Serenna Brown

Winter Wonderland West of the Rockies

By: Serenna Brown

On any given night in December, the Winter Lodge is dressed up with snowy garland wreaths, the crisscrossing string of lights above, and a Christmas tree centerpiece in the middle of the outdoor ice-skating rink. You can see a towering Christmas tree full of lights when you gaze at the glossy white rink. People enter the rink, happy to be standing and moving forward while smiling and laughing as they skate around the rink. As the evening ends, people start to leave the rink, laughing with friends and family while saddened the joyful night has to come to an end. People know little about the leadership and political history of keeping the ice rink open over the years.

The Winter Lodge is Palo Alto's only permanent outdoor recreational ice-skating rink West of Sierra Nevada. The Winter Lodge, formally known as the Winter Club, was established club by Duncan Williams on February 15th, 1956, as a "for-profit" seasonal membership. He came to California to teach engineering at SJSC and to experiment with a plan to build an outdoor ice-skating rink utilizing a new refrigeration and brine mixture to maintain a first-of-its-kind ice skating rink. Initially, the 3.74-acre parcel contained an ice-skating rink, pool, and four outdoor tennis courts on land owned by developer Richard Perry Associates. During the winter, anyone with a membership was welcomed to ice skate on the glossy sheet of ice. The rink became very popular and loved by Palo Altans and the surrounding communities.

The Winter Lodge has been impacted by State, city, and local politics throughout its time. In 1981, owner Duncan Williams announced that the Winter Club would close at the end of the 1983 winter skating season because he would retire, and the land lease for the Winter Club would expire. The landowner and developer wanted to demolish the ice rink, pool, and tennis courts and put new condominiums in place. A small group of passionate figure skaters and local community members petitioned to keep the ice rink open. Through a land swap opportunity between the City of Palo Alto and Richard Peery & Associates, the community could extend the lease with the city and keep the ice-skating rink open.

Behind the charm of the Winter Lodge lies a story of a community that has fought through political conflict, including a global pandemic threatening its shutdown, to ensure the rink stays open for everyone to enjoy. The people of The Winter Lodge have shown determination and tenacity to keep the joyful memories alive against all odds. As Williams later said, "It was sort of a wild adventure. I didn't have very good grounds to know it would succeed." The Winter Club had little expectation it would survive after his retirement. This worried the skating community as many members didn't want to lose their ice-skating rink. The legacy that Ducan built would be lost forever. As the 1984 skating season ended, the nonprofit Trust for Community Skating secured a one-year lease extension and desperately searched for funding to purchase the land from

Richard Peery & Associates. In 1985, Measure A and B were created. Measure A and B would allow a land swap between the City of Palo Alto and Richard Peery & Associates. Measure A would be the legally negotiated exchange of land of a portion of the Palo Alto Municipal Golf Course not to exceed 3.74 acres of Parkland in exchange for Peery's privately owned parcel. The Winter Lodge facility would continue to be used for community ice skating as long as no city subsidy is required for its continuance. Measure B was needed to discontinue park use on the property near the Palo Alto Municipal Golf Course. Measure A and B would pass with overwhelming community support. The Winter Club would also transition from a membership "for-profit" ice skating rink to an operationally funded "nonprofit."

After Duncan's retirement and the land swap, the Winter Lodge needed new management to run the ice skating. Linda Stebbins Jensen, a former Winter Club skater, Palo Altan, and former Ice Capades skater, put her hat in the ring for the Executive Director opportunity. At the time, Linda had recently graduated from The University of the Pacific. Her impressive interview confirmed her ability, enthusiasm, and previous experience at the Winter Club would be a great fit. Linda reported Duncan saying, "I did have a lot of what they were looking for. I had advanced first aid emergency care. I was also a figure skating instructor."

Linda was hired as the Executive Director in 1986 by the newly formed Community Skate Inc. board and, shortly thereafter, started to attend graduate school to help her run the rink. The biggest threat to Winter Lodge was the rink being closed because of an unsure demand for ice skating and to make room for future property development. The prior Winter Club manager, Merre Jayne McFate, told Linda that the Winter Lodge had only been a "nonprofit" business for a short amount of time, and Merre Jayne had little expectations that it would survive. While she was attending graduate school, the Community Skate Inc. board helped guide Linda. Linda mentioned, "I got a Master's in Public Administration and learned a lot about running a nonprofit organization there (Notre Dame de Namur University)." Linda notes that

“my ongoing overarching goal for all these years is to make sure that Winter Lodge is self-sufficient, self-running business, self-funded.”

when she first started at Winter Lodge, that City politics weren't the only challenge. Local politics were also an issue for the Winter Lodge. Multi-story condominiums were built surrounding the rink which posed a challenge because of the complaints about the bright lights and noise from the rink. The rink hosts ice skating shows throughout the season to showcase the skills the young ice skaters learned. There would be several nights when bright lights and the sounds of loud music would play for the students practicing their ice-skating routine as well as students practicing tennis. The Winter Lodge proposed building a sound wall to help mitigate the noise. After many negotiations the sound wall was built with the city council's approval.

State politics related to business shutdowns during COVID-19 became another threat to the Winter Lodge in March 2020. The State of California and the County of Santa Clara stated that all recreation

facilities needed to be closed due to the pandemic. The pandemic threatened to shut down many businesses permanently. During the shutdown, the rink was empty, and you would only see the underlying sand and pipes left under the melted ice.

Linda would become instrumental in helping to keep the Winter Lodge open through the pandemic. The Winter Lodge was an open-air outdoor rink with ample air circulation. It was essentially a frozen park, and parks were not mandated to be shut down. Linda worked with the local state legislature to keep the rink open. Linda used her PR Marketing Public Relations superpowers to keep the rink open. Linda reached out to California State Senator Marc Berman. She asked if he could lobby to reopen the outdoor ice-skating rink: "So I guess it was the State that he had to lobby, so he went and lobbied on our behalf and said, 'Hey, in my district, we have an outdoor ice-skating rink. And you say that kids' recreation is the first one of the things we're going to allow to reopen. But you also say that skating rinks have to be closed."

Policies stated that all indoor ice rinks were closed because they were unsafe, even though the Winter Lodge is a permanent outdoor skating rink. California would adjust its procedures and allow the Winter Lodge to open with the policies of having everyone staying outside and 6 ft apart with masks. Linda also secured funding from the Paycheck Protection Program to help pay her staff when the facility was to be shut down. Linda said, "So there were the payroll protection loans where there are some rebates for organizations to help pay the people through that time." The Winter Lodge would slowly emerge from the pandemic and welcome back the ice skaters and their families

As a skater at the Winter Lodge, I found this super scary, not fully knowing what would happen if the rink could not open. Linda recalls this as time as " It was like driving into a fog bank, hoping you wouldn't hit anything or drive off a cliff. I wasn't sure if the Winter Lodge would survive, but I had enough hope that it would, thankfully. Getting back to a regular skating routine and skating closely with others would be tricky, given the required distance and the lack of contact requirements."

The Winter Lodge has become a multi-generation institution for many ice skaters. It has triumphed over political opposition and global pandemics. Today, the Winter Lodge is one of the largest ice-skating schools, enrolling over 3,000 students a season. The Winter Lodge typically hosts a sold-out seasonal ice-skating show and winter recital. According to an article in USA TODAY in 2020, the Winter Lodge was ranked the #1 top ice-skating rink across the US, according to Yelp. The Winter Lodge remains a hidden gem on Middlefield Road in Palo Alto, California.

Serenna Brown is a student at mountain view high school and Freestyle academy where she takes Animation. She loves to figure skate at the Winter Lodge where she takes lessons and teaches. She has been skating since she was three, and continues to skate, always trying new skills. She likes creating art from many medias, like oil paint, acrylic, and watercolor.