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'Once a Rockette, always a Rockette': Marlene Boll, local alumnae to celebrate 100 years at Radio City

Erica Hobbs Special to The Detroit News

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When 92-year-old Grosse Pointe Shores resident and philanthropist Marlene Boll was invited to audition for the Radio City Rockettes in 1951, she was hesitant.

At 18, she was a professional dancer with steady jobs on “The Ed Sullivan Show” and as a touring summer dancer with Roxyette — a similar role to a Rockette — which helped support her widowed, single mother. But upon her friend’s insistence, she auditioned for the Rockettes’ founder and director, Russell Markert, and was offered a job on the spot, with only a few days’ notice to start.

“(Markert) said, ‘If you want to be a Rockette, you be here Thursday morning,’” Boll said.

And with that, Boll quit her two-year job on “The Ed Sullivan Show” and embarked on a three-year tenure as a Radio City Rockette, which would become some of the most memorable years of her life.

As the Rockettes celebrate their centennial this year, Boll and a group of other former Rockettes in Metro Detroit are planning a visit to New York City this week. The women will join decades of other Rockettes from across the country Nov. 19-22 for a private reunion with options that include a reception, gala, brunch and opportunities to revisit the legendary precision dance Christmas show.

The Rockettes — which opened their 100th season on Nov. 6 — originated in St. Louis in 1925 as the "Missouri Rockets." They relocated to New York City in 1927 and settled in their home at Radio City Music Hall in 1932, where they became known as the Rockettes. They have since become the longest-running precision dance company in the United States, performing for more than one million people annually during their "Christmas Spectacular Starring the Radio City Rockettes." The elite dance group is known for its precision dance technique that combines jazz, ballet, and tap, as well as its iconic eye-high kick lines.

"To be part of a legacy like the Rockettes will always be one of the achievements I'm most proud of as a dancer," said Northville resident Bethany Trailer, 41, who performed with the Rockettes from 2010-15.

Trailer, who followed in the footsteps of her older sister, Emily Blanchard, was one of six local Rockette alumnae who joined Boll in her home on Oct. 27 for a mini-reunion. The group included Grosse Pointe Woods resident and Sterling Heights native Cori Callahan (1997-2004), Pleasant Ridge resident and Clarkston native Denise Caston-Clark (1997-2007), South Lyon resident and Livonia native Audrie Jeffords (2000-01, 2005-07), South Lyon resident and Dearborn native Gretchen Kyte (1997-2008) and Birmingham resident and Rochester native Ali Woerner (1999-2004), who are only a handful of local dancers who have graced Radio City Music Hall over the years.

Over tea sandwiches and sparkling wine, the women reminisced over their experiences during their times as Rockettes, exchanging stories of misbehaving livestock, wardrobe mishaps, missing props, recurring

performance anxiety nightmares, epic romances and the shared pride and joy of being part of one of the most legendary dance groups in the world.

“I hold the five years I performed as a Rockette very close to my heart,” Jeffords said. “I will cherish those memories for the rest of my life.”

Boll, originally from Roselle, New Jersey, about an hour outside of New York City, met her husband, John Boll, in 1951 during her time as a dancer through a chance encounter. She was 18 and on tour as a Roxyette dancer at the time, associated with the now-closed Roxy Theatre in New York City.

While performing at the North Carolina State Fair, she and a few fellow dancers missed the bus to get back and were waiting at the bus stop.

John Boll, who passed in 2022, was a 20-year-old Army corporal from St. Clair Shores stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and happened to be driving by. When he found the girls stranded, he offered them a ride, kicking out his friends and fellow passengers in his powder blue Ford Mercury to make room.

“I didn’t look at him at all (during the drive),” Boll said. “It was too much for me.”

The girls offered John Boll and his friends tickets to the show as a thank you. John Boll was smitten right away, and with that, the two began a long-distance courtship between New York City and North Carolina, with John Boll crossing state lines on a regular basis to see his sweetheart perform as both a Roxyette and eventually a Rockette.

“On his day off, he would always come and see the show, and he always had a little white hanky,” Boll said.

Some of the other women found romance during their time as Rockettes as well. Callahan, 47, met her husband when he worked as an usher for the show while she was performing on Mackinac Island. Kyte, 47, said her husband used to wear a Santa hat to her shows so she could find him in the audience.

“We still have the exact hat, and he wears it throughout the holiday season,” she said.

The show’s signature “Living Nativity” scene — featuring live animals — was also the source of some memorable stories. Caston-Clark, 48, remembered an unruly sheep dragging her off stage, Kyte remembered a sheep that went into labor during the show, giving birth in the theater shortly after.

“We finished the rest of the season with adorable little lambs to visit in the animal tents,” she said.

Woerner, 48, said one of her fondest memories as a Rockette was of a heavily pregnant woman seated in the first row of the audience. She watched the woman’s reaction as the baby apparently kicked in time to the music, grabbing her husband’s hand to place on her stomach to show him.

“The legacy of Radio City, of the Rockettes, was now in that woman’s birth story,” she said. “She’ll remember that forever, but I’ll remember that forever. That was over 20 years ago, and I still remember how meaningful that was.”

The women remembered the grueling hours, the day-long rehearsals six days a week and then performing the 90-minute show up to five times a day. But they also remembered the magic, the glamour and the special experience of what Woerner described as someone’s “Christmas present.”

“There was so much teamwork and precision that went into rehearsing the show, but when the curtain would rise and we’d hear the cheers of the audience, the feeling was indescribable,” Kyte said. “We were part of

something so glamorous and iconic, and it felt so magical and exhilarating.”

Callahan remembered being asked for her autograph by young dancers outside the stage door.

“Radio City makes you feel like a true star,” she said. “It was almost surreal.”

Many of the women credited the Rockettes’ long legacy with the company’s ability to maintain its iconic precision dance style and traditions throughout the decades, including its classic "Parade of the Wooden Soldiers” routine and its “Living Nativity.”

“This is a (performance) style that can never be watered down,” Callahan said. “Because of this dedication to the craft, it has stood the test of time.”

But the company has also evolved with the times, embracing diversity among its dancers and improving their working conditions. Boll said the show required her to wear light-colored nylons after she returned from her honeymoon with a tan. It was 1985 when the Rockettes hired their first non-White dancer, Japanese-born Setsuko Maruhashi, and 1987 when Jennifer Jones became the show’s first Black dancer.

Woerner remembered when they changed the rules to allow the women to wear dance sneakers for the second half of rehearsals, so they didn’t have to dance in heels all day. Treatment of the dancers is also more forgiving.

In her time, Boll said, mistakes were not tolerated.

“If you messed up, you weren’t in the next day,” she said. “They'd put someone in your place.”

Caston-Clark, however, said the company was much more patient with her when she was slow to pick up choreography her first year.

“I stayed after rehearsal for an hour by myself just with the director and the dance captain and the rehearsal pianist,” she said. “That experience also really shaped me, because they believed in me, they saw that I had it inside me to accomplish it.”

Post-Rockettes, many of the women went on to continue successful careers in dance and other endeavors, including stints with professional dance companies, touring shows, cruise ships, national commercials and grand Las Vegas productions. Most now pass on their dance training to the next generation as teachers in some capacity, including owning their own companies and studios.

“Put a bunch of type A, high caliber women in a room, and you’re going to get stuff done …” Woerner said. “I’m certain any Rockette that you talk to that is no longer in the line is doing something pretty fantastic.”

Boll left the Rockettes in 1954 to move to Roseville with her now-husband, John Boll. She taught dance from their home and began choreographing for local high schools. She said she also formed and coached the Lake View High School Huskettes Dance Team in St. Clair Shores. John Boll would go on to find success in real estate development and manufactured housing, and the couple became devoted to philanthropy, establishing the John A. and Marlene L. Boll Foundation and Detroit’s Boll Family YMCA.

Woerner is the founder and artistic director of the internationally performing Take Root modern dance company, and both she and Caston-Cark teach dance at Oakland University. Caston-Clark and Callahan own local dance studios, Tap Dance Detroit and Mack Avenue Dance Center, respectively, and Trailer works for a national dance competition. Kyte offers private dance coaching and workshops and owns Gretchen Noelle Photography, which specializes in dance portraits, headshots and family photography.

For Jeffords — who was 1999's Miss Michigan America — becoming a Rockette completely changed her career path. With the original goal of becoming a lawyer and eventually a judge, she left Pepperdine University's law school after her third week, after receiving a call to become a Rockette.

"I couldn't turn down this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I don't ever regret my decision," she said.

Jeffords went on to dance with the famed Siegfried & Roy magic show and with illusionist Rick Thomas in Las Vegas and now works as a regional product trainer for BMW of North America.

The women said the discipline and work ethic developed during their time with the Rockettes contributed significantly to their success.

"Being a Rockette has shaped everything about how I approach my life and work — attention to detail, professionalism and perseverance," Kyte said. "It gave me confidence and a deep respect for the art of collaboration. Those lessons continue to influence how I teach dancers, create choreography and even how I approach my photography today. I strive to do everything with excellence."

While it's been many years — even decades — since the women took their place in the line, they described their experience as being part of a sisterhood that will be with them forever.

"Once a Rockette," Boll said, "always a Rockette."