

Rugby Club of Aurora Junior Program co-founder Steve Bernardo passes away at 78

The Town of Aurora lost an influential sports figure on Tuesday night when Steve Bernardo passed away peacefully in his home in the presence of family after a long battle with cancer. He was 78.

In 1999, Bernardo co-founded, established, and coached in the Junior Program of the Aurora Rugby Club. He oversaw a significant merger in 2002 when Aurora RFC combined forces with the Toronto Barbarians RFC. The revamped franchise was rebranded as the Aurora Barbarians RFC and has grown into one of the largest and most successful Rugby Football clubs in Ontario.

Bernardo always considered himself an Aurora boy and spent a considerable part of his life living and contributing mightily to the community. He lived in Aurora for nineteen years before departing to study for undergraduate and law degrees at McMaster and Queen's, respectively.

In 1991, Bernardo joined the commuter ranks when he and Gemma moved their family of five to Aurora where he was heavily involved with Canadian Parents for French and coached basketball and rugby.

Bernardo retired from Mathews Dinsdale & Clark in 2020 as the most senior partner in the 80-lawyer specialty law firm.

I was lucky enough to have enjoyed Steve Bernardo's presence as a neighbor. Not only were we Queen's guys, as it turned out, but we were also bound by the charming process of maple syrup production—its arduous collection, its laborious processing, and, ultimately, its tantalizing enjoyment—an apt metaphor for the stages of human experience.

The use of metaphors was at the heart of one of the most amusing conversations I had with Steve. I was pruning my raspberry grove on Storrington Gate when he approached me using an accusatory voice. He stated excitedly: "How dare you elevate the language of The Auroran newspaper by using metaphors on the sports pages!?" I burst out laughing. So did he. To receive this fun-loving compliment about my word choices, as I was embarking on a new career as a journalist, meant so much coming from this silver-tongued orator.

I will miss Steve's fun-loving and supportive nature. He was a brilliant conversationalist. We would trade stories about Queen's and sports, especially rugby. I considered it an honor and a pleasure to have bonded with Steve over the last few years. Our commonly-held values manifested themselves in chats over a libation by the woodstove with the heavenly aroma of maple syrup bubbling on the Sugar Shack's evaporator in Dave Hunt's backyard.

As an Aurora boy, Steve took pleasure in these local activities and was proud that the Barbs were hosting another 60-team Rugby Festival at Sheppard's Bush this weekend to celebrate a sport that he loved.

Steve is survived by his wife of almost 49 years and best friend of almost 50 years, Gemma; his three sons—Matthew (Elizabeth), David (Laura), and Andrew (Jana); and seven grandchildren: Sophia, Rhiannon, Conrad, William, Aubrey, Colin, and Helena. Steve is the son of Clifford (deceased) and Doris (Age 101) Bernardo, and brother of Craig (deceased) and Deborah.

A Celebration of Life ceremony to honor Steve Bernardo will be held on Sunday, July 21 at the Aurora Royal Canadian Legion Branch #385 at 105 Industrial Parkway North from 2-5 p.m. Speeches will start at 3 p.m.

By Jim Stewart