

Kids skate and slide on outdoor ice rink thanks to residents

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It's amazing what a little ice rink can do.

Separated by a snow fence from the rest of Elizabeth Simcoe Park in Guildwood, 10 children were on skates Monday afternoon racing, jumping, turning tight circles, sliding or just laying on the ice, which neighbourhood parents had created.

"It's a lot different from being inside on an indoor rink," said Scott Wardle, 9. "There's no stands, there's no boards. The ice is kind of bumpy but it's still very nice."

Ice pads on baseball diamonds and other patches of grass were once common in east Toronto. It seemed like every park had one, said Hilary Wollis of Friends of Elizabeth Simcoe Park.

"That was a big part of our childhood."

Now it's a novelty for children in Scarborough to skate outdoors as they once did, said Wollis, surveying the park rink's homemade benches and plastic milk crates guarding a corner with rough ice.

"We have lost something over the decades by not doing this."

Wollis formed her group, and got more than 20 parents to build and flood it after seeing a city map of outdoor rinks across Toronto - and realizing Albert Campbell Square had the only one in Scarborough.

Seeking permission was complicated: Wollis had to apply to the city's parks department last year, ask neighbours for comments and appear before a city council committee.

A Home Depot on Eglinton Avenue, she said, helped the project clear another hurdle by donating lumber.

And there was a payoff, two weeks of good skating weather before Tuesday's rain forced the rink to close, hopefully not for long.

Some children, Wollis said, took the opportunity to skate for the first time.

One was William Kim, 5. "He actually learned here. He's loved it every since," his mother Lornah Kim, said while checking her son's leg for bruises after a fall.

"All of his friends are here."

The effort snowballed once it got going, and fathers and their tool belts - "plumbers to elevator guys to computer guys" - turned up to figure the project out, not unlike the hero of a certain 1980s television show,



Kids skate and slide on outdoor ice rink thanks to residents. Children skate on the natural rink in Elizabeth Simcoe Park recently. Despite warm winter weather, local residents got together to build and maintain the rink for the neighbourhood to enjoy. (Jan. 30, 2012)
Staff photo/NICK PERRY

said volunteer Bill Wilson. "We just MacGyvered this."

Wilson demonstrated how he opens a manhole by the rink that has a fire hose inside for flooding the ice. "It's awesome. I can be over from my house, flood it and be back in my house in 25 minutes," he said, noting the rink was a hit from the beginning.

"Now we've created a monster, because everybody's talking about next year already," including making the ice pad larger and building a separate hockey rink, he said.

Wollis was inspired by the efforts of Curran Hall Community Association which had managed to form and flood rinks over the past two winters by the local community centre on Orton Park Road.

Last year, they had two rinks, one of them for hockey.

After a big thaw last January, volunteer Richard Thomas recalled, he visited indoor rinks to bring their discarded snow in his pickup. "We had to take dozens of loads of wet snow and pack it down," Thomas said this week.

"It felt good once we got it done."

Their own process needs fine-tuning, however. After two seasons of good luck "doing it old school," stomping on snow without a plastic liner to contain the water, the Curran Hall crew has run into the most frustrating winter weather imaginable and may not be able to get a rink up and running.

They will have to use a liner next year, said association president Brian MacFarlane.

"You can't win a wrestling match with Mother Nature," added Ken Devane, a carpenter by trade who built the boards for the group's rinks in previous years.

In her latest newsletter, Michelle Berardinetti, councillor for a neighbouring ward, reported that "rookie rink builders Nick Pappas and Rob Poulin" were close to completing a large ice pad on Pharmacy Avenue.

"Despite several challenges, and more than once going back to the drawing board they persevered," she wrote, noting Rona donated the wood, screws and duct tape, and another company, Crupi and Sons paid for the liner.

But for those shaking their head at the weather, or the obstacles neighbourhoods face to get a public patch of ice, local hockey coach Scott Harrison said the solution is something people in Etobicoke and North York take for granted, refrigerated outdoor rinks.

Harrison said last October he sent the city a \$1,000 cheque to "get the ball rolling" on new outdoor rinks in Scarborough. The city sent it back because none were planned.

"I didn't take skating lessons," said Harrison, who used to help his father flood a seasonal rink in Bendale Park and now runs the Scarborough firefighters' hockey league.

"All the guys I play hockey with all learned to skate on outdoor rinks."

Last week, he said, he took the issue and the outdoor rink map to Mayor Rob Ford, who was "floored" Scarborough only had one. "He's on side to do something about it," Harrison said.

Michael Thompson, another Scarborough councillor who headed a task force on reviving hockey in Scarborough said while outdoor rinks are nice to have, the former City of Scarborough's plan was to have more indoor rinks.

"That's why there's a discrepancy; it's not a matter of being fair or unfair," he said, adding he did not "really buy this as being so central to the development of hockey" in Scarborough.

"There hasn't been a huge clamour for outdoor facilities," Thompson said.

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