

# WINDY CITY WONDER

CHICAGO-AREA PROGRAMS JOIN FORCES TO PROMOTE FIGURE SKATING

by MIMI WHETSTONE

As the 2014 Olympic Winter Games approach, ice arenas nationwide prepare to embrace the on-ice membership increases that follow. Between the spikes in interest, however, figure skating directors are getting creative in growing their numbers in an uncertain economy.

"Skating has changed tremendously with the economy over the last few years, and the needs of people who were coming into the facility changed as a result," Kerry Murphy, figure skating director at Skokie Park District's Skatium Ice Arena in Skokie, Ill., said. "People want to get their money's worth. They aren't looking for skating lessons; they're looking for a package. U.S. Figure Skating's Basic Skills Program gave us that package."

In an effort to build her program, Murphy joined forces with 11 other Basic Skills programs in the greater Chicago area to form the Chicago Basic Skills Committee, a collaboration that she says has helped her program with the difficult task of retaining students.

"My skating school has seen longer retention at the lower levels, which is vital to any program," Murphy said. "It's easy to get a bunch of skaters in for the first time, but once they're in the door, it's my responsibility to retain them. Through the incentives we've implemented, I would say our retention rate has increased 35 percent for students Basic 3 and higher."

Murphy teamed up with programs based in Crestwood, Crystal Lake, Glenview, Highland Park, Hoffman Estates, Pleasant Prairie, Rockford, West Dundee, Winnetka and Woodridge, Ill., along with the All Seasons Ice Rinks program in Naperville. All Seasons, under the direction of Dona Bengson, has retained more than 1,000 members since 2009.

Kids from Skokie Skatium show off their Basic Skills badges.



PHOTO COURTESY OF IRIS LEVIN



Skaters from the Glenview Ice Center in Glenview, Ill., perform at the Hollywood Skate of Fame Show.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DONIE CASCIO

"One thing that really holds us all together is our support meetings," Murphy said. "In the last three years, a representative from every program has been present at every meeting. When we started this strategy, we said we had to stay united and committed to the whole, not ourselves. Everything we do, we do together."

"When we all get together, we get going on some great topics," Dorie Cascio, figure skating director at the Glenview Ice Center, added. "We talk about different options to use in our programs, what's worked, what hasn't worked and

different ways to present things. Working with the other directors and programs really pushes me to keep my program at the top of its game."

Together, the program directors have promoted events that encourage participants to get excited about figure skating, such as attending Disney on Ice performances through a partnership with Feld Entertainment, hosting skating Fun Badge workshops with local Girl Scout troops, contributing to the Destination Sochi \$20.14 Program and annually hosting the Chicagoland Basic Skills Championships. Last year the Championships touted 200 competitors representing 23 U.S. Figure Skating clubs and skating schools.

"Working together gives us great opportunities to spark interest in figure skating," Cascio said. "When our kids do things together, they're proud to represent their own rink among other programs, but they enjoy being part of the bigger picture within the figure skating community."

Through the U.S. Figure Skating Basic Skills program, the Chicago Basic Skills Committee has successfully supported its members in creating new and unique group incentives to grow the figure skating community in addition to their own individual programs, a feat Murphy credits entirely to cooperation.

"From the beginning we have focused on teamwork," Murphy said. "Everyone truly cares about their programs and we all have a great deal of respect for each other."