



The Carolina Snowbellies

Tapping into the Holidays

BY JAN TODD

Whether it is curling up in front of a fire and watching “White Christmas,” attending a production of “The Nutcracker,” or heading to New York City to see the Radio City Music Hall Christmas Spectacular featuring the Rockettes, enjoying dance performances is a holiday tradition. Thanks to Cheryl Cutlip, former Rockette and director of the Carolina Snowbellies, folks in the High Country can now get a glimpse of the glamour and glitz of a “big city” dance production without leaving town.



Director, Cheryl Cutlip (right) and Dance Captain Lindsay Masland (left) discuss a rehearsal plan for this year’s team of Carolina Snowbellies.

The Carolina Snowbellies are a precision dance troupe entering their third Christmas season, and already tapping their way into the hearts of the arts community in the area. Per-

forming this year at events including the Western Youth Network Festival of Trees, the Holiday Stroll in Blowing Rock, and Christmas parades, locals and tourists

will have several chances to see this group in action. Next year, the group has been invited to perform at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC.

Featuring dancers from age 10 through adult, the Carolina Snowbellies rehearse several hours a week throughout the entire year to perfect their precise jazz and tap moves. “Precision dance” focuses on exactness of performance, dancers moving in tandem to produce an overall effect as a group, rather than that of an individual dancer. It takes a tremendous amount of practice, discipline, and teamwork. “They have to work together,” said Cheryl. “If one or two dancers don’t

get it, the whole group is off.” Cheryl understands hard work and discipline. She was a Radio City Rockette for



Photos by Chasity Strickland

Carolina Snowbellies (above, left to right) Madi, Elliana, Kati Mac, Ali, Hattie Rose, Ava and Raylee





Cheryl, age 5, getting ready for a recital



Cheryl, age 7 Yankee Doodle recital costume at Diane's Studio of Dance



Cheryl, age 11 performing her first tap solo



15 years, with an impressive list of stage credits and life experiences that would seem like a dream to many dancers. She also understands what it is like to grow up in a small town.

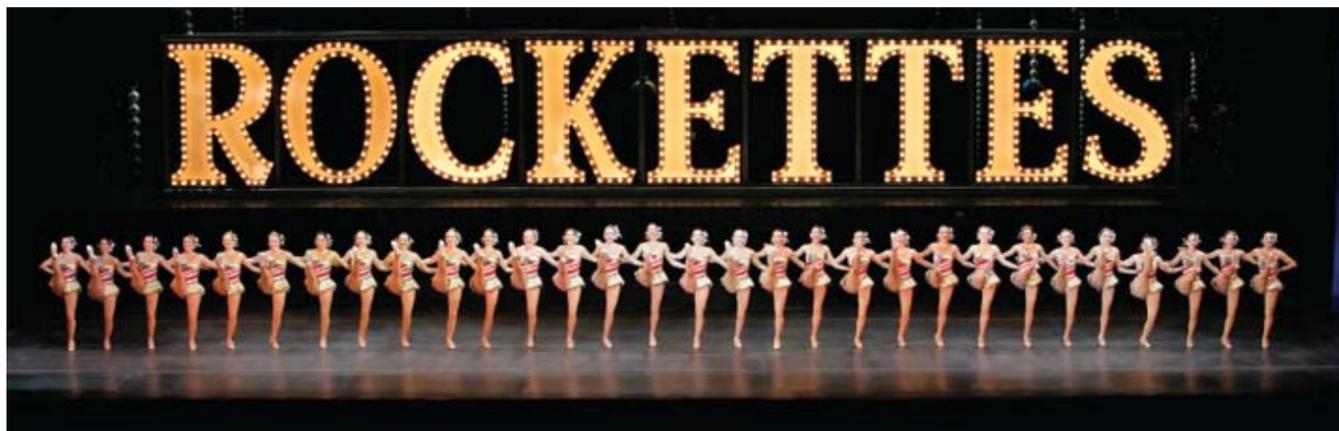
"I come from a one-stop-light town near High Point," she said. In Archdale, North Carolina, her mother enrolled her at the one dance studio when she was just three years old. When Cheryl was thirteen, she began taking lessons in Winston-Salem with the legendary Mallory Graham, who had choreographed and performed in many Broadway shows in New York. Graham was also known to be very successful in placing his dance students on Broadway.

Graham opened doors for Cheryl.

Radio City Music Hall publishes an annual photo book featuring the current Radio City Rockettes. This photo of Cheryl was taken to represent the Snowball Costume worn for the famous Christmas wreath routine called Santa Clause is Coming To Town.

yl. She described, "When I was about 15, I started dancing in the Miss North Carolina pageant, which was produced by one of my dance teachers. I was getting opportunities to perform on television, and that was very exciting for me. Then that same year, I traveled with a company called Dance Caravan, dancing eight hours a day for six weeks on a 12-city tour during the summer. That was a turning point. My parents knew that if I came back after that tour, still excited about dancing, then that would probably turn into a career for me. And sure enough, I came back knowing what I wanted to do!"

After finishing high school and attending UNC-Greensboro for a se-



Photos by Jenna Markiewicz

Each summer Cheryl hosts a precision dance summer intensive, KICK IT UP. Along with Appalachian State University and local patron, Karyn Kennedy Herterich, Cheryl brings in guest professional teaching artists. The week culminates in a family and friends performance and Carolina Snowbelle audition. The 2018 event is June 26-30. More: www.projectdance.com



Carolina Snowbelle hopefuls auditioning at KICK IT UP

mester, Cheryl auditioned for Opryland U.S.A. and was offered a spot on the variety show "The Spirit of America" at the Roy Acuff Theater. "Brenda Lee was the star of the show," remembered Cheryl. "She is such a lovely lady, a real class act."

"So there I was, eighteen years old. I had begun my professional career, quit college and moved to Nashville. I never looked back!" continued Cheryl. "It was a great experience, a training ground in addition to performing. While working for them, Opryland continued training us as dancers, and I gained more skills on that job."

When the Opryland season came to a close, Cheryl went to work on a ship owned by Crown Cruise Lines, a now defunct operator that sailed small ships carrying a few hundred passengers. "The ship I was assigned to was brand new, built in Spain," said Cheryl. "The whole crew flew to Spain and sailed across the Atlantic. That was an experience like I've never had again. On our way out to sea, we were sailing by Morocco, and the captain just decided to stop there for dinner! We were so close, so why not? Then, I remember on about day 5 of the sail, we were in the middle of nowhere, days without seeing land. It was almost a little eerie!"

Cheryl continued, "The living quarters were very tiny on the ship. We had to share the space with a roommate, so that made the space even tinier. But it was a fun time. We'd go to the same ports over and over, and get to know some of the locals. I remember in Haiti, we'd go out on a boat and catch our own lobsters, enormous ones about three feet long! Then we'd grill them. It was an amazing time, connecting with people in Key West, Cozumel, Cancun, the Caymans."

"We did a few different shows, a 50's show, a welcome show, and a more sophisticated theater show. As a young dancer, I was able to save a lot of money on that job, because our rent and food was covered, and there really weren't many places to spend money!"



Department Chair, Kevin Warner and Dance Captain, Lindsay Masland evaluating auditions



Brad Parquette teaches ballet portion of audition



Cheryl reviews details of new routine, Let It Snow. Photos by Ken Ketchie

When her six-month contract on the cruise line was up, Cheryl packed her bags again and this time landed in New York. After a few months of auditioning, she became a princess. Not by marrying royalty, however. Cheryl was cast as Cinderella at Disneyworld in Japan!

She reflected, "Living in Japan, that really opened my eyes. Seeing the respect and honor in the Asian culture, as a twenty year old, was life changing. Everything was so completely different, the language, the food, even the way they open books, flipping pages from left to right."

"The Asians have such a love affair with Disney, and I was Cinderella! So I had fans that would come and visit me in the American village. One of the Japanese customs was to bring a gift when visiting someone. So I would open the door and see these elaborate gifts, and really didn't



Rehearsals begin each week with a 30 minute company warm up including floor work, stretching, kicks, across the floor jazz and tap skills.

"So there I was, eighteen years old. I had begun my professional career, quit college and moved to Nashville. I never looked back!"

understand why they were giving them to me. I still have some of the gifts, beautiful decorations, ornate things. Or sometimes they'd take pictures of the show and bring me postcards of myself. It was amazing, and so sweet."

Cheryl once again returned to New York after eight months in Tokyo. "That was the cycle for a dancer," she explained. "Go to New York, audition, get a job that goes somewhere else, go back to New York, audition some more. After Japan, I went to Europe to dance on the show 42nd Street, then came back to New York."

The audition for the Rockettes, Cheryl admitted, was just like any other audition. "When you're a dancer in New York, you audition every day. You have your bag packed, you look through the want ads, and go to auditions. I didn't grow up dreaming to be a Rockette, I just wanted to dance professionally. So the audition for Radio City was just one on a list of many for me that week."

"I remember the audition as being very long. We learned a routine in a group of our, performed it, then learned another routine. They measured us, made sure we were tall enough. At that time, you had to be 5'5" to 5'9". Now it is 5'6 to 5'10.5". At the call back audition, we did kicks, sang, and had an interview."

Cheryl had no idea that she was beginning a fifteen year





The Carolina Snowbellies work tediously to perfect their unified steps. Each dancer relies on the dancers around them to create the lines, kick heights and stage depths while moving together.

career with the Rockettes. “I thought it would be like every other job, something I’d do for six months, then do something else. I didn’t realize that it was a job that I could do full time. After we finished the Christmas show, I was offered the Easter show, then just kept going. Some years it was full time, some years it was seasonal. Eventually, I became a dance captain and part of the creative team, doing pre-production and behind the scenes things. The Rockettes became like a second family to me.”

While a Rockette, Cheryl had a blend of experience of life in the spotlight, while in uniform, and living in New York as a “regular person” when not dressed for the part. “Unless I was in costume, no one recognized me as a Rockette,” said Cheryl. “But on the job, it was a whole different culture. The Rockettes are in the fabric of New York City, so we’d go to high profile functions, meet presidents and celebrities, be a part of the pop-rock scene. And I’d be standing there, thinking, “They have no idea who I am, just a little girl from North Carolina!”

Occasionally, Cheryl found herself star-struck. Like the time she found herself dancing with Liza Minnelli. “To meet someone like that, to be on stage with someone like that, it was amazing, watching her process and perform,” remembered Cheryl.

Another time, Cheryl met and performed with rock icon Sting. “I love Sting. So after the show, a few of us asked him if we could have our picture taken

with him, and he said, “Actually, I was hoping I could have my picture made with you guys!” So it was a whole reversal, with us thinking, “Wow, we’re dancing with Sting!” while he was thinking, “Wow, I’m performing with the Rockettes!”



Encouragement based teaching with a clear expectation of the work is Cheryl’s motto

In spite of the fun and glamour, life as a Rockette wasn’t easy. In New York City, thirty six dancers take the stage during the Christmas season for more than 200 shows in an eight-week period. The dancer’s day starts around 9:30am and isn’t over until about 11pm. “After the holiday season, we’d take a month off to let the body rest and get back to normal,” said Cheryl. “But it was a fun, fun time.”

Cheryl lived in New York for about twenty years, during which time she married Ron, a landscape architect, and had two children, Ava (age 12) and Evan (age 9.) Seven years ago, they decided to move to the mountains. “It was just a feeling that came over us,” Cheryl reflected. “Ron and I both felt it. So we sublet our apartment in New York, packed up everything, two kids, two cats, in our decrepit Jeep, and came here to live. We discovered this was a great place for our children, and it has been good for Ron and me as well.”

Having stepped off the big stage, Cheryl feels that she has entered a new phase of her career. “I had teachers and mentors who gave me opportunities, who traveled with me and encouraged me to take that next step. So now, with my age and where I am in my career, it is time to give back, and be that person for someone else.”



In three short seasons, these dancers have improved greatly allowing us to achieve more in depth work.

Cheryl started teaching tap and jazz at the Western Carolina Youth Ballet studio in Boone, owned by Brad Parquette. “I started offering precision dance classes, teaching that unique style that I used as a former Rockette, and interest started to build. I began wondering what it would be like to

have our own little troupe, to enliven the community and go around and perform, and become the fabric of the High Country like the Rockettes are to New York.”

Auditions, twenty-five dancers were selected, and the Carolina Snowbellies were born. “It is an eclectic group of

dancers,” Cheryl described. “We have a couple of professors, some moms and daughters, every age, every size. With all generations learning the same material, a little magic happens.”

The Carolina Snowbellies is an all-scholarship program. All of the dancers

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 successful in whatever
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The Carolina Snowbelles perform during the annual Blowing Rock Christmas Parade in 2016.



The Carolina Snowbelles appear in the annual An Ensemble Christmas. Get your tickets at www.ensemblestage.com



Celebrating the opening of The Appalachian Ski Welcome Center, The Carolina Snowbelles joined the festivities and ribbon cutting ceremonies.

are required to take regular lessons from a studio, and the Snowbelles is designed to be an extension. "I know that it isn't always possible for families to pay for this level of additional training. I really wanted a troupe that was community driven, giving the community the opportunity to support young dancers, and they've done that. It has been really exciting."

"Our founding patron was Karyn Kennedy Herterich, the owner of South Marke shopping center in Blowing Rock. She is also the one that connected us with the Kennedy Center and helped us get the invitation to perform there next year," said Cheryl. "Blowing Rock Community Foundation is a partner, Alice Roess, and lots of individuals have also stepped up to help us."

Even though the program has only been in existence for a few years, several young dancers from the High Country have already begun to realize their dancing dreams. Three Snowbelles, Katie Hannah, Savannah Spencer, and Emma Pinnix, auditioned and earned spots in the week-long Radio City Rockettes' Summer Intensive this year. They went to New York and learned advanced techniques, ending in a public performance. Cheryl reflected, "It's one thing for me to tell my students about the experience, but it is really cool for them to hear about it from their peers!"

"I tell the girls that it isn't may goal to have them all become Rockettes," Cheryl added. "I want them to be successful in whatever they want to do in life. I have students who want to be veterinarians, lawyers, all kinds of careers. Their experience as Snowbelles really gives them "life training." They learn the importance of being on time, of giving me three hours or so of really hard work. They learn how to show up and handle themselves in public, to talk to patrons, to get along with one another. They come together here with one purpose. That translates to being successful in whatever field they choose."

The Carolina Snowbelles is part Cheryl's

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"I didn't grow up dreaming to be a Rockette, I just wanted to dance professionally."

"Project Dance Foundation," which seeks to nurture dancers to their fullest potential and inspire people all over the world. Project Dance began as a response to 9-11 in New York City, when the dance community sought to encourage and bring a message of hope to those impacted by the devastating events of September 11, 2001.

"I was living in New York during that time, and the Rockettes, as well as Broadway dancers and ballet dancers, got together and wanted to do something to help people in the city. So we worked with the city to build a giant stage in Times Square, and for ten hours, we danced. We danced as an expression of love, of hope. We had people visit our stage who had been affected by 9-11, emergency workers, families of victims, who were literally on the asphalt in front of us in tears, receiving what we had to offer them in the form of dance. It was very emotional, with everyone dancing their own heart message," described Cheryl.

That experience sparked a passion in Cheryl, and she founded The Project Dance organization. Along with hundreds of volunteers, the Foundation produces events around the world. "We do 3-day conferences where participants network with one another, perform a group dance as well as solo numbers in an open air concert. The idea is to equip that dancer for their next step in their professional career. We've been to Sydney Australia, Hong Kong, Jerusa-

Photos from a Project Dance performance in New York.

The project is an international movement of dancers seeking to positively impact culture through artistic integrity. Our desire is to see every dancer nurtured to their fullest human potential for their own wellbeing and for their contribution to the world.
www.projectdance.com

Photos by Gary Murakami



Karyn Kennedy Herterich (right top photo with Snowbelles) is known for her passion for the arts and children. The Carolina Snowbelles launched 3 years ago due to her active participation in the lives of these young dancers. One of The Carolina Snowbelle's favorite annual performance is for Karyn in front of her store at South Marke, Serves You Right in Blowing Rock during the Christmas parade.



Karyn Herterich was crying with joy as the Snowbelles showed their gratitude

lem, New York, Paris, Orlando, all over the world."

Styles of dance vary according to the culture and interests of the dancers who participate in the events. Cheryl elaborated, "In Southeast Asia, most of the dancers are men, and they do a type of street dance. In Sydney, Australia, ballet is very big. In South America, they dance for life. In Israel, they actually have a Minister of Dance, who oversees dance. It has been amazing to see how dance works in different cultures."

"Dance is beautiful, powerful, and transcends any language," Cheryl concluded. "It is unifying, and doesn't require words to express a message. That is what gets me out of bed every morning, to be a part of that." ♦



The Snowbelles do their part for the Blowing Rock Christmas Parade Nov. 25

