

AMHA President Bentolila presented with Key to Town



Long-time Aurora Minor Hockey Association President Joe Bentolila has skated his last shift as the Town's hockey boss and hundreds showed up on Friday night at the ACC to show their appreciation.

Bentolila, who is stepping down from his leadership role after 25 inspirational years at the helm, was shocked by the turnout and felt 'totally humbled' so many people are here that I love seeing.

'My heart's full tonight,' he said. 'These are the faces of the people I've known for so long' then all of a sudden, I realize that so many were kids who played in the organization and now are parents and coaches in roles of responsibility.'

The affable administrator disclosed his principal aim as leader of the AMHA: 'My goal was to see kids smiling when they came off the ice. I always maintained with the coaches that their success would not be measured by just wins and losses' it's how we maintain and retain our players that really counts and what kind of positive energy we bring to the rink for the kids.'

When President Bentolila was asked about the secret to his stunning longevity as a high-profile sports leader in a hockey-mad town, he humbly noted, 'I always had a vision where we created an environment for kids who would enjoy playing the game they love. It was up to us as the adults to provide life lessons in a supportive environment, especially for kids that might have been cut from a rep or select team and had to cope with that perceived failure. It was up to us to make sure players in those situations were let down gently and supported.'

Well-wishers supported and surrounded Joe throughout our interview and their genuine love for this sports executive was evident.

Hundreds bid Bentolila pleasant goodbyes and thanks for twenty-five years of dedicated work.

Prominent among the well-wishers was Mayor Tom Mrakas who presented Bentolila with the Key to the Town.

The outgoing President said he was moved by Mayor Mrakas's gesture.

'I got this overwhelming feeling and said to myself, 'Oh my God, there is so much love in the room tonight.' It made me feel good that I've managed to touch lives in the community in a positive way on this journey. When the Mayor gave me the key, I felt a deep feeling of satisfaction and gratitude. I didn't work at this for the accolades, but when the Mayor presented me the key' and I know it's coming from a person who is a big advocate for youth sports' it was a great feeling.'

One of the best anecdotes shared at Joe Bentolila's reception was the AMHA providing a home for one of the greatest players currently playing in the NHL.

Bentolila regaled us with the tale: 'Connor McDavid was six-years-old and wasn't permitted to play rep in Newmarket. His father, Brian, called me to explain the predicament and I mentioned on the phone, 'Let's have a look at him.' I took one look and said he's too good to play with our 7Us. He's too good to play for 8Us, too. We settled on having Connor play with the 9Us and all I could think was 'We're going to see this kid again somewhere down the line.'

To acknowledge how his famous son was accommodated in Aurora to start his rep career, Brian McDavid presented Bentolila with a framed Connor McDavid Edmonton Oiler jersey, including a personal thank you note under glass from the superstar: 'Just wanted to congratulate you on your 25 years of service to the hockey community of Aurora, from all the players who have played in the Aurora Minor Hockey Association myself included, we thank you for all your great work and service you have provided to the community. Wishing you the best in your retirement from the AMHA. Celebrating a job well done!'

Echoing McDavid's long-distance celebratory sentiments was incoming AMHA President Corby Saltzman.

'We're celebrating Joe tonight. We've been planning the party since February. He's a guy that deserves a truly great send off and we were so happy that it was a complete surprise for Joe.'

When asked about the quality that he admired most in Joe Bentolila, Saltzman offered me a concise response: 'His honesty? Joe always tells it like it is. He also had a way of keeping things in perspective and in times of stress, he showed his empathy for parents, players, and coaches who might be having a difficult time. He was an expert on turning down the temperature in the room and understanding people.'

The incoming President also maintained that the 'Executive that Joe has built is such a strength to build from.'

'No one is successful without a great supporting cast. Like Joe, I'll have to lead by example. The Executive is filled with good listeners and they want to be the best models for the community. Hockey is a vital part of the fabric of this community.'

Hockey is, indeed, a vital part of the fabric of our community and Aurora is a better town to live in due to Joe Bentolila's 25 years of dedicated, steady, and honest leadership.

By Jim Stewart