

‘She skated to live and lived to skate’

Apex Center honors Yvonne Dowlen, a lifelong skater who inspired many



Yvonne Dowlen, skating devotee, Apex Ice Arena regular and Apex PRD/North Jeffco instructor, passed away at age 90. Courtesy photo

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When Yvonne Dowlen was in the room, there was a spark of happiness that came with her. As a lifelong ice skater, she inspired many at the Apex Ice Arena in Arvada as well as on the national stage.

In May, Dowlen — a Lakewood resident — passed away at the age 90. She died where she lived: on the ice.

“She skated to live and lived to skate,” said Bret Dowlen, Yvonne’s son.

Many Apex Center staff, participants and ice arena spectators fondly remember Dowlen and continue to be inspired by her story. To honor her, the center held a public skate session dedicated to her memory on Sept. 21. The skate was combined with the center’s annual superhero skate.

“We decided to combine it with Yvonne’s memorial skate because she is our superhero and so many of us knew her and skated with her,” said Patti Snyder, skating director at

Apex. “She is really a superhero for everybody that’s in this rink. She’s touched so many lives here.”

For Dowlen, slowing down was not an option.

“I’m not too old to move,” she was often heard saying.

She pursued her love of skating for nearly 80 years, starting at age 13. Highlights included a stint with the Ice Capades and many national awards — including second place at the Senior Skating Championships last year.

Just over six months ago, Dowlen skated in an Ice Skating Institute (ISI) national competition — the 2015 ISI Holiday Challenge, at Dr. Pepper StarCenter in McKinney, Texas.

According to an ISI Facebook post, “She inspired others of all ages, on and off the ice.”

Dowlen also had a genuine interest in sharing her love of skating with others. She worked as an instructor for several years throughout the Denver metro area as well as at Apex PRD/North Jeffco.

“When she got older and didn’t have much of a roster of students, she would go skating at a public session, find someone who was having trouble skating and give them a lesson on the spot,” Bret Dowlen said. “That person usually would be able to make it around the rink by the session’s end, and at no charge.”

Skating coach Leasa Parr was one of many who came out on Sept. 21 to remember Dowlen. She said she looked at Dowlen as a surrogate mother and a skating mentor.

“What an amazing soul she was,” Parr said. “She was just always so happy and she gave so much to skating and the community.”

Recently, Katie Stjernholm and Jonathan Hiller, of Balcony Nine Media, created a documentary short film called “Edges” that features Dowlen and her life.

“I have a passion for elderly people and capturing their stories,” Stjernholm said. “I read about Yvonne — 10 people over the age of 90 that were winning life. She was the only person in America and right here in Lakewood.”

Stjernholm, who is based in Boulder, knew she had to meet and film the woman who was skating at 90.

Yvonne's son helped the documentary crew light the rink at the Apex Center and they filmed her skating in addition to sit-down interviews.

They finished editing the film in May. Two days later, Yvonne Dowlen died. It was the day before she was scheduled to view the film.

"We were devastated she never got to see the film," Stjernholm said, adding that they did a private screening at her memorial service.

The film premiered at the Telluride Film Festival Labor Day Weekend. It is currently traveling on the festival circuit and was just accepted to the Denver Film Festival, which is in early November.

"The film is a tribute to her legacy, spirit and resilience," Stjernholm said.

At the memorial skate night, a plaque of dedication to Dowlen was hung in front of the west rink in the ice arena.

"I'm kind of overwhelmed," said Yvonne's daughter, Sherry Dowlen, after the plaque was presented. "It's really awesome that they honored my mother. She was always the happiest out on the ice."