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Rink memories

LOCAL NEWS

FEB 21, 2014

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In the 1980s, the flashing lights, fluorescent lasers and pop music made roller skating rinks hugely popular among teenagers across the country.

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A vestige from the disco craze of the late 1970s, friends and classmates would plan their days around stops at the hottest skating spots.

For many youths around Trumbull County, the Top O' the Strip Roller Rink in Niles was the premier after-school hangout.

It was destroyed by a killer tornado in May 31, 1985. For the past four years, friends who used to hang out at the rink have gathered annually to reminisce.

"That was the pinnacle of roller skating in this area, when everything went to lasers," said Robert Chambers, who worked at the Top O' the Strip during his teenage years.

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"It was really started to get popular, and I started bringing friends from Cortland and Austintown there. It was a really beautiful rink, and we had a blast there," he said.

Chambers and his friends planned to spend that evening at their favorite hangout. However, while floating in a swimming pool in Austintown, breaking news on a nearby radio caught his ear.

"They said there was a bad storm in Newton Falls headed toward Niles, and to get indoors," Chambers remembers. "It was hard to believe, because the weather was fine where I was."

At around the same time, Cindy Weiss Rogers, who had also planned to go skating at the rink that night, was near Robbins Avenue in Niles when she felt an odd electricity in the air.

"It was like nothing I have ever felt before and just really weird," the now 41-year-old Weiss Rogers said. "Everyone was concerned and the skies started looking strange."

At about 6:30 p.m., a funnel cloud touched down in Portage County, churning its way toward Newton Falls and Niles.

The F5 tornado ripped through the area, staying on the ground for 47 miles, devastating everything in its path.

It is believed that 300 mph winds swirled inside the twister, which would have made it the largest tornado in the world that year.

When it was over, 10 people in Ohio and eight in Western Pennsylvania had perished. Most of the victims in Trumbull County died when the twister roared down on the Niles Park Plaza on U.S. Route 422 near Vienna Avenue.

Nearly 70 houses were destroyed in six communities, and more than 65 others were damaged severely. Damage estimates put losses at more than \$60 million.

Among the scattered wreckage in the massive debris field left in the storm's wake, Top O' the Strip was leveled.

Chambers said he could not believe his eyes.

"It was amazing, because everything was fine until you got to around North Road and (state Route) 169," the 1982 Mineral Ridge graduate said. "It looked like someone dropped a bomb. Everything was gone."

Now, nearly three decades later, local skaters have spent the past several years remembering the destroyed rink in an annual remembrance, reuniting old friends and celebrating 1980s popular culture.

The idea first began four years ago when a group of friends on Facebook were reminiscing about the Top O' the Strip.

"We had some pictures devoted to the rink and the tornado, and people started suggesting doing something and getting together," Weiss Rogers said. "Everybody jumped on board."

This year's remembrance is set to take place from 7 to 10 p.m. Saturday at the Cortland Roller Rink.

Rogers is expecting a crowd of around 200 at the 1980s-themed gathering. This marks the first year the event is open to children, but not an open skate.

"We basically rent the rink for the day, since they're normally not open on Saturdays," Rogers said.

The event will feature door prizes from the 1980s trivia, songs and prizes will be awarded at the end of the event. All children must be accompanied by an adult in order to attend the reunion.

Attendees dressed in 1980s attire will receive prizes as well.

"We do it to remember the rink and all the fun we had there and to just get old friends together," Weiss Rogers said. "It's a good time."

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