

Family Affair

Unleashing children's potential is a personal calling for Karl Subban and his daughters

BY SHARON ASCHAIK PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FORD

WHEN WE THINK OF Karl Subban (BEEd '90), the achievements that come to mind for most of us are the hockey-related breakthroughs made by all three of his sons: Malcolm and Jordan – both AHL players and NHL prospects – and superstar P.K., who was the NHL's top defence-man in 2013. It's an against-the-odds feat that came about through his intensive investment in their talent and has earned him the reputation of "ultimate hockey dad."

What's less well-known about Subban's knack for tapping people's potential is how effectively he has applied it with thousands of other kids across Toronto. For almost three decades, he worked as an educator for the Toronto District School Board, serving at 10 different schools in the city's northwest area, including some in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. His skilful approach to helping students learn, combined with his caring attitude and his emphasis on a disciplined, respectful learning environment, helped boost the academic performance and self-esteem of many students, including some of the city's most vulnerable children.

"Once kids know you care about them and believe in them, they understand they have what it takes to succeed," Subban says. "Then you are on the road to changing lives and making a difference."

Wanting to strengthen his expertise to stay competitive, Subban turned to York University's Faculty of Education, where he completed part-time courses to become a specialist in science, physical education and special education. A little later, following the advice of a colleague who saw his leadership potential, he took principal-qualification courses at York. He says that while at the University, he learned valuable lessons not only from his professors, but through the collaborative work he completed with other students.

"So many of the assignments were not done individually,

but in teams, and you learn a lot more while working with others," he says. "Thanks to York, I grew a lot. I learned what I was capable of."

After working in the classroom for five years, Subban began his foray into administration, serving as a vice-principal and later principal at various elementary and middle schools. In 2006, he requested a transfer to a school where he thought he could make a bigger difference: Brookview Middle School, in Toronto's struggling Jane-Finch neighbourhood. With his firm but charismatic style, he focused on boosting the students' capacity to learn and raising the school's standardized test results. He insisted on spotless hallways, orderly lineups and the recital of a daily pledge that included the line, "I come to school to save my life by working hard to be a better person and a better student."

Central to Subban's approach was encouraging students to focus on the four Ts: time – arriving at school punctually; task – doing the required task to the best of your abilities; training – continually practising learned skills in order to improve; and team – cooperating with others to achieve better results. He also believed that deeply understanding children's interests, abilities and needs is essential to building their strengths and addressing their weaknesses. To that end, he worked hard at getting to know his students, and he encouraged his teachers to do the same.

"It's so important that in their early years, children get lots of love, attention and support," Subban says. "Teachers need to really know the children and where they are academically, so they know how to work with them." Although Subban retired in 2013, he has continued to be active in trying to positively impact children's lives. He worked on a project with Canadian Tire to teach families about the benefits of playing hockey.

Subban's dedication and hard work as an educator have inspired his two daughters, Nastassia and Natasha, to follow in his footsteps. Both remember joining him at his schools



MEET THE SUBBANS: Natasha (left), Nastassia (middle) and Karl (right)

for different occasions and seeing him joyfully interact with students and get lots of hugs. Sometimes, they say, he wore funny ties to school to endear himself to the kids. His younger daughter Natasha says many of her teachers had worked for her dad, and spoke fondly about his commitment to students.

Both Nastassia and Natasha pursued their bachelor of education degrees at York, and recall different highlights of their training. For Nastassia, it was learning about issues of equity and social justice in education from social studies and culture Professor Peter Flaherty. For Natasha, it was becoming motivated to teach math, a subject she had struggled with in high school, but became manageable and enjoyable thanks to the guidance of Professor Lyndon Martin.

Nastassia is currently completing a

secondment as an education instructor at York, but before that she taught history and phys-ed at Westview Centennial Secondary School in the Jane-Finch neighbourhood. Like her father, she went above and beyond her role by leading the school's literacy improvement efforts and organizing its hot lunch program.

Natasha, meanwhile, most recently taught a class for students with learning difficulties at Elmbank Middle Junior School near Finch Avenue and Martin Grove Road (she is currently on maternity leave with her first child – her parents' fourth grandchild). She was able to elicit the children's best efforts with the same approach she learned from her father, by helping them discover their special gifts.

"I always remember how my dad said that every kid has a passion," Natasha says. "You have to find out what they

like and let them know you care, and they will open up to you."

Of course, Karl is delighted to see how his daughters have likewise evolved into hands-on educators who are helping kids reach their full potential.

Professor Martin, Natasha's former teacher and now the dean of York's Faculty of Education, says the accomplishments of Karl and his daughters as educators reflect exactly the kind of outcomes the Faculty tries to achieve with its emphasis on training teachers to be engaged and progressive changemakers in education.

"Our program has a very strong focus on social justice and on teaching for diverse and inclusive classrooms," Martin says. "The Faculty of Education is proud to have had a role in helping to shape how the Subbans think about education and in developing their skills." ●