

DARLENE PARENT: A Life on Her Toes

by

Lynn Rutherford

No matter how many test sessions she runs, or how many students she coaches, when people of a certain age think about Darlene Parent (*née* Gilbert), they picture her on her toes.

The native San Franciscan, who discovered ballet at age four, became enraptured by skating after a trip to the Ice Follies when she was five. A resourceful child, she covered her shoes with wax paper and slid around her linoleum playroom floor, mimicking tricks she saw Follies stars perform. She didn't take to the ice, though, until she was 14, and by age 17 sought a way to combine her love of dance, with her love of skating.

The result? The toe skate, half pointe shoe and half ice skate, reinforced with steel to allow the wearer to skate on pointe.

"I went to a model maker for inventors, and after trial and error got a working pair of pointe shoes with short blades on the tips," Darlene says.

Wearing the hybrid skate, she performed sit-spins, layback and camel spins, spirals and spread eagles. To date, she is the only person in the world to perform on toe skates.

"It took time, and a lot of practice," she recalls. "Others tried, but their feet cramped up."

By the time she was 21, Darlene's performing career began in earnest, launched by a 1959 appearance on ABC TV's "You Asked for It," a long-running human interest show.

"I never competed," she said. "Figures were number one back in the 1950s, and by the time I started skating, it was too late to learn them. I learned to skate on public sessions."

As far as performing goes, though, Darlene did it all – "the ridiculous and the sublime," as she puts it. Some of her gigs, like the six months spent performing with partner Bobby Metcalf on synthetic ice at Radio City Music Hall, played on renowned stages and were written up in the *New York Times*. Others made the front page of local gazettes like the *Hurricane Breeze*, a daily in Hurricane, West Virginia still published today.

"Talk about diverse!" Darlene says with a chuckle. "We traveled all over in the 1970s. I skated in those crazy shoes in places where they never saw ice. My partner, Brian Grant, was a very good-looking guy; sadly, he died in 1987 of AIDS. We made the newspapers everywhere."

One memorable event brought Darlene and her synthetic ice to the pitchers' mound for a pre-game show at a Philadelphia Phillies' game.

"We couldn't do much, because the dirt kept coming up," she remembers.

On the more sublime side of the ledger were shows at upscale New York City hotels, from the Waldorf-Astoria to the Marriott Marquis, and even Studio 54.

"I had shows in every hotel in the city," Darlene says. "People would rent rooms for special events. That's the kind of commercial performing that pays the bills....The "ice" was

three parts water, one part glyceride, with insect repellent sprayed all over the plastic. I think they've upgraded the materials (for synthetic ice) by now."

Her fondest performing memory is taking the ice with Dick Button's "Ice-Travaganza" at the 1964 New York World's Fair, shortly after she moved to New York City. The show, which starred Canada's 1963 World Champion Donald McPherson, had Darlene toe skating the role of Blue Fairy in *Pinocchio* at the New York City Pavilion.

"That was pure excitement," she says. "A lot of fun."

By the time Darlene's longtime friend Moira North founded Ice Theatre of New York (ITNY) in 1984, she had moved on from performing.

"I was a little too old," she says. "My knees started bothering me. I went more into teaching and producing ice shows."

Married to the late Don Parent in 1969 – a banker and ice dance enthusiast she met at the New Hyde Park Skating Rink, who later taught ice dance – Darlene had a son, Dale, in 1970. She balanced motherhood with her new career, and found she was quite good at.

"Sometimes, my job was making sure the people who hired ITNY didn't work the skaters to death," she says. "They seemed to think (the company) could skate on a 30 x 30 patch for an hour without stopping or resting. I would say, 'Hey, wait a minute! They need food and bathroom breaks!'"

These days, Darlene is as devoted as ever to her students, many of whom she guides through U.S. Figure Skating moves in the field tests.

“That’s my specialty, the moves tests,” she says. “My husband taught me ice dance, so I know the Choctaws, the rockers, and I had ballet I’ve had over a hundred kids pass their senior moves. It’s scary to think about it. I’ve become a success as a moves coach; most of my students pass (their tests). Sometimes kids get nervous and don’t pass, and sometimes the judges are crazy. Synchronized skaters are required to pass their moves tests, and a lot of other coaches ask me to look at their kids’ moves.”

For many years, Darlene was Director of the ISI Figure Skating Competition. She continues to volunteer for Skating Club of New York, running test sessions. When I caught up with her to chat for this article, she had just completed a long session at Sky Rink at Chelsea Piers and was relaxing for the Easter holiday at her vacation home in Lake Placid, where she also teaches. But it was only a long weekend; full-time retirement still looks far away.

“I’ve got a kid who needs to pass senior moves,” Darlene says. “She’s going off to college, but she still hasn’t passed She’s a bit of a nervous nelly. I’m going to get her through, though.”