Nichols officially formed the Central Park Dance Skaters Association, open to skaters only. Volunteer skaters and D.J.s perform there every Saturday and Sunday and hold four fundraisers a year to benefit various area charities.

"(We) help keep the drug dealers out and we help keep the place environmentally beautiful," explained Ziering of the association's positive impact on the Central Park community.

But Ziering's love of all things roller skating doesn't end there. When New York City's three roller skating "gems" – The Roxy, Skate Key and Empire – all closed within months of each other in 2007, they left a giant void in the lives of New

York City's roller skating community.

Not one to sit back and sulk, Ziering formed a committee to search for a new location to skate. "I got a call from a gent wanting to purchase skates. He said he skated in his gym. I asked 'What gym?' and he said he was the manager for the Salvation Army, which had a gym attached," said Ziering. "I asked him what kind of floor it had; he said 'a beautiful wood floor.'" They made a deal.

Volunteers jumped on the opportunity to skate again. They set up lights and resurfaced the "too slick" 90 ft. by 70 ft. gym floor. "We covered three of the big ceiling lights with two red and one purple gel and then covered the whole room with blinking Christmas tree lights."

According to Ziering, the regulars liked the atmosphere and didn't want him to add any more. "It was just bright enough that people weren't crashing into each other. And once you're there for 10 minutes, you adjust to the light. I was going to put in strobes and flashing lights, but they didn't want it."

They also solicited help from the infamous D.J. Julio (Roxy) and Big Bob (Empire) and some other sound experts to pull

together a nice sound system. "It was problematic in the beginning. It kept breaking down, we didn't have the right equipment, all of a sudden we'd lose a speaker, people weren't happy with the quality of music.

"It took some trial and error, but we finally got the right mix," said Ziering.

On Sept. 10, 2008, the Crazy Legs Skate Club opened. Every Wednesday beginning at 6:30, more than 100 skaters meet for roller skat-

a few pairs from the skates I use for lessons."

And while not officially a rink, the skating club took on the feel of a rink almost immediately, said Ziering. "In the center, people skate in place and do routines together, and there are other people who skate around the rectangle."

Wednesday nights are more than just skating around for this group, however. They are a big family gathering. Salvation Army volunteers come and make dinner, such as chicken, homemade mac-n-cheese, fish sandwiches, sweet potato pie and other delicious, but inexpensive offerings. The admission is \$10 for skating, plus a little extra for the meal. Nobody objects.

"The mac-n-cheese is honestly the best I've ever had," assured Ziering.

In addition to the Wednesday night offering, Ziering is trying out a "Second Fridays" gathering that costs \$12 per person and includes a buffet. "There is one woman who comes in and cooks. I have to have a volunteer D.J...right now we're getting about 40 people at the most." Ziering is willing to give it a little more

time, however, to see if it catches on with a new crowd of skaters. "I'm in this as a service to skaters, not to make money," he stated.

At first, Ziering anticipated closing shop for the season in June, 2008, "but the skaters kept on coming right through the summer," he exclaimed. "We have a very loyal crowd. Everybody knows everybody." And in its 2009-2010 season, the future continues to look bright for the Crazy Legs Skate Club.

Now that Wednesday nights are at a maintenance level, Ziering is onto another new endeavor that is taking off in ways he never expected: teaching roller derby teams and wannabes how to move on the track. In 2008, the undefeated Texas Roller-girls met with a huge surprise when they skated against the New York City Gotham Girls for the national flat track roller derby title.

To hear Ziering say it, "When the 6 or 7 girls who were forming the Gotham Girls came to me, they really couldn't skate well." But, once Ziering worked his magic the Gotham Girls turned heads of the entire Women's Flat Track Derby Association by beating the origi-



Lezly Ziering, a.k.a. the Skate Guru, works with a student at the Crazy Legs Skate Club, New York City.



A couple dance skates around the former Salvation Army gym, which is now home to the Crazy Legs Skate Club and its Wednesday night adult roller skating sessions.