

One of Vail's Finest Traditions

Peter Kohn's Precious Legacy

The Keeper of Lacrosse

By Alex Smith



"You have the same responsibility to give more than you think you can give no matter what you're doing, whether it's lacrosse or a business job. Whatever you do, whether you're a doctor, it's the same thing. You have to give yourself. I always try to give my best." - Peter Kohn, Keeper of the Kohn Documentary

In August of 2009, lacrosse lost one of its true ambassadors in Myron "Peter" Kohn, Middlebury College's legendary field manager and sideline companion. Peter was one of the oldest institutions in the game, but those who didn't know him well might not fully understand the imprint he left on the sport and the people who knew him. He was known for his competitiveness, carefully balanced by his regard for others, including opposing teams and players. He was known for his

attention to detail, chasing moss-covered balls in the bushes surrounding the practice field and having more varieties of gum than a convenience store on his person at all times. He was known for his voracious appetite for taking pictures, memorizing middle names and eating desserts.

But above all, he was known for his tremendously giving spirit and his dutiful dedication to doing the right thing. He was a man driven by his faith, so much so that a prestigious Fellowship of Christian Athletes award is given in his honor. Every year, the Peter Kohn Award is given to a member of the lacrosse community who best represents the scripture, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13).

Bradley Corrigan, a Denver native who played collegiate lacrosse at Middlebury and was part of the popular band Dispatch, was the 2010 winner of the Peter Kohn Award and had a special relationship with Peter. "When I was playing at Middlebury, we had a fun friendship," said Corrigan. "Both he and I had a really similar faith component, and I saw what a treasure he was as one of the sweetest, most generous guys around."

Corrigan describes Kohn's relationship with Middlebury lacrosse as a familial one – and he and Peter continued their friendship long after Brad graduated and moved back to Denver. Kohn, who was a stalwart at the Vail Shootout, would often stay for several days after the tournament to hang out with Corrigan and his family before heading Back East. He was also a regular at many of the bigger Dispatch concerts; doing anything and traveling everywhere he could to support Corrigan.

Corrigan's own giving spirit has him firmly entrenched in the world of non-profit organizations. In 2005, he was doing a benefit concert for orphans in Managua, Nicaragua. While there, his taxi driver saw that he was there to help children and asked to take him on a tour of the city. The tour included a place called La Chureca – slang for City Dump – and for Corrigan, that changed everything.

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At first glance, there don't appear to be many similarities between Middlebury, Vermont and a decrepit trash-dump community in Managua, Nicaragua. One is perfect Americana, filled with beautiful greenery and mountainous landscapes while the other is very literally a trash-dump with burning piles of refuse and amoeba-filled swamps. One has old-world architecture and one of the United States' top liberal arts colleges while the other has metal-sided lean-tos and families

sorting through the waste for their own sustenance and survival. In fact, it might be hard to imagine two places that have less in common.

But the two have become inexorably linked as epicenters in the lacrosse world for giving – both in the name of and back to the sport. After seeing La Chureca, Corrigan set up shop in Nicaragua, visiting about once a month while founding the non-profit organization Love Light & Melody in 2006, which he describes as a natural response for what he saw. Love Light &



Melody features mostly musicians and artists doing anything they can to help people – in particular the under-served community of La Chureca. “What I really wanted were storytellers,” said Corrigan. “I wanted people who could not only bring arts into La Chureca, but also people who could come back to the United States and tell the story.”

After making headway with various artists, athletes were the next logical step. Joining with former University of Virginia lacrosse superstar Brett Hughes, Corrigan then formed Lacrosse the Nations in 2009, which according to its website was established “as a non-profit international humanitarian organization that utilizes sport and play to foster education and the development of critical life skills for children living in impoverished communities worldwide.” La Chureca is their first project.

Hughes, who grew up in suburban Ohio before enjoying a very successful lacrosse career first at the University of Virginia and then in Major League Lacrosse, became a part of Lacrosse the Nations for what he says is a simple reason. “This sport has given so many people so much. In return, it’s time for me and others to give back,” said Hughes.

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Giving back was one of the primary themes of Peter Kohn’s life. Many know the story of how he came to Middlebury and

many know that his minor handicap left him dependent on others to complete everyday tasks. Starting as a basketball manager for the Park Hill School in Baltimore before being introduced to the college in 1980, Kohn quickly became a fixture at Middlebury. While his primary job was as equipment manager for the sports teams, and in particular the men's lacrosse team, he soon began to represent a much more important figure in the lives of the student-athletes and coaches.

The 2005 documentary *Keeper of the Kohn* details the importance of the position of "Keeper." That is, the person whose job it was to make sure Peter got to and from practice and in and out of stores on his daily errands. Peter often needed basic help and assistance, but there was never a question about his tireless work ethic and sense of responsibility to the job he held so dear. Often the Middlebury people questioned who was really "keeping" who as being selected for this position often taught the person much more than they could ever hope to learn in a classroom.

Dave Campbell, a captain of Middlebury in 2009 and Keeper in 2005, recalls Peter's distinct set of values. "He had a high regard for doing the right thing," said Campbell. "He was a competitor and he wanted us to play well and play hard to win, but to always take the high road."

One famous Kohn story involves his very first game as manager of the Middlebury lacrosse team and details the true strength of his convictions and sense of right and wrong. Pete showed up for the game at the request of a friend with connections to the Williams lacrosse team and as of yet had no formal job from Middlebury. As such, he didn't think it was right to help Middlebury and not Williams. At halftime, Kohn informed the Middlebury squad that he would be serving as Williams' game manager for the remainder of the game and walked directly across the field to do so.

Campbell, who now serves on the advisory board for Lacrosse the Nations and went on the group's first trip to Nicaragua, was very close to Peter and sees many parallels between the two. "He had the biggest heart of anyone I know," said Campbell. "He was always giving. The same feeling of giving back to and in the name of the game was exactly mirrored in Pete and Lacrosse the Nations."

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In La Chureca, children are often subjected to things we cannot imagine here in the United States, especially as part of a sport often associated with a certain sense of privilege, like lacrosse. Sifting through rubble and living in stark contrast to what we are accustomed to, the youth do not often get to enjoy the spoils of being young.

"The first time you see and experience the abject poverty of this group of people and the absolute hell they live in, it's awful," said Campbell. "Then you start to connect with the people and realize they have an incredibly strong spirit. Kids want to be kids, but they are trapped in a place that doesn't allow them to."

For Lacrosse the Nations, the game of lacrosse becomes a means to provide exactly that experience. Handing sticks to children and reaching out to the community gives the people an outlet. "You get into the lacrosse and it's their chance to release and act their age," said Campbell. "They get to be who they want to be and who they deserve to be. Since lacrosse is a new game for these people, they aren't bound by the expectations of what it should look like. They are extremely creative in the way that they play."

Campbell told the story of a young boy who saw their truck on the second trip down. "He immediately ran inside to get his lacrosse stick. He grabbed our hands and led us through his

house to his backyard, if you could even call it that, where he'd rigged up a make-shift goal and field and played one on one with his neighbors." The pure joy of being a child is what drives people like Campbell and Corrigan to continue their work – and it might be said that it's what drove Peter in all his earthly actions.

Peter Kohn was around the game of lacrosse for over 25 years. There were the Middlebury national championship teams, the USA World Championship team in 1998, and many other tournaments and alumni events too numerous to count. He attended more lacrosse events than maybe anyone alive and certainly enough to satiate even the most die-hard adolescent fantasy about the sport.

Vail was a different chapter in Peter's life and introduced him to a whole new set of people. Not having worked at Middlebury until 1980, many of the older players in the Masters and Supermasters Divisions didn't know who he was when he showed up for his first tournament in 1997.

"We met him in Vail," laughed long-time friend Bob Sideli. "He was just there and that was that." Sideli became Peter's unofficial Vail Keeper after he not-so-subtly reminded him that he needed a little bit of extra care. Since Peter didn't drive, someone had to get him all over the Vail Valley and Middlebury teams in Men's and Women's Elite, Masters, Supermasters and Grandmasters kept him plenty busy.

Peter was right on top of every game, staying apprised of penalty and game times, cooling off players with his trademark wet towels, making sure his players had plenty of water and passing out every flavor of gum imaginable. For Peter, Vail was just an extension of his job at Middlebury, whether it was a summer tournament or not.

In 2006, Sideli named Kohn the head coach of the Supermasters team. "He was always coaching on the sidelines anyway, so it was natural for him to take over," explained Sideli. Peter was famous for stealing team huddles from long-time friend and Middlebury head coach Erin Quinn in the most important moments of games, so Sideli wanted to give him the chance to run the show himself. "He probably knew more about lacrosse than anyone, including Coach Quinn," joked Sideli. "He just had to go at his own pace to get it out of there."

Kohn led Middlebury to a Supermasters Consolation Championship that year, but coaching the team was a challenge for Peter, who had a firm grasp of his limitations. After the

tournament, Sideli remembers a conversation he had with Kohn. "He was totally honored about being the coach, but the game moved a little too fast for him. He came up to me at the end of the tournament and said, 'Bobo, it would probably be best that I'm not the coach in the future.'"

Despite his tremendously giving spirit, Peter was extremely competitive. So much so that despite his yearly threats of not coming back to Vail, Sideli was able to convince him that they were going to win the first place trophy next year. "He always said that this was his last year," said Sideli. "But we persuaded him with possibly winning it all next year. He really lusted after that thing."

During the 2009 tournament, Corrigan and Lacrosse the Nations Executive Director Laura Neumann showed a short film about the plight of La Chureca to the Middlebury contingent of players and family members. Afterwards, Peter Kohn spoke to the entire group with tears in his eyes. "He was so committed to helping these people," said Corrigan. "He stood up and said, 'We must



get behind this. We must give lacrosse to these kids. If Brad will let me, I would like to go on this upcoming trip to serve this cause.'"

It was not surprising that Kohn would feel so passionately and want to get involved. Corrigan, Kohn and Neumann sat in a room and planned the next trip, one that Peter was planning on attending. When Vail was over, Corrigan played the guitar for Pete, teaching him the first two verses to *Amazing Grace*.

"I wrote down the verses really big with a Sharpie so he could read them," remembers Corrigan. "I played guitar and we sang the song before he left to go home. That was pretty much my last meaningful interaction I had with Peter – singing *Amazing Grace* and having him giving us his blessing to do the trip."

Peter passed away less than a month later on August 5th, 2009, just weeks before his scheduled trip to La Chureca.

Corrigan describes Pete as a guiding force. "I had no idea where I was going post-college," he said. "But having Pete in my life during college and the ensuing years was like having a rudder. Checking in with him really was affirmation that I was on the right track. He was such a great encourager."

While Peter Kohn never officially made it to Nicaragua, his spirit certainly lives on in those who have visited since and those who will make the trip in the future. "Peter was always looking for an opportunity to serve and uplift," said Corrigan who has established a memorial scholarship in Pete's name through Lacrosse the Nations. Paraphrased from their website, the scholarship "exists to open new doors for those who demonstrate Peter's character qualities of leading, serving, giving and encouraging. The scholarships will be awarded to cover the trip costs for those individuals who desire to use their gifts and talents to serve in Lacrosse the Nations difficult communities both domestic and abroad."

Corrigan hopes that helping the community in La Chureca is just



the beginning for Lacrosse the Nations. "This is the pilot program," he said. "We're a fledgling group right now, but in

five to ten years, we hope to be a much bigger and better known non-profit organization so that we can assist wherever we are given the opportunity, whether that be stateside or anywhere else in the world. We just want to take this game and get into people's lives."

Erin Quinn, who was the head men's lacrosse coach at Middlebury College for 14 years before moving on to the Athletic Director's role, spent many lacrosse seasons sharing a sideline with Kohn. Quinn will be involved with Lacrosse the Nations as well and is planning to take his 16-year-old to La Chureca on Lacrosse the Nations' next vision trip just after the Shootout. "We hope Lacrosse the Nations can be a way to galvanize others in the lacrosse community to commit to service and to use lacrosse as the vehicle to do so," said Quinn.

With Peter Kohn's spirit firmly entrenched in the program, Lacrosse the Nations moves forward. "The common thread between the two is having an incredible awareness for others and giving without any expectation of receiving anything back," said Dave Campbell. "Giving and giving freely and inspiring others to do the same are what ties this all together."

"Sewing Pete's legacy into Lacrosse the Nations is the ultimate dream," said Corrigan. "The scholarship program is one of the things we are most excited about for that reason. If he was here, he would still be saying, 'Don't you think there are greater riches in serving and loving these kids than there could ever be doing anything else?' Man, Pete was just like the Book of Proverbs."

Lacrosse the Nations will look to expand in the coming years to more under-served communities both worldwide and stateside. They hope to make it understood that just reaching out to any community in need can make lacrosse a conduit for good all around the world. "Our goal is to instill our core values in players, teams and coaches across the country and world so they can give themselves away and become ambassadors of hope," said Corrigan. "Go find something in your own backyard and use the game to build community and serve the under-

served.”



“Peter could have belonged to any sport or group of people,” said Bob Sideli. “He just wanted to serve, and in particular to serve the sport of lacrosse. We were all very lucky to have him.”

Friends say that Peter Kohn suffered from a form of undiagnosed autism, but he never let that define him. To listen to him speak



or to watch him interact with others is to glimpse what many of us only wish we could be. He never spoke a negative word about anyone or anything and served as the greatest of role models to countless men and women. By giving of himself and caring about others in a way that can only be described as saintly, Peter Kohn left an indelible mark on the world that will never fade.

“Peter was a model of thoughtfulness, selflessness and generosity,” said Erin Quinn in an email interview. “He was first and foremost a good friend, but he was also a great role model for the guys in the program. He was lots of fun and kept things

light, but his depth and insights were also critical to his relationship with our program. He is deeply missed.”

Photos by Vail Shootout staff photographer Andy Sharp from '05, '08, & '09.