

How One Man Inspired a Generation of Female Hockey Players The Simple yet Powerful Gesture They Made to Honour his Memory



By Brendan Osborne

After more than 20 years as a volunteer with the Ontario Women's Hockey Association, there's one phrase that will continue to resonate with the players Mike Shields came into contact with; ?Mike was a Rockstar.?

Following his sudden passing in September of 2017, it's a phrase that will surely echo within the rafter's of hockey areas throughout Southern Ontario for years to come.

Former OWHA member Meaghan Tracey will never forget the impact Mike had not only on the game but her as an individual. ?Mike was the exception, not the rule. I don't know if there will ever be someone whose impact has meant so much to so many people. His motivations to see female hockey succeed were so genuine.?

Working mostly with the Central York Girls Hockey Association and Aurora Panthers, Mike was an extremely vocal advocate for the growth of the female game. He's one of the main reasons for the strength of the Central York women's hockey program, which is now one of the strongest in the province.

?I think he set a very important example that it's more than just hockey for girls. He created a space for us to thrive and enjoy the game as well as opportunities for the league to grow. It always seemed to be about fun, even in the more competitive moments,? says former OWHA member Brittany Shroud.

Mike wasn't interested in following the norms or sticking to the predetermined game plan. He was passionate about inspiring those around him in a unique way that reached far beyond the ice surface. He didn't spend his time on a soapbox yelling for the world to hear, he battled through the noise and politics and let his actions do the talking.

?It's not often you find someone who is so personable and kind and well-liked and who is also able to affect change and make sure he gets his way,? explains Sarah Machin. ?Mike's way always benefited us girls when it came to ice time, tournament priority and funding.

?Because of him the league is stronger than ever,? says Tracey. ?His support of the house league level was unprecedented and so important to the growth of female hockey everywhere. Mike created a culture where everyone was important, no matter the skill level and no matter the gender.?

With a smile that would light up the room and a memorable laugh that filled an entire arena, every single player who came into contact with Mike has a funny or inspirational memory to share. Including his knack for coming up with unique nicknames and always encouraging fun within the game, even at his own expense.

“He was calling me something more similar to my first and last named combined,” says Stroud, “but I thought he started calling me Beef Stew. Of course he immediately laughed and decided that Beef Stew or Stewie was a much better nickname than what he had initially said, so it stuck. 12 years later and my teammates still call me Stu/Stewie.”

For Machin it was an impromptu dance party that provides one of her best memories. “In the final game of a tournament Mike insisted we all stand at centre ice and do an on-ice dance (reminiscent of the Macarena) while he danced along with us in the stands. That was Mike, he was proud of us and he always prioritized fun as number 1,” she says.

A Powerful Gesture to Honour Mike's Memory

Following his passing, a group of players, who were inspired by Mike throughout their hockey journey, came together to raise funds in support of his legacy and helping to create a positive future for female hockey players across Canada. It came in the form of a donation to the Grindstone Award Foundation Charity.

“When something as tragic as his passing happens, people reach out and support in various ways,” says Liz Stenbridge, a friend of Mike's daughter Brianna. “In this instance, I wanted to do something a little different, something that would address one of his loves, which was getting girls to experience the love of the game.”

The donation will support the Grindstone Award Foundation in providing financial support to female players in need from across Canada. It's a unique charity focused solely on female hockey, which was perfect for Stenbridge.

“It took a while, but I finally came across the Grindstone Awards and it was perfect. I honestly thought there would be an abundance of non profits like this, but there are not. So I was very happy when I read more about their mission,” she says.

“We're thrilled to accept this donation in memory of Mike. His passion for female hockey and his drive and determination embodies the qualities that inspired us to create this charity. If this grant supports just one female in her hockey journey I think he would be extremely proud,” says Grindstone Award Foundation CEO, Danielle Grundy.

Although she never had the pleasure of meeting Mike, Stenbridge has heard many wonderful stories from Brianna about the impact he had on the game. She can't help but wonder what it would have meant for her own hockey journey to have such a strong mentor and advocate like Mike.

“When I was a little girl, I wanted to play hockey. I was told no. Hockey was for boys. I was shipped off to figure skating which I loathed but excelled in because I wanted to skate. The minute I was old enough I quit. At that point I still wasn't encouraged to join a hockey league. That's where I wish I had a Mike. He was the one who would have been my advocate. Being a female in sport still has its hurdles. Sure it has come a long way...but not far enough. If for every girl who wanted to play hockey, there was a Mike...imagine where we could be??”

For those involved with female hockey and the Grindstone Award Foundation, the focus is on continuing to create positive opportunities for females in hockey and providing an inclusive environment for all genders and ages.

To learn more about the Charity and support the positive impact they're creating within female hockey across Canada, visit www.grindstoneaward.com or visit them on Facebook or Instagram.