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**'Treehouse Mike' Racicot
1980-2018**

For the full story, see pages 8-9

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'Treehouse Mike' Racicot lived life in the moment

BY JEFF MORRIS

As we celebrate our 30th Anniversary, the Barrhaven Independent will be featuring 30 people who have played a prominent role in building and shaping our community from the time we were a sleepy little suburb in 1990 to the thriving city of more than 100,000 we are now.

In this issue, we are featuring 'Treehouse Mike' Racicot. From lobbying council to build a skatepark in Barrhaven as a youth, to teaching and encouraging a generation of Barrhaven skaters, Mike Racicot dared to live the life the rest of us could only dream of.

The two simple words tattooed on Mike Racicot's wrist defined him.

"Enjoy life."

Nobody enjoyed life, or lived in the moment more than the man who became known as Treehouse Mike.

"He lived life in the moment," said his sister, Rachel Polite. "Some



people have a bucket list or maybe something that they would really like to do someday. When Mike had an idea like that, he would do it." From hobbies such as beekeeping and harvesting his own "Backyard Gold" honey, making homemade blackberry jam and cookies, to volunteering for the Squamish Search and Rescue, and raising money for local charities, there was nothing that Mike had on the backburner.

Racicot would have turned 40 in the summer. Unfortunately, he passed away during a BASE jump in Switzerland more than two years ago. A BASE jump is a skydiving jump off a fixed object, such

as a cliff, a mountain or a tower. His last jump was his 969th jump. He had become one of the best and most well-known BASE jumpers in the world.

The Racicot family moved to Barrhaven from Arnprior when Mike was a child. He was a likeable kid who became everyone's friend. At the age of 10, his father registered him to try out for the Nepean Redskins (now Nepean Eagles) Tyke football team. He didn't last long in football, as he didn't like to hit other kids.

But the one thing he loved, more than anything, was skateboarding.

"Long before he was Treehouse Mike, he was Skater Mike," Polite said of her younger brother. "Everyone knew him."

Racicot was not a strong student, but he was a kid who made an impact on his teachers. He was likeable, and his enthusiasm for life and his big smile were infectious. Teachers knew that even though he was not the smartest kid or the best student in the class, there was something special about him.

Racicot's mother would often take him to Manotick as a kid. Manotick-area teenage entrepreneur Trevor Alguire had successfully lobbied Rideau Township to build a small skateboard park at Centennial Park by the arena in Manotick. Alguire started his company, On Deck Skate Shop, the same year. Mike was a regular customer at On Deck, and looked up to its owner.

Before long, Racicot found himself following in Alguire's footsteps as a teen lobbyist. He organized a petition and made an impressive case to council for a skateboard park in Barrhaven.

"I remember when he was a kid and he approached us," Councillor Jan Harder said recently. "He was very passionate about it, and that made

an impact on us. He is the one who really got the ball rolling for a skateboard park in Barrhaven."

The first Barrhaven skatepark was in the Walter Baker Centre parking lot. Racicot and his friends were fixtures there. He was already an accomplished skater. He spent countless hours helping younger skaters or beginners, teaching them, encouraging them, and helping them.

In addition to being an accomplished skateboarder and teacher, Racicot and his friend, Adam Myers, started a graffiti collective called the DBS Crew. They became well-known throughout the city.

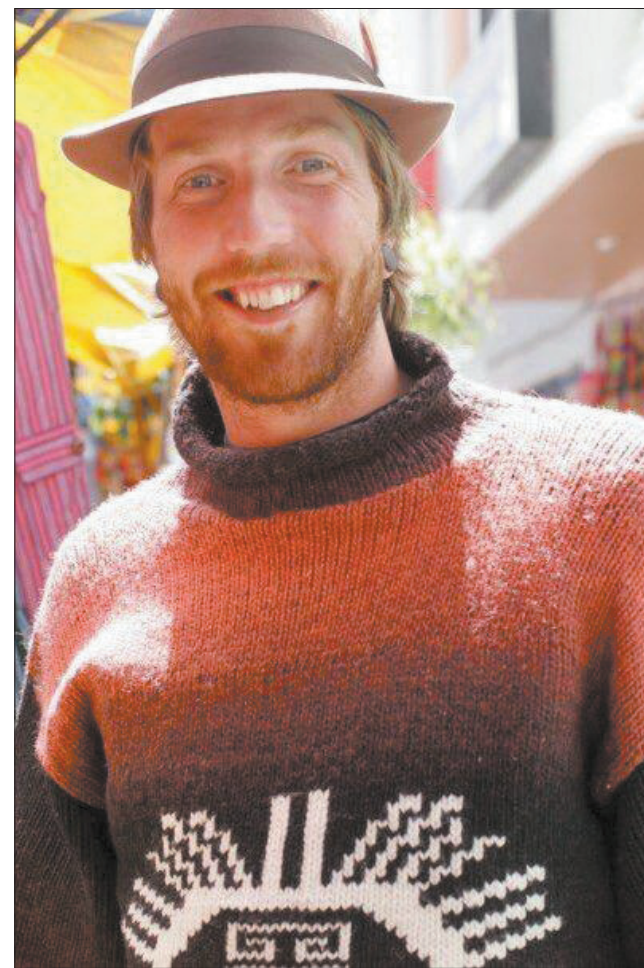
"Everyone in Barrhaven seemed to know Mike," Polite said. "And even everywhere else in the city they knew him. It didn't matter what part of Ottawa I was in. If I saw a kid with a skateboard, as soon as I told them my brother was Skater Mike from Barrhaven, they would get excited and say they knew him."

As much as he loved skateboarding, he also loved jumping off things. He would jump off the roof of his house and local buildings, and do flips into a big bank of snow. He would jump off bridges, like Burnstown, into the water. For his 18th birthday, his parents got him a skydiving session. They took him to Arnprior along with his buddy Myers, and he took his first jump.

From there, he was hooked.

Racicot went to college for a year in Lindsay, but did not go back for a second year. Although he was not successful in the classroom, he was successful when it came to carpentry and building things.

After many trips back and forth to BC, Racicot headed west permanently at the age of 23, on one of the most unusual road



'Treehouse Mike' Racicot was known more for his kind heart and willingness to help others than he was for his world class BASE jumping abilities.

(PHOTOS SUBMITTED BY RAE POLITE)

trips ever seen in the history of the Canadian highway system. He packed up his belongings, skateboard and all, and got on his 80cc Yamaha scooter. Weighed down by his personal effects, he could only go 60 km per hour on the highway and 40 uphill. Mike laughed about the amount of people who flipped the bird while racing past him. He swallowed several bugs through the prairies without a windshield, but that changed in Calgary when a local mechanic spotted his Ontario license plates in the parking lot of a Tim Horton's, and had to go inside to meet the person who had actually made it that far. After making a great impression on the friendly stranger, he invited Mike to stay at his house for a few days so he could fashion a windshield from plexiglass to

help for the final leg of his trip. Coincidentally, that mechanic was also a skateboarder, and the two enjoyed much of their time together at a local skatepark.

After a month on the road, camping out each night, Racicot reached his destination, the beautiful town of Whistler. Lured originally by the easy-going snowboarding life.

Racicot took some odd jobs – he worked in a grocery store, at a ski hill and as an adventure tour guide – in the Whistler area, but was shocked at the cost of housing and accommodations on the west coast. He even rented someone's utility closet to live in for a while, but it was still too much.

That's when the legend of Treehouse Mike was born.

RACIOT
continues on page 9



As a kid, Mike Racicot became one of Barrhaven's most accomplished skateboarders.

RACIOT continues from page 8

Racicot gathered scrap lumber from construction sites, and built a treehouse along the side of a cliff on Blackcomb Mountain in Whistler. He had enough room for a small bed made of rigid insulation, and stacked milk crates for his clothing. The treehouse was covered with a big, green tarp, complete with slash marks from bears. He had a small grill that he could cook food with outside.

Throughout the community, Racicot had friends working at local hotels. He was able to go into a room as it was being cleaned, take a quick shower, and grab some food at the free continental breakfast.

While on the west coast, it was not long before Racicot's passion for skydiving and extreme sports, introduced him to the world of BASE jumping. He immediately embraced the lifestyle and culture of the sport, and much like skateboarding, he excelled immediately.

"Mike was the ultimate free spirit, and when he got involved with BASE jumping, he met other people who were just like he was," Polite said. "They were a close group – they lived for the moment, knowing they were risking their lives with every jump. The bond they had was incredible. Mike valued his friendships and

family more than anything, and he really felt like he belonged there."

As Racicot grew as a jumper, he naturally evolved to a teacher and mentor to newer and less-experienced jumpers.

"That's who Mike was," Polite said. "He would do anything for his friends, and he loved to help people and teach people who were as passionate as he was."

Racicot and his adventure seeking friends, travelled the world in search of the best mountains, bridges and towers to jump from. He was in awe of nature, animals and the universe around him. He took advantage of these trips to meet the locals, enjoying the food and culture of every country he visited.

After moving to Squamish, he became a fixture on the Stawamus Chief – a 700-metre high mountain above Howe Sound – hiking to the top and jumping from it a total of 502 times. Known as the Chief of the Chief, Mike would regularly jump several times in a day, and often getting one in before starting work at 6am. He referred to those early morning weekday jumps as "coffee runs." Mike was well known for tobogganing, and skiing off the edge equipped with his parachute. Always looking for a laugh, Mike coordinated a legendary jump dressed as Santa Claus, with his fellow jumpers as elves, reindeer and a penguin thrown in for fun.

In 2016, Racicot had begun occasionally experiencing seizures in high altitudes, after suffering altitude illness at the Wings for Love BASE jumping competition in the mountains of Dashanbao China. Mike's final



'Treehouse Mike' Racicot made close to 1,000 BASE jumps and was considered one of the best BASE jumpers in the world.

jump took place in mountains of Walenstadt Switzerland in July of 2018. During the wingsuit BASE jump, he never pulled his parachute, and it's speculated that he had a seizure mid-air and had already passed before he disappeared into the trees below. Mike passed wearing his well-known "Taco suit" adorned with a giant picture of his beloved Boxer's face. Polite has since used the wingsuit (which was sent to her from the Swiss police) to make mini Mike ornaments, and plans on making a kite so the Taco suit can fly again.

"He died doing what he loved to do," said Polite.

Over the past two years, Racicot has been honoured and celebrated by his friends, with many of the celebrations up on YouTube. As per his wish to have his "ashes put back in the air" and "not sit in a box

on a shelf", his ashes have been scattered by friends on epic "ash jumps" around the world. His ashes have been spread in Alaska, Hawaii, Thailand, Spain, Norway, Russia, Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, China, Switzerland, Germany, France, South Africa, the Bahamas, Mexico, Singapore, Egypt, Greece, Jamaica, Grand Cayman, Malaysia and throughout the United States, and Canada from B.C. to and iceberg in Prince Edward Island. His ashes are in several special spots in Barrhaven, and even imbedded into a tattoo on his sister's arm.

Polite said she misses her brother every day, and says he was the best brother and uncle in the world.

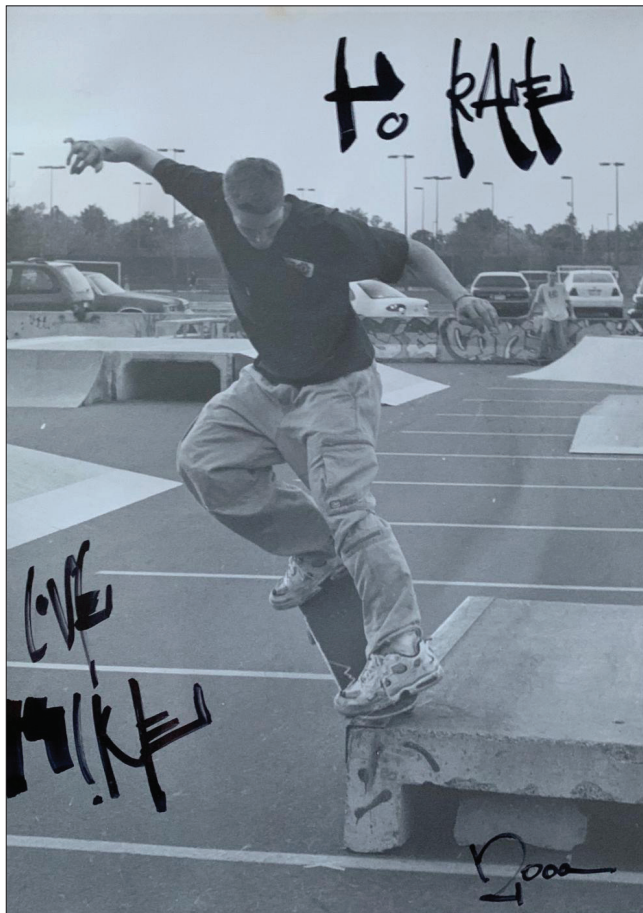
"He was a very special and caring person," she said. "He was always smiling and laughing, but he cared about everyone he loved so

deeply. He was such a great uncle to Riley, Brooke and Charlie, and he always put those he loved ahead of himself. I can honestly say I have never known anyone like him, and I know I never will."

The Polite and Racicot families were honoured in late August when the skatepark in Barrhaven – now located at Greenbank and Berrigan beside the fire station – was renamed the Treehouse Mike Skatepark.

"He would have been humbled and really touched by this," Polite said. "It is also such a beautiful spot. It is a great place to come and remember him. He would love to see how so many kids in the community are enjoying skating and having fun."

The park is a fitting legacy for someone who poured all of himself into making sure others were happy.



As a youth, Mike Racicot lobbied municipal politicians to get a skatepark built in Barrhaven. The original Barrhaven Skatepark was in the parking lot at the Walter Baker Centre.



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Barrhaven Independent 30 years, 30 people: Rowan Stringer

As we celebrate our 30th Anniversary, the Barrhaven Independent will be featuring 30 people who have played a prominent role in building and shaping our community from the time we were a sleepy little suburb in 1990 to the thriving city of more than 100,000 we are now.

In this issue, we are featuring Rowan Stringer. In 2013, Rowan lost her life after suffering a head injury in a rugby game. Part of the larger-than-life legacy she left behind was being the inspiration of Rowan's Law, a concussion awareness piece of legislation that has become known throughout Canada.

Until her family moved, Makayla sat on a bed in Rowan Stringer's old bedroom.

Throughout Rowan's childhood and youth, the little doll never left her side. Makayla remained the emotional centrepiece of the bedroom that was a home within a home for Rowan.

In 2013, Rowan Stringer left for school one morning. She would be playing in a high school rugby game that afternoon. She would be playing with a concussion. Like many rugby players and athletes, playing through an injury meant that you were a warrior. You couldn't possibly let something like a head injury keep you out of the biggest game of the season. After all, she was the captain. What kind of example would she be setting for her teammates



if she sat out? Anyone who has played a contact sport has either been there or has had a buddy who has been there.

Rowan did not want to let her teammates down.

During the game, Rowan was tackled and hit her head on the ground. She sat up for a moment, and then fell back down, unconscious. She was rushed to the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, where she died from something called Second Impact Syndrome. SIS, most common in teens and young adults, is a condition in which a person suffers permanent brain damage or even death if a concussion is suffered while the brain is healing from another concussion.

Rowan has now become the poster girl for Concussion Awareness in Ontario. Her legacy, however, extends far beyond a piece of legislation proposed by a jury in the inquest into her death. Her legacy is what her life was always about – helping and caring for people.

"Rowan is sort of an unusual name," said her mother, Kathleen Stringer, "and we're hoping that when her name comes up people will associate it with a sad

story, but also one that will help a lot of children and a lot of people in the future. We hope Rowan's name will change the culture of sport."

Rowan was named after a Dr. Rowan Mayfair, a character in Anne Rice's novel, *The Witching Hour*. Ironically, Dr. Rowan Mayfair was a neurosurgeon. Rowan Stringer, meanwhile, was loyal and friendly and an absolute role model for her schoolmates, particularly the younger ones, at John McCrae Secondary School. She was about to graduate from high school and go to college to study nursing.

"She just loved caring for people," her father, Gordon said with a smile.

That, in itself, was the beautiful complexity of Rowan Stringer. Rowan the rugby player was a fierce competitor and the ultimate teammate. But Rowan the young girl was empathetic and compassionate. She loved being a peer leader at McCrae. She loved to meet the younger students at her school and make them feel welcomed and comfortable in their new and intimidating environment. She brought with her an aura of warmth that was infectious and held define her school's culture while she was there. She could always make anyone laugh and smile. She genuinely cared about everyone, and she had a particular soft spot for children.

"She just loved children, from the day she was born," Kathleen said. Makayla was an extension of that love for children. "She took Maka-



Rowan Stringer, shown with the ball, played rugby for the Barrhaven Scottish as well as at John McCrae Secondary School.

yla everywhere with her. And everyone knew about Rowan and Makayla, her doll. I can remember when she was in Grade 3 or 4 and I said maybe you shouldn't take Makayla to school anymore, but it was so cute because she was young at heart and innocent and she just loved taking care of things."

It was tough for Gordon and Kathleen to sit in a courtroom in Ottawa and go through the painful details of the 2015 inquest into their daughter's death. There were some revelations that surprised them, some details that frustrated them, and some emotional wounds that were pried open. Going through the process made them cry and lose sleep at nights. But they soldiered through it all, just as Rowan would have, because they knew that

this inquest might help the next Rowan Stringer from suffering the same fate.

"She would be proud of us for all the hard work we've done in her honour and legacy," her father, Gordon, said. "She knows everything we do is for her."

The first recommendation of the inquest was Rowan's Law, which would provide a template for reporting and managing concussions in the classroom, on the playgrounds, and in sports. Gordon and Kathleen are honoured that their daughter inspired this proposed piece of Legislation.

"Someday we'll get to the point where it is a normal thing for them, that they have each other's back and that they report injury and that it's actually stronger to own up to something than try to be tough and

play through something that could potentially be very harmful," Kathleen said.

The Stringers became advocates for concussion awareness and watched Rowan's Law become a reality. In fact, it has been perhaps the most important piece of legislation affecting youth sports in Canadian history. They are driven and inspired, yet open and compassionate. Maybe Rowan got these qualities from them. Or, maybe, they got some of these qualities from their daughter.

Probably both.

"Nothing would make her happier than to find out she was helping all of the children by bringing in Rowan's Law," Kathleen said.

And while Makayla sits in a new room now, you can bet that she would be smiling, too.

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The 17-year-old captain of John McCrae High School's rugby team, died from Second Impact Syndrome, which is swelling of the brain caused by a subsequent injury that occurred before a previous injury healed.

Soon after her passing, her parents Gord and Kathleen Stringer decided to open up about their daughters death to raise awareness on concussions. An inquest was held after her passing which brought forward 49 recommendations centred on keeping athletes away from playing after having a concussion.

Last year the day was recognized with a series of events, including with a concussion awareness symposium held at Mother Teresa High School. It featured a panel of well-known athletes including: Eric Lindros, Andy Fantuz, and Kalley Armstrong. The students had the opportunity to hear about how they started out in their selective sports careers, and how they overcame concussion injuries.

This year MacLeod has also announced \$25,000 will be allotted to ensuring rural communities receive support on brain injury awareness. Another \$200,000 is being invested into a documentary about Rowan and her story.

"We need to bring Rowan's story to all young athletes," MacLeod announced in another speech on September 30. "It's

important to me as minister of heritage, sport, tourism and culture industries, to really showcase that Ontario is the safest place to engage in sports."

Ontario was supposed to hold the Canada Games in 2021, an opportunity for athletes from all regions of this country to represent their provinces; However due to COVID-19, the games will now be held in 2022. MacLeod says when they do take place in the Niagara region, it will be the first time every Canadian athlete will have to adhere to concussion legislation.

Tim Fleizer, the first football player in Canadian football league history to win four Grey Cup championships with four different teams, is now a member of the Concussion Legacy Foundation of Canada. He says the work being done with con-

cussion awareness now will be felt for generations to come.

"When future generations consider how the concussion crisis was addressed here in Canada, the main events happened here on this field," said Fleizer from Rowan's Pitch inside Ken Ross Park.

"The progress will be traced to Rowan Stringer's legacy; Gord, Cathy and Cassie's advocacy, and Minister MacLeod's leadership in driving legislation that has made things safer for children across the province," he added.

MacLeod ended by saying it's amazing how something which started as a private member's bill only a few years ago has turned into a national debate circling around a local Barrhaven teen who is now leaving an everlasting legacy.

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