

Memories of Mike Elrick

By John Sandlos

The first time I met Mike was in the winter of 1989 at my job interview for a senior staff position at Camp Kitchikewana. I was suffering at the time from what developed into a severe case of mononucleosis, so I wasn't really in any state to put a lot of thought into the interview. As I sat nearly comatose in the Midland YMCA, my mom propping me up on her shoulder, Mike came bursting out of his office and gave me one of his huge trademark handshakes. It struck me that he had a lot more energy than I did. Indeed, with the big grin and eager look on his face, I thought he had more energy than most people I had met in my brief 18 years of experience.

I stumbled into the interview room. Mike started off talking a bit about his journey toward becoming the director of Kitchi. I learned he was a kayaker and avid camper, and had recently completed the Queen's Outdoor and Experiential Education program. Hmm, I thought, we had just read Henry David Thoreau in my high school's Modern Western Civilization class; maybe I ought to try that angle. "Have you read Thoreau?" I said. "You know," I continued "the guy who goes out in the woods to live in a cabin and grow beans." Mike answered, "Henry David Thoreau has been a huge influence on outdoor and experiential educators."

Bingo! We spent the rest of the interview talking about *Walden*. To someone who did not know Mike, this might seem strange. What about my swimming qualifications? What did I know about camp programming? Had I taken first aid? Mike, however, was one of those rare people who can become totally immersed and interested in the passions of another person. He saw that I was excited about something, and to him the essence of a person was more important than the details. He always had a way of bringing out the best in people in word and deed.

Mike carried his own passion for outdoor education into his work at Kitchi. The camp



had always had a focus on outdoor recreation, with strong boating and swimming programs. Mike showed his staff that we could do more, using the Kitchi site as a staging ground for children to encounter the natural world in profound and meaningful ways. Many of the staff had likely never heard of outdoor or environmental education, but Mike showed us that a canoe trip, a campfire, or a hike was more than mere fun; each could connect campers to nature in powerful and sometimes indescribable ways. Through his leadership and inspiration, Mike laid the groundwork for the environmental education focus that continues as a critical part of the Kitchi program to this day.

Mike instituted other important changes as director of Kitchi. Two stick out in my mind: He worked to make the camp more accessible to special needs children. He also started to develop the camp's relationship with the staff at Georgian Bay Islands National Park, enhancing an educational partnership with the park's staff that opened campers and staff to the fact that Kitchi was located in one of Canada's unique and very special protected areas.

I feel extremely fortunate to have worked for Mike in the two years that he was director

of Kitchi. His seemingly endless supply of positive energy inspired me time and time again. I remember on a staff canoe trip when he woke me up one morning playing “Born to be Wild” (get your motor running!) on a beat up tripping guitar. I wanted to be mad, but all I could do was grin as I pulled myself out of my sleeping bag into a cold spring morning. On the same trip another staff member, Mike Walton, and I were paddling a canoe upstream against a rapid as hard as we could, but not really getting anywhere. All of a sudden, Mike shoots by us paddling solo in a canoe, slipping effortlessly up the eddies to the head of the rapid. “Work with the river,” he said, “never against it.”

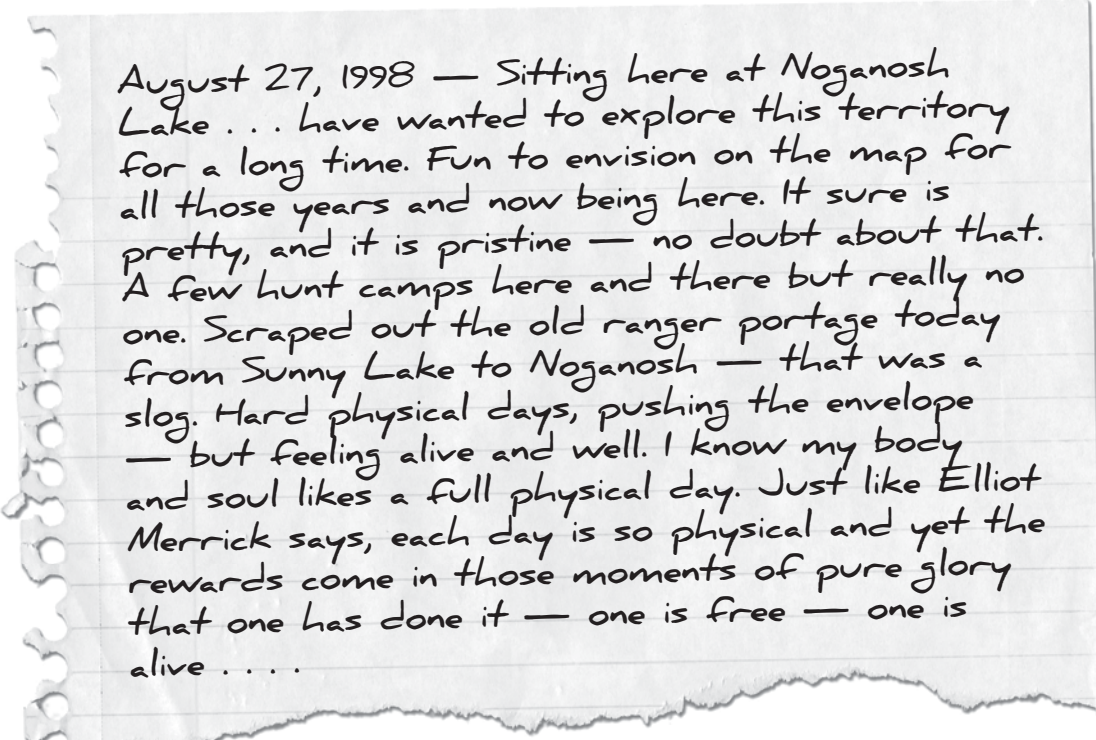
Mike was always working with the river. From Kitchi he went on to become one of Canada’s most revered outdoor educators, developing two unique environmental leadership programs for Guelph students. Not only did Mike continue to pursue the outdoor education ideal of taking students out on canoe and camping trips, but he also taught his students about critical urban environmental issues such as energy use, urban transportation and waste disposal.

I chose a slightly different path, turning away from experiential education and instead

pursuing my love for environmental ideas and history through a seemingly endless stint at graduate school. When I was finishing my PhD thesis in Guelph in 2003/2004, I remember riding my bike to the library one day and encountering Mike’s entire class going the other way on bicycles to visit the city’s compost and recycling facility. We all stopped and chatted for a bit, that same energy flowing out of Mike as when I first met him. Then I rode off to my books, and he toward another important experiential learning moment for his students. We had taken two streams, I thought, but I hoped we were working with the same river.

Since Mike’s passing, I have been thinking about how much of him, particularly his interests in the environment and education, had flowed into me. Then I thought, multiply that influence many times over, as Mike touched dozens of other Kitchi staff and campers, and hundreds of high school students in the course of his distinguished career. Mike was a river. Mike was the headwaters. Mike flowed into each of us and lives on in everyone he touched.

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August 27, 1998 — Sitting here at Noganosh Lake . . . have wanted to explore this territory for a long time. Fun to envision on the map for all those years and now being here. It sure is pretty, and it is pristine — no doubt about that. A few hunt camps here and there but really no one. Scraped out the old ranger portage today from Sunny Lake to Noganosh — that was a slog. Hard physical days, pushing the envelope — but feeling alive and well. I know my body and soul likes a full physical day. Just like Elliot Merrick says, each day is so physical and yet the rewards come in those moments of pure glory that one has done it — one is free — one is alive