

Seasons of Joy

Cheryl Cutlip &

Life after Radio City



To watch the Radio City Rockettes is to behold perfection. Dazzling smiles. Effortless precision. Those eye-high kicks that make your hamstrings ache just to witness.

Boone resident Cheryl Cutlip lived that life for 15 years, high-kicking her way through an incredible dance career that took her around the world before bringing her back to small-town North Carolina.

Today she's passing her knowledge to the next generation as director and choreographer of The Carolina Snowbelles, a precision dance troupe now in its third year in the High Country. And she's enjoying a new season of life that uses her talents in fresh ways.

"I think for some people, it's just sort of in you to do certain things in life, and for me, it was dance," Cheryl says.

First Position

Before she laced up a tap shoe or took her place at the barre, Cheryl got her first taste of dance in a more spontaneous fashion. On Friday or Saturday nights, her parents would put on Diana Ross or a beach music hit, and she and her brother would cut a rug in the living room of their Archdale, N.C., home.

Noticing her budding interest, Cheryl's mom enrolled her at the local studio, Diane's School of Dance, at the wee age of 3. She honed her skills in ballet and tap for a decade before the teacher declared that she'd taught Cheryl everything she knew. Cheryl moved on to a studio in Winston-Salem under the instruction of Emmy Award-winner Mallory Graham, where she broadened her skills into jazz, commercial dance and musical theater.

At age 15, Cheryl embarked on a 10-city dance tour with an organization called Dance Caravan. It was her first time away from home and on an airplane. It was also, she realizes now, an experience that cemented her plans to make dance her profession.

The multi-talented teen enrolled at UNC-Greensboro under a dance scholarship and after just one semester au-

ditioned with the Opryland USA theme park in Nashville, Tenn. She got the part.

Cheryl's mom, Jean Hebert, recalls the weight of that decision: continue in college or embrace the vagabond life of a professional dancer. Cheryl chose to dance.

"I was a little bit nervous about her moving to Nashville and giving up the scholarship, but Cheryl's always made good decisions, so we just felt like that was her decision," Jean says. "She had to make it and live with the results of it, and it was a good choice for her."

Road to New York

After her Opryland debut — a show called "Spirit of America" with Brenda Lee — the jobs began to snowball. She earned a gig on a Caribbean cruise ship and saved enough money to move to New York, where she crashed on a friend's couch while chasing her dream.

New York is the city that never sleeps, and neither did Cheryl. She started waitressing — her ticket to a hot meal every day — and joined Steps on Broadway, where she could take free dance classes in exchange for 10 to 15 hours of labor per week. Scrimping and saving, she made the \$3,500 she'd saved from her cruise job last six months.

"I still to this day wonder, what did I eat? What did I do?" Cheryl says.

Her hustle paid off, and she spent several years bouncing from job to job in the U.S. and abroad. She spent a year at Tokyo Disneyland, danced in the European National Tour of "42nd Street" and performed a stint with "Crazy for You" in Europe. The audition cycle was grueling and filled with uncertainty, but Cheryl was enjoying the gypsy lifestyle.

Becoming a Rockette

Cheryl was a Radio City Rockette for five months before she knew it.

She was in Berlin in summer 1993 when she got a call from Radio City: we need to schedule your body composi-

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Cheryl Cutlip. Photo by Chasity Strickland

tion test. She assumed it was another part of the audition process she'd started that spring.

"They said, no, you're been a Rockette for five months, and I said, I have?" Cheryl recalls.

With a half-dozen apartments in the last six months, the acceptance letter had never made it to Cheryl's hands. But she happily accepted the belated offer.

Performing with the legendary Rockettes is a monumental feat of athleticism and finesse. During the holiday season, the glitzy dancers perform a 90-minute show four times a day, with more than 100 high kicks per show. They cram their brains with new routines and work toward absolute precision in their coordinated movements.

"You can go to dance school your whole life, but until you're working three inches away from a gal to your right and left, you never experience anything like that," Cheryl says.

Her last several years with the company, Cheryl would end the night with waist-deep ice baths and physical therapy.

One year she suffered a herniated disk in her back and performed through the pain, never missing a show.

She would need that strength and determination in 2003, when a traumatic experience tested her as never before. Pregnant with her first child and working as a choreographer at Radio City, Cheryl started to feel off. She rushed to Mount Sinai and discovered she was entering premature labor at 24 weeks. Her son, Stuart, lived only three and a half days.

The Rockettes family surrounded Cheryl and her husband, Ron, through the devastating grief.

Amid personal and professional challenges, this era brought unbelievable opportunities to perform in the national spotlight: the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and the inauguration of President George W. Bush.

When the Yankees won the pennant in 1999, the Rockettes were asked to appear in a celebratory parade, and Cheryl was tasked with choreographing the show. With virtually no time to prepare, she had to teach the steps on the bus as they traveled from Radio City to downtown Manhattan.

"I'm standing on a moving bus and I have 25 Rockettes standing with me, and I am telling them the choreography and they're trying to see the visuals," Cheryl says. "I'm thinking, I cannot believe I said yes to this."

Her trial by fire earned her more opportunities to arrange programs and lead the women on stage, eventually landing as assistant choreographer for the Christmas Spectacular.

Close friend and former Rockette Leslie Ulrich says Cheryl possessed an innate ability to handle pressure. At some points Cheryl danced the "swing" position, standing in for absent dancers, mean-



Members of the Carolina Snowbellies pose in costume: (left to right) Madi Greene, Elliana Berry, Kati Mac Greene, Ali Cook, Hattie Rose Greene, Ava Cutlip, Raylee Cline. Photo by Chasity Strickland

ing she had to know the steps for every position on stage. And when it came to TV interviews, Cheryl was the go-to girl.

"It was often Cheryl because she's so good in conversing with people in high-pressure situations," Leslie says. "She has an amazing ability to handle stress and keep it positive."

Nowhere was that positive attitude more needed than the streets of New York after Sept. 11.

Shortly after the terrorist attack, Cheryl pulled together a handful of professional dancers who sought to respond to the tragedy through dance. Drawn together by a desire to positively impact the world, Project Dance held its first event in 2002 to tremendous acclaim. With Cheryl as founder and director, the organization ballooned and now hosts similar exhibitions in more than 10 cities across the globe.

Leaving the Line

After retiring from Radio City in 2008, Cheryl worked with the jazz company Walker Dance under Chet Walker before leaving New York for Boone two years later, seeking a quieter life with her husband and two kids. Though she immensely enjoyed her busy family life and her continued work with Project Dance, she faced an unexpected identity crisis as she struggled to fill the void dance once held.

As she watched her daughter explore her own interests in dance, an idea began to take shape in Cheryl's mind. What if she tried to teach the precision dance style to young people her daughter's age?

She mentioned the idea to Blowing Rock resident Karyn Herterich as they worked together on the Blowing Rock School playground renovation project.

Karyn, a longtime supporter of the arts and youth causes, said she found Cheryl to be amazingly bright, capable and sincere and signed on as founding patron of the dance troupe, later named The Carolina Snowbelles. Her generosity allowed the group to launch as a full scholarship program at no cost to the youth dancers.

Karyn says she was excited about bringing a new type of dance to the High Country and by the opportunity to help young girls develop teamwork



Cheryl leads dancers (from left) Josie Crisp, Anne Mellon, Kati Mac Greene, Ava Crisp, Madelyn Street, Grace Sears, Lily Jones and Isabel Holt in the studio. Photo by Jenna Markiewicz

and diligence they could apply well into adulthood.

"This is a really, really critical time of development for them, and it teaches them that if they're not a team, it's not going to work," Karyn says.

Cheryl held her first auditions in 2014 and accepted 15 dancers. Now the troupe has grown to 25 girls, ages 9 and up, as well as a creative team of three. Snowbelles rehearse once a week in Boone and must already have experience in jazz, tap and ballet. The community-focused group performs in parades, civic events and special shows.

Sixteen-year-old Savannah Spencer of Hickory, a three-year member of the Snowbelles, said she loves the sisterhood of the troupe and Cheryl's challenging but kind leadership style.

"Cheryl as an instructor is so amazing," Savannah says. "The way she teaches is so clear, and I feel like it really resonates with every dancer."

This time of year, as the weather cools and holiday jingles hit the airwaves, Cheryl, 46, sometimes feels nostalgic for her Christmas Spectacular days. But between the Snowbelles, holidays spent with family and finally participating in ballet classes just for the fun of it, Cheryl



Former Rockette Cheryl Cutlip stands on the Radio City stage with her daughter, Ava.

says she's enjoying a beautiful season of life.

"When I lived in New York, my priorities were stacked differently, so the move to the mountains was really a huge flip of those priorities," she says. "There was a time in my life when I didn't put enough emphasis on the most important things. Through shifting that, I've actually had so much more joy. I'm a happier person."



KELLEN SHORT

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