

VALLEY NEWS DISPATCH

VALarena owners say goodbye as new owners continue roller skating rink tradition in North Apollo

MARY ANN THOMAS | Thursday, June 30, 2022 9:01 a.m.



LILLY KUBIT | TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Fred Kneppshield leads a roller rink followed by Hannah, Raegan, Avery, Wendy and Michael Vaughn at VALarena Sk8Land in North Apollo.



After more than two decades of operating the successful VAL-arena in North Apollo, Fred and Debra Kneppshield get to finally hang up their roller skates.

The skating rink, named after the first letters of Vandergrift, Apollo and Leechburg, has been an entertainment institution in the Alle-Kiski Valley for 73 years.

The new owners are keeping the VALarena name, which was a request from the Kneppshields, and have added to it: VALarena Sk8Land.

The VALarena is the last roller skating rink in Armstrong County, according to Experience Armstrong Inc.'s 2022 Visitors Guide, and one of only about four dedicated roller skating rinks still operating in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

Others in operation include Neville Roller Dome on Neville Island, Latrobe Skating Center in Latrobe and Eden Park Roller Rink in McKeesport.

"It's exciting they found somebody who wanted to keep with the tradition of it rather than convert it into a warehouse or something," said Tracie Leshock Bowser, tourism assistant for the county.

The Kneppshields, who met at the roller rink and are now both 67 years old, have been wanting to retire for several years. Then covid-19 hit. The rink was closed for about a year, a neture for several years.

Reopening was uncertain. When the public learned of the rink's travails, the rink's Facebook page blew up with more than 17,000 views.

Fans started two GoFundMe campaigns and raised more than \$7,000. The VALarena reopened in February 2021 with a new roof.

The Kneppshields sold it June 1 to Mike and Wendy Vaughn of Pittsburgh. They declined to give the final sales figure, which included the business, building, rink contents and equipment.

"We finally did it," Fred Kneppshield said.

"Hallelujah," his wife, Debra, exclaimed.

The Vaughns, who were looking for a retro skating rink, found the rink, worked there for a while and liked it enough to buy it, Kneppshield said.

"We added a little twist to the name, but we plan to keep the nostalgia alive by holding onto the history that lives here," the Vaughns said.

"Being that we are the only remaining Roller Skating Rink in Armstrong County, we feel it's extremely important to provide a place to skate for those that do," the couple said "And it's a place to introduce those people to the great sport and leisure activity of roller skating."

Longtime fans of the North Apollo rink were elated to see the rink continue.

"We're happy to have the VALarena continue to be a landmark in our town," said Tracy Miller, North Apollo borough administrator.

Miller skated at the rink as a kid, and her parents met there.

"Many of us have fond memories of the rink, and we hope to have the business in our town for many years to come," she said.

From late December into early spring, the rink had its busiest winter season in 23 years, Kneppshield said.

The rink is attracting about 1,000 skaters a week.

"Thank goodness we had the help, because we were really running," Kneppshield said.

The high attendance might be caused in part by the closing of the Tarentum Roller Rink in Tarentum earlier this year, he noted. Patrons come from a 25- to 40-mile radius.

The Kneppshields said they plan to enjoy their family and more leisure time.

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