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Ice Chalet Celebrates 50th Anniversary

In 1962, a group of investors decided to bring a new sports venue to Knoxville -- an ice skating rink. In the heart of the Bearden area, they built more than just a building with an ice rink. They built a community of people. Fifty years later, generations of East Tennesseans recall their experiences at the Ice Chalet with great fondness, and now they bring their children and grandchildren to learn to skate or play hockey in the same charming, chalet-style rink.

On July 21, 2012, the Ice Chalet will kick-off a year-long celebration of its 50th Anniversary with "A Celebration and Reunion" featuring on-ice dancing to the tunes of the past and a outdoor dinner gathering. The excitement is obvious -- "Save the Date" notices have been issued to about one-thousand current and former skaters and their families, and there is a Facebook group dedicated to the Anniversary with more than 500 members:

<http://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/300349949976810/>

The primary investors in the Ice Chalet were Chambliss Pierce, Harkness Construction Co., Pilot Oil Corp., and Brownlee Kesterson Construction Co. The first ice resurfacing machine used at the Ice Chalet was built in 1955, and it is now on display at the Zamboni corporation's museum in California.

The Ice Chalet was one of the first two skating rinks in the South with regularly scheduled public sessions. A year after the rink opened, a German skating professional named Robert Unger happened to visit Knoxville while on tour with "Holiday On Ice", and he decided to stay and make Knoxville and its new Ice Chalet his home. He established the renowned Robert Unger School of Ice Skating in Knoxville and in Huntsville, Alabama. He was instrumental in the development of the testing standards for the Ice Skating Institute of America (now the Ice Skating Institute) that are still in use. Mr. Unger passed away in 2007, but his legacy of excellence and philosophy of "something for everyone" remains a strong hallmark of the Ice Chalet's programs.

In 1969, the Ice Chalet established one of the first recreational skating competitions endorsed by the Ice Skating Institute. In 1977, it became the first international recreational skating competition. That competition continues to this day, and it is the oldest continuously running recreational competition in the world. Teams from the Ice Chalet also compete regularly at other venues around the nation, often outpacing other teams in the number of skaters participating as well as in skating skills.

The Ice Chalet was one of the first skating rinks in the South to offer a college course in skating and in hockey, and the University of Tennessee class is still a popular option in the UT course catalog.

The Ice Chalet has a strong tradition of show productions, partially due to Mr. Unger's experience in the ice show industry. In 1987, the first "Nutcracker On Ice" production was held at the Market Square Mall as a part of Knoxville's "Christmas in the City" celebration. The show is now held at the Ice Chalet with a cast of more than 150 skaters, and it is still an official event of "Christmas in the City."

Many of Ice Chalet students and teachers have achieved individual successes in the skating world. Several have skated in shows such as Disney On Ice, Holiday On Ice, Rosstyn Ice Shows, and the Ice Theatre of New York, and three are skating in shows as of this news release. An Ice Chalet student, Jon Robinson, was the first man in the world to compete at the highest ISI Freestyle level (10) in 1983. Several Ice Chalet skaters have achieved the highest possible test level in Ice Dance. A few have even placed well at very high levels in the competitive world of figure skating. Many Ice Chalet students were inspired to become teachers themselves, sharing their love of skating in rinks all over the U.S.

A few things have changed over the years. Wood paneling was added throughout the lobby, small rooms, viewing areas, and even a small cafe were added as space permitted, and the skates and blades and costumes have evolved. Large windows now let in some natural light on the southern side of the building, and there is even a Pro Shop. The music is quite different -- instead of Tijuana Brass and The Girl from Ipanema, it's a wide variety of songs ranging from Michael Buble to Glee and even a little rap. Curling was added to the curriculum in the past decade.

Many things have not changed. The mirror ball is still at center ice, waiting to be used in another evening session. The fireplace still burns real wood, and the mural on the wall still welcomes new visitors. The most important constant throughout these years is the feeling that this is a place to enjoy an afternoon or evening of fun for families, couples, and friends.

Larry LaBorde has been a part of the Ice Chalet since he was 11 years old, back in 1967. Now President and General Manager and a Master-rated instructor, he has seen a lot of students grow up at the Ice Chalet. When those former students bring their children, Larry gives them a thrill with big lifts high into the air and an even bigger hug when they come down. Perhaps the great-grandchildren of the Ice Chalet's first skaters will learn to glide across this ice surface in the decades to come. One can only imagine... and smile at all the memories yet to be made in this comfortable and familiar place called "The Ice Chalet."

For more information, call 865-588-1858 or e-mail icechalet50@gmail.com

More details about the history of the Ice Chalet are available online:

<http://www.chaleticerinks.com/history.htm>

Photos from years past are being posted and updated daily to Shutterfly:

<http://icechalet50.shutterfly.com>

More details about the 50th Anniversary celebration are available on the Ice Chalet's web site:

<http://www.chaleticerinks.com/50thanniversary.htm>