

A Mother's Greatest Gift

Sue Robins left everyone she taught with more than a fly-fishing legacy.

BY MARIO CARR

The greatest inheritance a mother can leave her children has no dollar value. For Sue Robins, it was her inspirations and passions.

A passion for fly fishing is the common thread that binds Heather Jones and her twin, Sherri Steel, to their mother, Sue Robins, who died in a car accident during a snowstorm in February 2007. She was

married to fly-fishing inspiration Ken Robins.

Through Sue's contagious love of fly fishing, her goal was to inspire other women to take up the activity. She did this by teaching in workshops throughout Ontario, and her girls joined her.

"Now we do those workshops without her," said Heather. "We start each workshop with a dedication to her, talk about her, and her passion. Doing the workshops definitely brings us a lot closer to her and helps us honour her and her memory."

Heather is a math teacher in Stratford and her sister is a PhD in spinal-cord injury in Barrie.

Not Just a Mom

"We started teaching with Mom when we were about 17 years old," said Heather. "It was on those weekends away that we really grew into women and became adults. Mom became more than just Mom. We were best friends."

They taught at the Women's Outdoor Weekends with the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters and at Grand Opportunities with Friends of the Grand. They also taught Casting for Recovery, a programme that helps women recover physically and emotionally from cancer.

"Since Mom died, it's definitely been rough on Dad," said Heather. "They were married for 37 years and she was his fishing buddy. Fly fishing is really emotional for him because of how much they did together."

Her death was not only a disaster to the whole family, but a serious blow to the Ontario fly-fishing community. Everyone knew of Sue's aspirations to teach fly fishing to women. She taught at the 2006 Canadian Fly Fishing Forum in Burlington. "It was a huge hit," added Heather.

Organizers had scheduled her for the show in the April during the year she was killed. They called the twins and asked if they would consider teaching the workshop.

"That was really tough," said Heather. "It was not a long time for us to deal with her being gone, and then being involved with something that had meant so much to the three of us."

Heather and Sherri then and now, pursuing their passion, fostered from early on by their mother, Sue.



PHOTOS: RYAN PFEIFFER » RYANPFEIFFER.COM, INSET AND SUE ROBINS COURTESY KEN ROBINS

So, we decided to do it and that was incredible.”

They taught it again in 2008 and in 2010. They stress the fun of being out on the water and being one with nature.

“It’s all about the stories,” said Heather. “We spend some time on entomology, casting, and the basics of fly fishing, but the way we do it is with stories and experiences.”

The Challenges

“We’ve had women say my husband does it and I always wanted to try it, but I feel intimidated,” said Heather. “There’s still a stigma there.

“We used to offer fly-casting lessons at the former (*Ontario OUT OF DOORS*) Spring Fishing Show in Mississauga with my father, mother, and sister. I remember there was a man who refused to have either Sherri or I teach him how to cast. He said, ‘No I will just wait for your dad.’

“My father was so angry, he said, ‘They’re better teachers than I am. I’m not helping you.’

“I’ve also had a few men come up to me and say, ‘Let’s see how much line you can cast.’ It’s pretty funny actually.”

Ken Robins also helped spread the word about fly fishing by presenting workshops at fishing clubs, through Scouts, and at the Canadian Fly Fishing Forum.

Fly-Fishing Tips

Here’s some advice the twins offer at their workshops.

- Have fun and don’t take yourself seriously.
- You need the basics, but don’t get wrapped up in technicalities.
- It’s not about the size or type of fish you catch, it’s about the love of fly fishing.
- Use the proper equipment. This doesn’t mean it has to be expensive.
- If you’re fishing small streams, use a double-tapered line. After the line has been well used, switch it around and attach the beaten end to the reel.
- Make sure your rod and line are balanced. If you’re planning to fish in both small and big waters, use a 5/6-weight rod. If you’re going to fish on bigger water, use a 7/8-weight.

“The forum did a huge amount for fly fishing in Ontario,” he said. Today, he sees a similar excitement and enthusiasm by women to learn fly fishing like men had in the 1970s at the forum.

Ken was the fly-fishing editor of *Ontario Fisherman* magazine in the 1980s. While fishing at the Credit River, he saw a copy of his hatch chart in the front seat of a car in the parking lot. He felt good knowing that he was making a difference.

He also learned stream rehabilitation techniques from American biologists and help to educate Ministry of Natural Resources staff in the 1970s.

Advice for Men

If men want to fish with their families, Ken suggests being less competitive and more encouraging. He’s seen some men suddenly turn a day of fishing into a contest with their families, where they catch the biggest and most fish.

“What’s that going to do to the wife, who’s just learning?” he asked. “They give up and don’t want any part of it. If we never had any competition in fishing, I think it would be better.”

Ken notes that women have challenges finding properly fitting equipment. Usually, they don’t make it in women’s sizes, so they have to purchase men’s sizes. Vests, waders, and rod handles are designed for men and are generally too big for most women. But, manufacturers are starting to take notice, and clothes and tackle designed for a women’s needs have been working their way into the marketplace.

A Family Affair

“I’ve always believed that a family that fishes together stays together,” said Ken. The whole family would spend summers together fishing, even when the twins were teenagers.

“It’s not about catching the biggest fish,” said Heather. “It was about being together as a family...spending time together doing something we all enjoy. There’s a peacefulness

you feel on the river, without a care in the world.”

Sue didn’t fish until she met Ken. He, on the other hand, was an avid angler, but wasn’t serious about fly fishing. In the 1970s, they tried fly fishing and the seeds of a passion were implanted in both of them. After the twins were born, they bought little nets and waders so they could join their fishing expeditions.

“It wasn’t long before they started begging us to fly fish,” said Ken. “We said, ‘No, you’re not old enough.’ It wasn’t until they were 7 years old when we let them try. Later, once they started to catch something, that inspired them.

“I learned from them that it doesn’t matter how much you catch or how big it is. If you get something at the end of your line and bring it in, you’re successful.”

In the 1990s, following a trip to western Canada, the twins, too, gained a passion for fly fishing.

Still Work To Be Done

There are a lot of fly-fishing groups where men can fish together, but not a lot for women. “If you’re a woman and don’t have a man in your life who’s into fly fishing, you’re on your own,” said Heather. “Where do you go and meet other women to fish together?”

Ironically, that’s what the twins are currently struggling with, since they both married spouses who don’t fly fish. “I’m not going to fish by myself, so what can I do?” said Heather. “I can fish with my dad or my sister, but if they’re not available, I don’t have a core group of women friends that I can call and go fishing.”

Sue has influenced and motivated women all over Ontario. Some went on to teach fly fishing and to guide other

Sue Robins



women – and interest among women is still growing. Ken feels the work his wife started and his daughters are continuing is still in its infancy. It’s not just a male-dominant activity any more, thanks to a mother’s fly-fishing legacy and her great gift of passion. ●