

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

A letter from Michelle's family

The Globe's Christie Blatchford and Jessica Leeder couriered a written request to members of Major Michelle Mendes's family earlier this month asking for an interview. They refused the interview, but penned a detailed response. What follows, but for an introductory paragraph, is their letter

Saturday, Jun. 20, 2009 02:04PM EDT

June 17, 2009

The media coverage following Mic's death provided some glimpses into her career, her character and her many accomplishments but did not do justice in describing the wife, daughter and sister we loved and the life she packed into the years she was able to spend with us. Here is the rest of the story of the person we knew so well and the loss we mourn every day.

Mic and her older sister Mel grew up in Grafton Ontario with a childhood typical of smaller communities. She was in Brownies and Guides, went to camp through church and started to develop her leadership skills working as a camp counselor. She excelled in school and was consistently on the honour roll. An avid reader from an early age, she typically had a book in every room of the house and would read them all concurrently. Always athletic, she was involved in figure skating for many years, played rugby and baseball as well as spearheading a concerted drive to form her high school's first girl's wrestling team. An avid swimmer, she qualified as a lifeguard and was consistently in the family pool. She even combined her two passions for reading and fitness by figuring out how to read a book while swimming laps.

Even as a child, Mic was a very social person who balanced a few very strong friendships while maintaining a wide circle of friends across the community and, eventually, around the globe. Certainly in her home town, Mic knew everybody and everybody knew Mic. She always enjoyed children; she worked in a daycare and taught Sunday School during her high school years. As she grew, she took an interest in world events and the plight of others leading to her sense of service and a desire to assist those in need. Her interests led to her being accepted under a Rotary International programme where she spent one year in Brazil on a high school youth exchange. In addition to returning speaking Portuguese fluently, this experience highlighted her interest to find a career where she could make a difference in the world which ultimately led to her joining the military. Based on the impact she made while in Brazil, and with the Rotarians who sponsored her, Mic was subsequently selected to represent those who had done exchanges by giving an address to over 2500 Rotarians in California. Years later, Mic maintained her connection to Rotary through friends who were still involved in youth exchange and other initiatives such as polio eradication, and planned to join Rotary once she returned to Kingston.

Mic thrived at RMC with its emphasis on broad, balanced development in academics, athletics, leadership and languages. She thoroughly enjoyed the intellectual challenges of her programme and many of her professors have told us of their memories of an enthusiastic student who was always seeking to expand her knowledge beyond what the course covered. Like most university students, Mic had her strengths and her weaknesses. She excelled in the Arts. She loved ideas more than formulas, mathematics was not her strong suit and she struggled with first year calculus. While this likely led to her subsequent difficulties with the advanced phase of Artillery training, Mic passed calculus with her trademark perseverance and the help of some classmates leading to her constant desire to assist her colleagues when she could help out and her

willingness to reach out to others when she needed assistance.

As she had growing up, Mic made a large number of friends at RMC. We clearly recall the first time she asked if she could bring a few friends to visit our apple farm one weekend. Expecting a car load of 3 or 4, we were amazed when a caravan of dozens showed up for the weekend. This was the first of many times that we had the chance to meet her many friends and enjoying watching each develop into confident, successful individuals.

As her friends have said and Vic observed, Mic was a true team player and natural leader on the field. As with all facets of her life, she paid attention to her teammates, was always encouraging others and consistently downplayed her own skills and successes. These led to her selection as captain of her soccer team. She effectively combined a strong competitive spirit with good sportsmanship, win or lose. Of course, sports and particularly soccer was what brought Mic and Vic together leading to a strong partnership and wonderful marriage.

Building on the characteristics evident as a child, Mic sought out opportunities to take on greater responsibilities and fulfill leadership roles. She talked to us about her role models and the important lessons she learned about what the military was, what was expected of officers and the demands of a military career. She had the privilege of meeting Gen Romeo Dallaire and was inspired by his call for better educated officers with the desire to serve Canada in valuable missions overseas. These served to strengthen Mic's commitment to serving in uniform. It was during her time at RMC that we came to realize how important the CF was to Mic and that she was determined to serve for a full career.

While Mic blossomed at RMC expanding her understanding of the world and of herself, the aspects that stood out the most were those that had described Mic from childhood. She strove to excel and could be quite dogged in her determination to complete tasks that needed to be done. She certainly set high standards for herself and epitomized the ideal that one's reach should exceed one's grasp but she was equally aware of her limitations. Having had the privilege of staying in touch with so many of Mic's classmates over the years, we have come to recognize the commitment, perseverance and sense of service that characterizes those who have made the military their career.

Mic emerged from RMC confident, committed and dynamic; characteristics that enabled her to enjoy subsequent success and to weather the occasional set backs that she encountered as all of us do in life. Her excellence in all aspects of the RMC programme led to her selection as one of the few Cadets who are approved each year to apply to immediately pursue post-graduate training. Based on her outstanding academic achievements, she earned acceptance to Carleton University's prestigious Norman Patterson School of International Affairs. Again, Mic thrived on the intellectual stimulation. She pursued courses that interested her; which would, in fact, subsequently serve her well as an Intelligence Officer and, we believe, were part of why Mic excelled in the branch. She clearly did well in her studies as some of her professors had encouraged her to continue to do a PhD. As with her time at RMC, she also made some great friendships and we were fortunate to have met several of her NPSIA friends over the years.

We are extremely proud of Mic's successes in her career. Although it took a couple of years, her selection to be an Intelligence Officer was an obvious great fit for Mic as it allowed her to apply her keen intellect and love of learning, her desire to make a difference in the world and her phenomenal social and leadership skills. Not only did she excel on courses, she drew on her graduate education, her colleague's expertise and her own personal reading to teach at the Intelligence School and, most recently, submit an academic article on the need to better incorporate socio-cultural anthropology into CF thinking and Intelligence analyses. Mic made many contributions to the Branch including working on organizing the 25th anniversary dinner and dance in fall 2007. As part of her extensive preparation for her deployment to Afghanistan she had made contact with a Canadian supported Afghan Women's Network.

Despite her busy military career and time away from her home in Kingston, Mic was always active with

family and community. For several years, she helped organize the Christmas dinner served at the United church downtown. She participated in numerous fund raisers including running ½ marathons for cancer with her Mom. She always stayed in peak condition finding time to work out every day as well as belonging to a Kingston running club (for fun). Constantly thinking of others, she kept in close contact with colleagues and friends who deployed. As some related to us, she managed to get 'care packages' to some friends in Afghanistan before their own families did.

As reflected in her choice of a career in uniform and her year in Brazil, Mic loved to travel. She and Vic had wonderful experiences seeing the world through each other's eyes starting with their shoe string budget trip to Venezuela and extending through subsequent travels to Jamaica, Mexico and especially Portugal to twice celebrate Christmas with extended family.

What consistently amazed us was the number of lives she touched and all of those who felt a close personal connection with Mic. She was so often the key to bringing friends from all realms together. She always made sure the different communities she was involved in had the opportunity to crossover and learn from one another while gaining incredible friendships at the same time. She made everyone feel important, and made sure that their familial bond or friendship was celebrated just as she celebrated important milestones in her life. Together with her family and friends, who were truly extended family to her, she celebrated life, her marriage, holidays, birthdays, and her well deserved promotions. And every one of those celebrations was done with Mic's flair for the creative, specially decorated cakes, water balloons for the kids, and that oh so memorable handmade card or treat for that certain someone; everyone was made to feel special. For the party to celebrate her promotion to Major and her deployment, Mic invited 135 people and 135 showed up. She took great joy on that occasion sharing stories with each and every one of them, telling them where she was going to work and offering many advance congratulations for events that they would celebrate while she was away. Never one to lose contact and an avid user of Facebook, Mic made sure her family and friends would be able to stay in touch while she was away by prepping pre-addressed envelopes destined for her in Afghanistan. She did this, while at the same time making sure that her friends back home, or returning home, knew just how special they were by spending extra time with them before she left, and leaving others special treats they knew were crafted by her hand and assembled for them.

Mic committed to her tour in Afghanistan the way she lived her entire life: enthusiastic, confident and determined. Her deployment combined two of her greatest loves: service to Canada and extending a helping hand to those in need. We hope this letter gives you a more complete understanding of the wonderful person we loved and who we fully supported in her desire to make the world just a little bit better. Many have commented to us on Mic's intellect, her warmth, her compassion for others and her constant desire to assist those in need. We are comforted by knowing how many lives she touched, the contributions she made to the CF and the legacy she has left of service to humanity. Our fondest wish would be that her story may inspire others to seek to better understand our complex world and pursue options to represent Canada on the international stage making a difference in the lives of others.

In your letter to us, you have stated you wanted to explore what you believe are the tough questions that may have been raised. We don't see them as such. Mic was fully trained and fully prepared for her deployment. We are very proud of her many accomplishments, her commitment to mastering her profession and the well deserved accolades she received for her leadership, expertise and judgment. Mic certainly undertook demanding duties in the course of her career but so have many of her friends in uniform whom we know very well. We fully understood Mic's passion for her career and her drive to serve her nation to the best of her ability. Our observation is that the military is filled with individuals who thrive on challenges and are committed to rise to the occasion. Other stories in your paper and in Ms Blatchford's book have illustrated this point very well.

We are proud of the fact that the CF saw Mic as fully qualified to assume responsibilities as a Major in the Intelligence Branch and we remain convinced that she was more than capable of discharging her duties and making a valuable contribution to the difficult mission that the Canadian people have given the CF. We are

quite aware of the close personal contact Mic had with her superiors and remain confident that the CF exercised all of its responsibilities in selecting and preparing Mic for her deployment. We are quite aware of previous events you have alluded to including her first deployment and her first attempt at AOC. We remain concerned that those who had only tangential involvement with Mic have chosen to speculate about issues of which they have incomplete knowledge. We believe that they and/or you have taken isolated snippets of information out of context to opine that some ignored issues and placed her career and the mission in Afghanistan ahead of her well being. Our conclusion reading your letter is that you are seeking a rational explanation for an irrational act and have decided to portray a vulnerable person pushed into crisis. We strongly encourage you to do more research to understand the more accepted explanations for these events and to avoid perpetuating unfounded views. This letter is provided in the hope that you will opt to provide a factual retelling of the amazing joy, hope and inspiration cast by how Mic lived rather than speculation on the manner in which her flame went out. We do not believe your readers would be well served by conjecture that lacks a factual basis and we know that Mic deserves better than that.

Victor Mendes; Ron, Dianne and Melissa Knight

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