



Bull Tales

STORIES OF ACHIEVEMENT, HEART AND GIVING AT USF

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Live Like Mike

Mike Radomski Was Taken Far Too Soon, but his Memory and “Rock the Planet” Philosophy Continue On in USF Athletics and a New Scholarship

By Dave Scheiber, USF Foundation



The walls of a small, second-floor office inside the USF Athletics communications department are bare now, standing over a room frozen in time and heartbreak.

Several boxes with notebooks and assorted papers rest in a corner. And the surface of an empty desk holds only a pair of hardly touched running shoes, a visual link to a memory nobody seems to want to disturb.

They are a reminder of the young man whose boundless spirit once filled this space, an employee who touched everyone in his orbit with his familiar “Rock the Planet” motto for living, infectious positivity and perpetual megawatt smile.

It has been nearly eight months since Mike Radomski, an assistant director of communications for USF Athletics, died in a car accident in the early hours of Oct. 12, 2017. True to form, the guy who was often the first to arrive at work and

last to leave had stayed late in the office, this time to beat a fast-approaching deadline for the men’s basketball media guide.

He made the usual friendly chatter with Bulls head football coach Charlie Strong, also working into the night to prepare for his team’s homecoming contest against Cincinnati in two days. And they talked about the 29-year-old New Jersey native’s beloved Yankees, in the process of defeating the Indians in the AL Division Series on a nearby television.

Sometime after midnight, Radomski finally knocked off and began the long haul home in his SUV on north Interstate-75 to Wildwood. The little Florida town is where he and his wife, Christina, decided to rent an apartment – in order for each to have an hour’s drive to work; Mike to USF Tampa and Christina to her job in Gainesville as an athletic trainer at the University of Florida.

But then came the reports and the shocking pre-dawn phone calls that swept through the tight-knit USF Athletics family – fellow staff members, coaches and student-athletes alike – in a wave of disbelief. Mike was gone, killed in a collision when traffic suddenly slowed only several miles from his destination. For associate athletic director Brian Siegrist, like everyone in the Bulls sporting universe, the pain of that morning and the months that followed still lingers.

“To see a life that had so much promise, and so much energy and enthusiasm, taken like that was incredibly hard,” he says on a recent afternoon, sitting at his desk only several feet from Radomski’s old office. “Mike was such a positive influence on everybody. To lose him so suddenly was one of the most difficult things I’ve ever been through.”

Siegrist remembers how one young staffer stood and simply stared at Radomski’s office door without moving, for more than an hour. Others talked in hushed tones or wept, trying to make sense of the senseless. “In this profession, we spend a lot of time together – you’re sometimes working 80 hours a week and we’re all in it together,” Siegrist explains. “It’s a testament to who Mike was and how he treated people that everyone felt so connected to him.”



USF Associate athletic director Brian Siegrist



Now, Siegrist and other members of the Athletics Department have set out to connect Radomski’s legacy with others for generations to come. In honor of their late colleague, who made such a powerful impact in only three years on the job, they have established the Michael J. Radomski Memorial Scholarship.

It will be awarded, hopefully this fall, to a deserving student working in the USF Athletics realm of communications, marketing, the ticket office and other areas of operation. Donations directed to Christina and the Radomski family in the immediate wake of the tragedy generated \$5,000 to start the scholarship fund, and now the goal is to raise enough funds to fully endow it for perpetuity at \$25,000.

USF Athletics' official announcement of the new scholarship in Radomski's name.

“We thought, ‘What if we could put Mike’s name on something for students who display the passion, dedication, and uplifting energy he had, and help them advance their careers,’” Siegrist reflects. “We wanted to do it in a way that represented what Mike meant to us. His kindness was a big part of it – how he conducted himself, and the effect he had on others. He just had a way of making you feel happier when you left than when you came in.”

But the scholarship will also accomplish something else, now and far into the future. It will ensure that people who never met Radomski will learn about a co-worker, a friend, and a man who – to all in his path – was truly one of a kind.

If he had a trademark beyond his catchphrase, it was his endless array of hand-written “thank you” notes – left for anyone who had assisted him in almost any way. The list of pleasantly surprised recipients ranged from helpful co-workers, to the local dry cleaner, to his car mechanic – and to one particular print shop in Evansville, Indiana.

As the story goes, Mike had been hired by USF from his job as sports information officer at the University of Evansville.



“He charmed me with that smile,” Christina says.

Before leaving for Tampa, he ordered a batch of new baseball scorebooks to use in his new job with the Bulls. And Christina went to pick them up at the printer.

“I looked to my right,” she says, “and there was a thank-you note to them from Mike hanging right there on the wall.”

Then she looked at the scorebooks and couldn’t help but smile. The printer had added a USF Bulls logo to the front as a gesture of their appreciation.

“I’ve heard so many stories from people I don’t even know, people who’ve met Mike only once or twice, and the impact he’s had on them in that one meeting,” Christina adds. “You could be in a restaurant and he would be able to make the day of the person who sat us at our table, or who waited on us. Or it could be some random stranger, who’d never see us again, and he would just brighten their day.”

Christina recalls how he brightened her day at Evansville. She had been a star collegiate swimmer and athletic training major at the school, while Mike was busy earning his journalism degree from Quinnipiac University in Connecticut, serving as co-sports director and play-by-play broadcaster for the student-run radio station, WQAQ, and receiving an award for excellence in sports and media. At Evansville, they seemed destined to cross paths. Christina worked as an athletic trainer for the women's basketball team and Mike handled communications duties for the squad, broadcasting their games on radio. “He charmed me with that smile of his,” she says. They went on their first date at an Evansville IceMen hockey game, and in less than a year they were charting a new course together to Florida at respective Division I programs.

Radomski brought with him the philosophical hashtag he had popularized at Evansville, #RockThePlanet – words that summed up his approach to life: making an impact in the world through random acts of kindness and an unselfish approach to every task. “It just meant trying to make the world a better place by doing little things to make others feel appreciated or feel better in some way,” Christina says.

Her husband was so thrilled to work for USF Athletics that he would frequently send Christina iPhone pictures walking early in the morning into the Lee Roy Selmon Athletics Center, accompanied by a simple hashtag ... #blessed.

Mike and Christina were married in June 2016 in Christina's native Minnesota. By then, he had already started what he considered his dream job at USF – sports information director for the baseball team. His life seemed complete in every way.



Mike and Christina on their wedding day in 2016.

At that time, Radomski worked closely with another relative newcomer to the USF Athletics sports information staff, Erin Bean, who handled communications for the top-notch women’s basketball team.

They had adjacent offices, which allowed them to talk constantly about their goals and challenges. “I started on a Friday and Mike started on a Monday, so we started our USF journeys at virtually the exact same time,” says Bean, now assistant athletic director for external operations at St. Leo University. “We were both young, ambitious and really ready to establish ourselves.”

She had worked in collegiate offices at each NCAA level, and he had worked five years as a minor league radio broadcaster with the Evansville Otters – eventually calling a franchise-record 550 games – prior to working at the University of Evansville and then USF. “He loved baseball and just had that passion for being an SID,” Bean says. “He always said that’s all he wanted to be. It’s a difficult job – there are a lot of hours and tedious work involved. But I don’t think I ever once heard him complain. He loved everything that needed to be done.”

He began most days at 4:45 a.m. with a run of several miles, then made the hour-long commute to Tampa and arrived at the office at 7:30, fully energized for a long day at hand in spite of his disdain for coffee. His work ethic, coupled with his knowledge and demeanor, eventually paved the way for a promotion to SID for men's basketball in the 2016-17 season. Radomski was even featured in a CoSida (College Sports Information Directors of America) 360 magazine cover story dubbed "30 for 30" – singling out 30 rising-star SIDs in the United States who were 30 years or younger.



"Mike carried around a little notebook, and he had his lists of what's important right now, what's important next week, and what's important long-term," Bean remembers. "And I swear, it was always a list of at least 30 different items. I'd look at him and say, 'How on earth are you going to get all this done?' But he did."



Bean, Radomski and Tom Zebold enjoying a moment with USF sports communications.

I worked with USF's women's basketball team, one of the best programs in the country, and it could be a little intense at times. I might get frustrated with one thing or another, but he just always made me feel validated and like I could do the job – like, 'You got this, Erin!'

Like so many others, Bean often found herself on the receiving end of his gestures of appreciation. While still working with the baseball team, for example, Radomski needed a small favor. His wedding to Christina fell on the same day as the 2016 Major League Baseball Draft, and it was likely that one of the Bulls players would be selected.

Radomski had worked ahead writing press releases for that player, and any others, who might be selected, leaving blanks for the selecting team, the round and the draft pick number to be added. Then he asked Bean if she would simply insert those details when the time came, and post the releases online. Naturally, she couldn't have been happier to oblige.

"Mike even texted us on his wedding day that the kid was drafted, before we even saw it," she says with a laugh. "Of course, if anyone would have understood, it was Christina. And in the end, all I had to do was literally type three words."

But when Radomski returned from his honeymoon, Bean, a major coffee drinker, found a surprise on her desk: a \$50 gift card to Starbucks and a bag of Costa Rican coffee from their trip. And there was one more thing. "A beautifully written thank you

In his new basketball assignment, Radomski worked closely with Siegrist to help a program going through some upheaval and lean times, but he embraced the challenge with the same fervor he had with baseball. Among his skills, Radomski was known as the department's ace proofreader, using different colored pens to mark mistakes or make comments – adding a smiley face at the end as his personal touch.

"He had this thing he'd do all the time," Siegrist recalls. "I'd come in and say, 'Mike, we have to get this done, and we only have so much time,' and he'd say, 'That's okay' and then clap his hands and go, 'We got this!' And I was like, 'Okay, we got this. Let's go do it!'"

At other times, Radomski made an impact by simply being a valuable listener. "If I was having a bad day, or just needed five minutes to take a step away and talk about something else, I could walk into his office and he'd drop everything," Bean says. "He always gave you his complete, undivided attention.

note for what I had done, so he and Christina could be married that day, even though it was just adding in three words,” she says. “That was who Mike was. No matter what you did, you were going to get a hand-written thank you note. I still have that one and a lot of them in my office today. But it wasn’t just me – he had that relationship with everybody.”

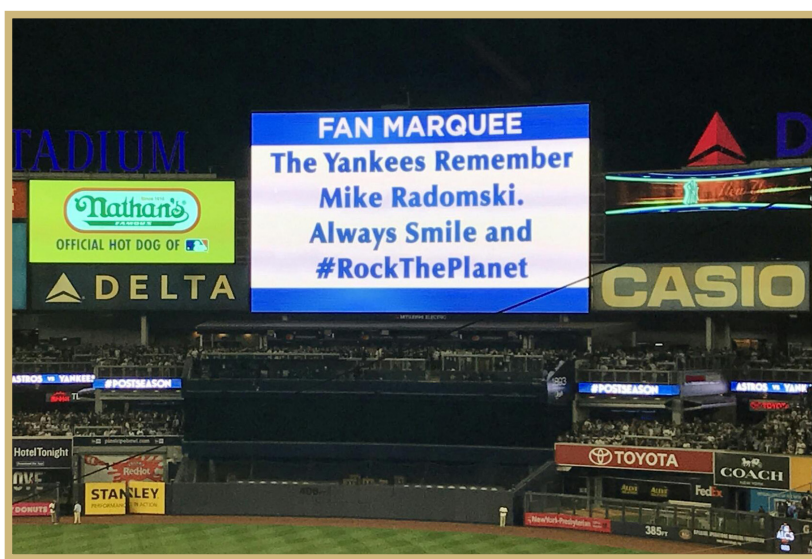
She vividly recalls the last day of his life, her voice breaking at the memory. They attended a donor luncheon to talk about the prospects for their respective basketball teams, doing interviews with various standout student-athletes.

“That day was so special – you really saw Mike living his dream,” she says. “He was in his element doing these interviews, with the new men’s coach, and several student-athletes. Here the women’s team was Top 25, and the men’s team had some blemishes, but Mike made everybody in the room so excited. He just had that air about him.”

In the days after his death, expressions of grief and tribute poured in. His office door was filled with photos and thank you notes, this time to Mike, creating a make-shift shrine that remained in place for months. His Facebook page overflowed with words of sadness, appreciation and stories of how he had touched them in some way. Even his beloved Yankees payed homage days later on their stadium scoreboard.

That came about thanks to Patrick Puzzo, a Bulls assistant director of communications, who contacted the team’s media department. It was a fitting sendoff, considering Radomski had grown up so close to Yankee Stadium in northern Jersey, a straight shot across the Hudson River and into the Bronx.

ESPN followed by airing a tribute to Radomski on the national telecast of the Bulls’ homecoming football game. More tributes aired on broadcasts throughout the football season and when basketball season got under way nearly every broadcast team paid their own respects to the young man who had made such an impression. The Otters minor league club didn’t forget Radomski, either, naming a seat in their press box.



And a former USF Athletics communications assistant, Steve Schoon, had bumper stickers printed, reading “Rock the Planet: Live Like Mike.” Members of the staff quickly attached them to the backs of laptops and desktop surfaces, while Radomski’s younger brother, Brian, had commemorative wristbands with the saying made and delivered them in November to department staff – both gestures keeping a special memory burning strong.

More recently, USF Athletics found a new way to bring his story to light. It took place in April at the annual Stampede of Champions, a red-carpet Sun Dome affair where student-athletes received awards in a wide range of categories. In the crowded formal-wear cocktail reception, it would have been hard not to find anyone who hadn’t been graced by Radomski’s smile or encouraging words.

One such person, baseball head coach Billy Mohl, still feels the pain. Mohl, who lost his wife to cancer in 2013, was the first one in Athletics to learn of the accident and immediately called Christina. “Other than my wife’s situation, it was the hardest call I’ve ever had,” he says. “Mike and I chatted every morning. The guy never had a bad day. If he did, you never knew about it. But if you were having a bad day, he wanted to make sure you felt better. You’re not going to find another Mike Radomski.”

In the gathering are three people who wholeheartedly agreed – Christina, who drove in from Gainesville, and parents John and Alicia Radomski, who had just flown in from New Jersey. “We’ve been overwhelmed by what we’ve read online and from the USF community,” Alicia says. “It’s been amazing, and very comforting.”



Alicia with sons Mike and Brian (right) two weeks before the accident. "I waited a long time to have this beautiful picture taken with my two grown-up sons. It was spontaneous, and Christina took it with my phone. I couldn't be prouder. I'll cherish it forever."

She describes her son as being as humble as he was friendly, a child who was in constant motion in Cub Scouts, playing Little League baseball, serving as an altar boy and becoming editor-in-chief of the school newspaper at Bergen Catholic High, where he earned the outstanding achievement award for his journalism endeavors, including reporting sports each morning on the school's BCTV network. At his graduation, the priest closed his commencement speech by telling the class to "go out and rock the planet!" The phrase struck a chord with Radomski – and he decided to adopt it.

Throughout all those years, he was a great influence on his brother, Brian. They did almost everything together, recalls Alicia, from playing multiple sports to going "down the shore" at the beaches in Jersey during summer vacations or skiing during the winter with their parents. The day after graduating from college, Mike set out on a road trip with his brother to Evansville, where his exciting new job with the Otters awaited and he would soon make his slogan part of every broadcast. Each step of the way in life, the one constant was his upbeat disposition.

"Since he was a baby, he was never without that smile," says his mother. "He was a joy and never gave us any trouble. I would call him my sunshine. And he was that."

Young Michael was also a Yankees fan to his core. Alicia tells a story of taking him to a Yankees game as a child, and lifting him over a metal barricade so he could get Derek Jeter's autograph. She recalls all the nights she videotaped the end of Yankees games so young Mike could go to bed, and wake up in the morning before school to watch what he missed. And she talks of how they always watched ESPN's glamorous awards show, the ESPYs, when he was a teen dreaming of working at the sports network.



John and Alicia Radomski at the Stampede of Champions.

This particular night has the glitzy feel of the ESPYs, in fact, and it only seems right that Radomski will be part of the show honoring USF athletes, teams and key moments of the year. Midway through the program, one of the student-athlete emcees tells the crowd, "If sportsmanship exists outside of athletics, Mike wins the award every time. Tonight, we celebrate Mike by naming him the first-ever Honorary Sportsmanship Award recipient."

The packed crowd, including USF President Judy Genshaft, responds with a loud ovation as a video plays on the scoreboard, including comments from Siegrist and USF athletic director Mark Harlan, who says, "He knew there were incredible stories to be told about our student-athletes and coaches here and he took great pride in making sure those stories got out to the public. But the one thing that always struck me about Mike was his positive attitude, day in, day out. He was a terrific man. His legacy will always be one that regards passion and the love of USF that he had."

When the video ends, Christina and Radomski's parents are invited to the stage to say a few words, and the audience responds with a spontaneous standing ovation. In that instant, the entire room is connected to Mike, just as he always connected with others, and Christina captures the meaning of the moment perfectly.

"I know Mike would be thrilled, and he would be humbled," she begins. "He always said he was blessed to be able to work here in Tampa at USF, with the great student-athletes and amazing staff and in this beautiful city. And I think it's up to us – those who know Mike, those who know of Mike, and those who will know of Mike – to keep that positive spirit and attitude, that enthusiasm, and that amazing smile alive."

Amid the boisterous, heartfelt applause that follows, you can almost hear another noise rattling the walls – the sound, no doubt, of a planet being rocked into the night.



Christina, with Alicia and John Radomski, thanking the Sun Dome crowd.



