

Gaetz remains driving force as Odessa rink turns 25

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Dave Wild calls it “fitting” that Leonard Gaetz ended up living across the street from the arena in Odessa.

Gaetz, with a wink and a smile, calls it a conspiracy.

“The plan was to be out in the new development, but that didn’t get developed. And then this property came up for sale. I think somebody in town set that up,” he jokes.

Whatever the case, in the 25-year history of the Odessa Skating Rink, Gaetz has quite literally just about seen it all.

Leonard Gaetz moved with his wife Annette from Montmartre to Odessa in 1983. By 1985 he was serving as president of the Odessa Recreation Association. And by 1988, fundraising was underway to replace the old Odessa rink.

“He was one of the main guys that said ‘Maybe the grants are out there. Maybe it would be a good time to upgrade and build a new rink,’” Wild recalled. “Some of the people just said ‘That’s a dream, you’re never in a little town like this going to build a rink like that.’”

“But Leonard had the attitude of ‘You know, let’s never say never and at least give it a whirl.’ So we started raising money, and people started coming on board a little more and a little more, and boy oh boy before you knew it we had a little bit of money in the bank and started looking at the realization that ‘Jeez, this just may actually happen.’”

Wild headed up the fundraising side of the board, while Gaetz led the building committee, which looked after the overall planning and design of the project.

“We had to go either bigger or new, one of the two,” said Gaetz. “And it was quite a discussion to get everybody convinced that we should go new. Just for the fact that it cost a lot of money but once everybody got on board it went not bad.”

The first shovels went in the ground in the fall of 1990 and, save for two lead hands, the entire arena was built on volunteer labour from Odessa and the surrounding area.

On Jan. 18, 1992, the community celebrated the rink’s grand opening.

“When it was done, we had a rink that we were very proud of and we owed no money on, so



Leonard Gaetz shares a laugh or six while working the score clock at a recent White Butte Eagles junior C hockey game in Odessa. Gaetz was a driving force behind the push to build a new local arena, which last month marked 25 years since its grand opening. Forum photo by Brad Brown

it was a big accomplishment,” said Wild.

The rink may have been finished, but for Gaetz it’s unlikely the job will ever be done.

He’s become as much of a fixture at the arena as the sound of a Zamboni or the smell of a rink burger (which, as an aside, earned Odessa an unofficial provincial championship in a 2011 newspaper contest).

“My wife can probably relate to this story,” he said with another laugh. “We had a child who was born in 1990. Two months later I was back here working on the roof.”

In the early 2000s, Gaetz founded the local Eagles junior C program, and continues to manage both the Eagles and the senior Odessa/Vibank Bruins. He works as scorekeeper for both teams’ home games, helps out with repair work as needed, and continues to manage the arena’s bookings.

Somewhere along the way, he must be making time to play some cards too, as his poker face is Hall of Fame-worthy when questioned about how much time he spends at the rink each week.

“Oh I don’t know, maybe only 10-15 hours. It varies,” Gaetz said with characteristic modesty.

But for all the volunteers to whom Gaetz is happy to defer any and all credit to, Wild — un-

officially speaking on behalf of so many others in the Odessa area — has a different take.

“When it comes to the rink, he’s the guy,” said Wild.

The ‘new’ Odessa rink has since played host to everything from broomball provincial championships to the community’s centennial and homecoming in 2011, and has been home to countless championship teams across numerous levels in the Qu’Appelle Valley Hockey League, Mainline Minor Hockey League, Hockey Regina and Saskatchewan Hockey Association provincial circuits.

Gaetz also recalled the rink playing backdrop to Dave Wild’s wedding.

“I think he’s the only one who ever got married in there,” Gaetz chuckled.

Maybe that means Wild’s connection to the rink runs even deeper than Gaetz’s. Then again, maybe not.

“If there would be any glory or fame in it, he’s the first one to push it away,” Wild said of his longtime rec board colleague. “But he’s just an awesome community person, and we were just fortunate enough that he decided to make his home here.”

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