

Finding Mike Hughes: A Life Transformed by The Sweet Science

Written by John Nguyen
Tuesday, 28 June 2011 16:22



Mike Hughes was a pretty typical teenage boy. Goofy. Obnoxious. Sophomoric. At times, he seemed terminally so.

I should know. I was Mike's eighth grade English teacher.

To say Mike was a frustrating student to work with is a monumental understatement. He was not particularly motivated, and would rather gain notoriety as the class clown than the class brain, all of which drove me crazy as a young teacher. It wasn't that I disliked Mike. In fact, that was what made things so difficult: I liked him a lot. I saw potential in his underachieving; I saw

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subtle wit in his fart jokes that were absent from those of his peers. In short, I knew he could be something. The trouble was convincing him of the same.

As I finished that school year with Mike, I wasn't sure if I'd see him much after that. I wished nothing but the best for him, hoping that he would someday have his eyes opened to the potential he possessed.

A couple of years went by, and I hadn't heard much from Mike. Then, much to my surprise, he was waiting for me in my classroom after the last day of school of his sophomore year. He had big news.

"Mr. Nguyen, guess what I've started doing," Mike said, with an expectant grin on his face.

Knowing the way Mike used to be, the guesses that came to my mind were varied and disturbing.

"I don't know. What?" I replied, interested.

"Boxing. I just started a couple months ago, and I love it," he told me. He was clearly proud of himself, and seemed eager for me to be as well.

And proud of him I was, but I was even more surprised, for a couple of reasons. First, I was surprised that Mike had gone out of his way to tell me. Surely, he knew I was a fight fan. I have a poster for Tarver-Jones III hanging on my classroom wall, as well as various boxing pictures and memorabilia scattered throughout my classroom. Still, it didn't seem like I had the sort of bond with him that would bring him back after two years to tell me about this new development in his life.

Secondly, Mike just didn't seem like a fighter. The Mike Hughes I remembered was just too spastic, too immature, and too unfocused to ever undertake something like boxing, a sport that demands everything and devours those who give anything less. I couldn't picture him walking into Turner Boxing Club, located in a part of Kansas City known for its less-than-hospitable residents. It just didn't quite seem to add up.

Nevertheless, I was excited for him. Mike had a look in his eyes that I'd never seen before, and I wanted to give him an outlet to share his enthusiasm. We sat and talked that day, about boxing, his goals, and life in general. Considering how unexpected that conversation was, I could never have predicted that it was the beginning of an unlikely friendship that would form, characterized by periodic visits from Mike. Sometimes he would come in to talk about an upcoming tournament and the butterflies that he had about staring down rivals as well as his own fears. Other times he would have a trophy in hand and a beaming smile on his face. There were days when I would check my e-mail and find a message from Mike's mom with links to videos of his fights. After less than a year, Mike won the 2010 Kansas City Regional Golden Gloves in the Novice Welterweight division. It soon became apparent that boxing was not just a passing fad for him.

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It was also apparent that Mike Hughes was no longer the rambunctious, irresponsible teenager he once was.

Reflecting on how boxing has changed him, Mike, who graduated this spring from Piper High School in Kansas City, was direct as to the sport's significance in his maturity.

"It basically changed my whole life. You just sacrifice everything in the gym, taking punches all the time, pushing yourself constantly, going past the bell...it just teaches you a lot about yourself. You just have to find out who you really are."

That sense of identity is something that he did not always have. His past reputation as a prankster was simply a veneer to mask searing insecurities within.

"I was just a scared, lost little kid. I didn't know where I was wanting to go in life. I was always really stressed out and didn't know what I was going to do."

Speaking to him now, that missing sense of self is a long-faded memory. Mike knows what he wants to be and what he hopes to accomplish, and he speaks it with a confidence absent from the ambivalent plans of so many of his peers. That confidence is the type that comes only from a person who has come into their own.

His immediate plans involve joining the U.S. Army, and he hopes that his long-term plans involve boxing.

"In August, I leave for training in Fort Leonardwood, Missouri. After that, I hope boxing will still be there, wherever the army takes me afterward. I'm planning to become a cop, maybe a SWAT officer. I want to get involved with a KCK PAL boxing team and try to coach some young kids. If the Turner club is still around, hopefully I can go back there and help out guys I used to train with and maybe work with some of the new guys," Hughes said.

In a society where young people are usually defined by self-centered entitlement, here is a young man who is anxious to pay it forward, to help others experience the type of transformation that he has undergone.

But let's be honest here. Boxing didn't do for Mike what it has famously done for other fighters. It didn't save him from a life of crime. It didn't keep him from being incarcerated. It didn't turn him from the high likelihood of an early grave. Mike wasn't headed in that direction. He had a caring family, a solid support system, and all of the advantages necessary to get by in life.

But, make no mistake, boxing saved Mike Hughes. It saved him from a life of languishing in mediocrity, never fully realizing what his life could be. It kept him from a life of playing things safe and never testing the outer limits of his potential. It prevented him from living the type of comfortably numb, quietly tragic existence that has come to typify modern society. He now has the purpose and drive to make his life matter, and boxing was undoubtedly a catalyst in achieving that. Boxing bridged the gap of who Mike Hughes is and who he wants to be, a gap that tends to become a chasm as years go by, a gap that most approach apprehensively,

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standing nervously at the precipice, unsure if the span should ever be crossed. Not only has Mike crossed the expanse, he desires to help others make the journey. That, in itself, is nothing short of extraordinary.

As a part-time boxing writer and full-time fight fan, I often am asked why I even bother following the sport. Its detractors have valid, if not winning, arguments. Besides its inherent brutality, boxing quite often is nothing more than a masquerade of mankind's greatest vices: greed, betrayal, narcissism...the list is seemingly infinite.

Since none of those things can really be refuted, my only rational line of argument is to focus on the positive in boxing. It may put on display the evils of man, but it paradoxically extols mankind's virtues as well: perseverance, determination, sacrifice, courage. To an outside observer, the idea of two fighters trying to render each other unconscious is primitive and unbecoming of civil society, but to those who love boxing, there is an honesty in boxing that transcends the extraneous nonsense of the sport. There is something deeply moving about watching an individual confront their fears and insecurities and prevail victorious, reaching a depth of identity that eludes most people their entire lives. In essence, those of us enraptured by the sport of boxing love it not for what it is, but for what it can be.

However, if a skeptic were to ask me today why I love boxing, or to identify the redeeming qualities of such an irredeemable sport, my new response would be far more pragmatic and far less philosophical than before. I would pause, smile, and tell them about Mike Hughes. His story encapsulates everything that I love about The Sweet Science.

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Man,... I love these stories

Randy2104 says:

Inspirational. Thanks for this article. No more to say.