

## Remembering Mike at MacArthur

By Bert Horwood and James Raffan

In the heyday of the Outdoor and Experiential Education (OEE) Cooperative Program at Queen's University, there were often seven or eight highly qualified applicants for every 24 vacancies. All talented folk, they have gone on to grow experiential education in its many forms, in schools and beyond the bounds of the traditional classroom.

But never during our careful selection process, in the ensuing classes, or in the fine works of graduates played out in unlikely corners on every continent did either of us ever imagine honouring any of these bright able people in death. Sadly, the world is not always kind. Tragedy strikes, and never more cuttingly than in the passing of Mike Elrick.

### Bert's Recollections

Mike, like all good teachers, proved early that he had the ability to predict potential problems and also to look back recognizing problems not adequately controlled. He wrestled with these. He worried at them, not in the neurotic sense of worry, but in the sense of thoroughly examining every aspect of the matter. Here are a couple of examples:

Mike's class had discussed using stories in experiential education, especially at night. I argued that night fright stories were not compatible with making people comfortable with the darkness, especially in the bush. We should increase our students' powers, not restrict them, was how the argument went.

That didn't sit well with Mike. He came to my office close to the end of the academic year. He had a job as camp director and was concerned about deeply cherished customs that were part of the camp's culture. The custom involved tales and re-enactments involving a horrible character who was present both in real life and as a ghost. Mike felt that this was getting out of hand and could become harmful.

On the other hand he was aware that staff and senior campers had grown up with the

tradition and would not look kindly on a new director who attempted to suppress the custom. What were the priorities? What was to be done?

Mike and I floated many ideas, to be examined and rejected during the conversation. Some survived for further consideration. No factor was left unexamined. This is what I mean when I characterize Mike's labour as "wrestling." It was the kind of thing that Mike could simply have let alone to take care of itself, or to be handled when and if something bad happened. But Mike saw potential trouble, cared for the best possible experience for his campers and chose to get into the issue, understand it and have a course of action ready.

Mike also knew how to get the best out of his teachers. During our discussion about stories, he put the problem back in my lap. He did not expect me to solve it, but was inviting me to become part of his "wrestling team." Sort of problem-solving by tag team, I guess. That was how Mike worked. Questions, lots of questions; and answers, some answers. The process was enriched with additional voices and enhanced with whiffs of tea and woodsmoke. Mike was a thoughtful guy.

Both Jim and I remember that Mike took a lead role in developing integrated curricula as he brought the Community Environmental Leadership Program (CELP) to life at Centennial High School in Guelph and how, at an event at Bark Lake, he took a lead in grappling with an abiding problem with integration: namely, that if education is integrated it can't properly be evaluated in terms of independent subjects. Evaluation of students' work must surely be compatible with the intentions and delivery pattern of the course. No one had a solution to that problem then, although teachers found ways, some very creative, to bridge the gap or live with the disconnect.

Again, Mike displayed the same thorough and tenacious approach to the issue.

He listened, he thought, he argued, he invited more. He was content, in the end, to leave the question open as there was no clear way out. Yet everyone present felt that we had practiced our profession with care and energy, following Mike's lead.

### Jim's Recollections

My first impression of Mike was by way of a paper he had written for Bob Henderson at McMaster University. Mike had distilled two approaches to life (and winter camping) into one with heat and one without. The paper was about "warm" versus "cold" approaches to camping but it was apparent in the piece that what he was really talking about was something more profound than the temperature of your skin at midnight. "Warm" living and camping was about a life integrated with nature, but "cold" was more detached from the essential processes of life. Meeting him at his interview for OEE at Queen's University, my intrigue grew.

It turned out, when asked about his achievements as an elite kayaker, that Mike had done quite a bit of what Bert calls "wrestling" before he'd even applied to the OEE program. Instead of pursuing a trajectory in sport that would certainly lead to international competition and perhaps even a place on the Olympic team, Mike had decided that what he really wanted to do was, in the language of his essay, teach young people how to live "warm" with nature. I remember being impressed that a man of his age (his early 20s) had made such an intentional life turn.

Since those OEE days, I watched as Mike became the Director of Camp Kitchikwana and then moved on to Centennial Collegiate Vocational Institute. I visited his programs, traveled with him, and joined him at conferences and festivals. In each instance, I was amazed and reassured by his enduring vision and his quiet determination to see that his students would be agents of warmth in a cold, acquisitive and increasingly disconnected world.

But most often, when I talked to Mike, or met his students, or crossed paths with him on the

winter trails of Algonquin Park, I marvelled at the balance he was always able to strike in his work, his home life with Heather and the children, and the totally sustainable (or so it seemed) way in which the whole package came together in one remarkable teacher's life. Often, as people would ask about the secret of integrated teaching or of a life in experiential education, I'd send them to spend time with Mike. He was an example for me, an exemplar for us all.

And now he's gone. Because of the way he created CELP and Headwaters, we have no doubt that in the fine hands of his successors these programs will continue to thrive and evolve. It is his absence, as a presence in the field, that is going to take some coming to terms with. Mike never called for special attention but he commanded a lot of space, a lot of respect, in education and in our hearts. Perhaps the best tribute would be to try to follow his example, which, in itself, is probably a full-time job.

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*Bert Horwood, retired but not retiring, is based in Kingston. James Raffan, adventurer and teacher, keeps one foot in Seeley's Bay and stomps across the globe with the other.*

