

The Cape Breton Post

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Sydney native honored by adopted home 🇺🇸

GREG MACVICAR

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Gillis Stephenson is shown with his sister, Barbara Meara. Submitted by Judy Stephenson

A Cape Breton native and former player with the Sydney Millionaires has made such an impact in the hockey community of his adopted home in Massachusetts that a volunteer award has been created in his name.

"It's quite an honor," said Gill Stephenson from his residence in Leominster, Mass., where he and his wife, Judy have lived since recently relocating from Concord, Mass., Stephenson's hometown since he moved to the United States in 1962.

The first annual Gillis Stephenson Award was presented this autumn to Richard Sullivan, a long-time volunteer with the learn-to-skate program delivered by Concord-Carlisle Youth Hockey (CCYH).

Stephenson helped form the CCYH in 1972, and volunteered with the program for about 25 years as a coach for up to three teams per season. The success of the CCYH led to the formation of the Minuteman Minor Hockey League and Stephenson also volunteered as the league's commissioner.

The league quickly grew to include 80 teams from five towns, with 1,800 hockey players in mosquito through midget divisions.

"I used to pass myself on the road taking kids to rinks," joked the 70-year-old father of three and grandfather of eight. "When I came up here, that was the days that hockey was very, very young. They were mystified to see somebody actually pass the puck without falling down! Their biggest hockey up here, except for the Bruins, was college hockey."

He said the program he helped found is still popular 35 years later and he delighted in recalling his youngest grandson, a seven-year-old, sleeping in his jersey the night before beginning play in the CCYH's mosquito division.

Stephenson suffers from multiple sclerosis, but still tries to get out to his grandkids' games using his wheelchair. And he doesn't like some of the trends he's noticed developing around the rinks. "Parents jumping out into the fray and eight-year-olds fighting . . . it's sad," he said. "Sports are for kids, for fun, for a laugh, for a joke. We forgot what it's all about. When I was a kid, I was lucky if my father had time to go down and watch the game. Now, they're all refereeing the game."

For that reason, Stephenson, who worked a day job with an electronics company, said he avoided coaching his two sons.

And Stephenson said the philosophy instilled into the CCYH from the beginning was that "if you paid, you played" and that all players were given equal ice time.

"How many hockey teams are there where the coach has 15 kids on the team and he plays 10 kids?" questions Stephenson. "By playing the 10, he's got five kids at the end of the bench not playing. How many kids' lives do we ruin by sitting them at the end of the bench? It really hurts."

Stephenson said having an award created in his name is an honor, but that he gets his greatest satisfaction talking to the adults in the community who he used to coach as youngsters. "They say, 'At least you made it fun,' which makes me feel good."