

## Former Central York Panthers forward found her way back to the ice

When Julia Cuccia was away at Brock University studying psychology, there was a lot that was missing. She had no true university experience due to COVID-19, but most of all hockey had seemed like a distant memory and that was something she was ready to change.

"I wasn't sure if I wanted to play. Not even being able to have the chance to play this past year made me realize this is a big part of my life and I didn't want to give it up," Cuccia said.

"And even with my mental health and everything I had to step back and take care of myself before I can go on with hockey and with life. That was really important. My coaches helped me realize that and even Central York, they're all about mental health and speaking up."

The Central York Panthers, who she remained with for most of her young hockey career, officially announced that Cuccia would be joining the USports OUA York University Lions women's hockey team last week.

Cuccia is also changing her program to Criminology, aspiring to become a police officer and detective one day. Now she gets to enjoy both her education and being back on the ice.

With the help of Lions head coach Dan Church and Panthers junior coach Steve Dempsey, this became possible. She says she is excited to join a well-coached program.

"The idea of what they're coaching over there, I really like it. It suits my style as a hockey player and I thought it would be the best fit."

As a young girl, Cuccia began playing hockey after seeing her brothers play. She initially joined the Richmond Hill Stars as the lone girl on the team and immediately enjoyed what it meant to be a part of a team.

Since joining the Central York Panthers organization from minor bantam onward, Cuccia has thrived in the program. She initially played defence until she was moved to play wing in the middle of a tournament and it stuck ever since. She moved up to begin playing junior women's hockey when she was in grade 10 (15-years-old), and played for three seasons.

Playing hockey has developed her both as a player and a person. She was shy, but the sport brought forth her confidence both on the ice and in the real world.

Off the ice, Cuccia has made quite the impact in the local community with the Panthers.

"The association would set up programs for the hockey team and we went to a woman's shelter and we helped out there. It felt unselfish and giving. I would participate in community service and volunteering for younger children's hockey programs. It makes me feel like I'm giving back and helping people. I love to help out and assist the younger generation."

Cuccia is expected to begin in September of this year with York University.

**By Robert Belardi**