

A Smile, a Hug and a Word

THE BBQ WORLD LOSSES BIG MIKE MCCREA

By Merl Whitebook

The BBQ world grew a little smaller with the recent loss of Big Mike McCrea owner of Big Mike's BBQ in Thornton, Colorado. Mike passed away on October 6, 2009, after being injured in a flashover fire from a propane tank while cooking and vending at the 2009 Pork and Hops contest in Grand Junction, CO. Big Mike was taken to the hospital, but rather than a life flight to Denver, insisted on being released to help his team compete Saturday morning. Mike refused to leave his team one man down.

Michael Eugene "Big Mike" McCrea was a native of Denver, Colorado. Big Mike was noted for his huge smile and friendly disposition. Big Mike graduated from Manual High School in Denver. He pursued his love for barbeque, learning to cook "the best" making and selling his award winning sauce and barbecue. Mike was survived by his brothers Patrick McCrea and Rickey McCrea, his sister Pamela McCrea, and a host of nieces and nephews including Brendan McCrea who was part of Big Mike's team.

Michael was a long time member of KCBS. Both his barbecue and his sauce won awards in KCBS sanctioned contests and local "best of" competitions. With his characteristic positive attitude, whenever someone asked how things were going, Big Mike always replied "Stressing" no matter what the situation was, which was concluded with a huge smile to let you know, everything was alright.

Big Mike was featured in Newsweek magazine, Westward news, and was recently featured on the Food Networks Food Finds.

"Big Mike", with the million dollar smile and the hugs for friends he hadn't seen for a while, even if it was just last Saturday after the last award's ceremony," said Steve Marrs of Denver Cajun BBQ Krewe, who cooked with Big Mike during the 2009 season. Steve continued, "It's a good thing Mike didn't have to register with the Center for Disease Control, because he was contagious! His humor, his work ethics vending, his demeanor and his love for cooking BBQ at competition events infected everyone he came in contact with. Anyone that came in contact with Mike left his presence feeling a little bit better than they did before they met Mike that day. And it was the same way every time you were around Mike."

"At Qing for the Cure charity cook this past year, Mike and Mike (Bratton) were just work machines. Big Mike was a little worn down and Laura gave him a Pepsi and he just totally smiled and after downing that Pepsi was back to work. On the second day Big Mike had found a "private" golf cart to take him to the "free" massage booth to take advantage of the situation (the free massage booth didn't mind as Mike and Mike always seemed to show up with food). After that cook, Lizzie Q would always have a Pepsi for Mike and he would give that smile and say, "Thank you Lizzie Q, you have just brought me the nectar of the gods." I miss you so much Mike!!!! You taught me not to take the contests so seriously or lose focus of the intent. Good Fun, GREAT PEOPLE, and good food!!!!!!!!!" wrote Don Jay of Lizzie Q about Mike.

"There's no question that Big Mike was the nicest guy on the BBQ circuit. He always had the "I won a prize" smile. It's a shame he's gone... we're all going to miss his huge smile and friendship." said Rudy Duran of Los Nerds BBQ Team.

As que'ers and friends alike said good bye to Big Mike, his brother Patrick and nephew Brendan were presented posthumously the Hawgeyes' Smoky Angel Spirit Award pins. Big Mike was laid to rest with his Smoky Angel Spirit Award pin and a big smile on his face. In a final statement at his memorial service the Smoky Angel Spirit Award verse was read which Big Mike certainly lived by:

One kernel is felt in a hog shed; One drop of water helps to swell the ocean; A spark of fire helps to give light to the world. None are too small, too feeble, too poor to be of service. Think of this and act.
Hannah More (1745-1833)

So when you are out cooking and the cloud above you looks like a bellowing smoker, rest assured that Big Mike is looking down upon you, with his Big BBQ Smile and asking you the question: "Stressing?" Then you will know everything is alright!



US Foods Presents the #1 Big Mike's People's Choice Sauce Tasting Tent

Open during event hours

1st and Main Street

This year, an exciting new element comes to the Colorado BBQ Challenge, a people's choice sauce award and tasting tent.

US Foods Presents the Big Mike's #1 People's Choice Sauce Tasting Tent.

\$5 tasting plates will be sold to the public to sample sauces and vote on their favorite, the proceeds benefit the Colorado Restaurant Association Education Fund.

CRAEF's mission as a Colorado non-profit educational fund is the

training of all individuals in the foodservice industry and those individuals coming into the industry with full and equal opportunity.

Now, BBQ Challenge goers will get the chance to be a part of the competition by judging the Best BBQ Sauce at the Sauce Tasting Tent. The Top three sauces will be awarded a total of \$850 in prize money. Patrons will have the opportunity to try 25 different sauce entries

along with a meat prepared by Summit High Prostart students.



BBQ & Whiskey

Ticketed Event

June 18 ~ 6pm

Stranahan's
COLORADO
WHISKEY

RUB IT, SMOKE IT, SIP IT
BBQ TOUR

The Stranahan's Whiskey Rub It, Smoke It, Sip It BBQ Tour presented by the Rocky Mountain BBQ Association.

Starting at 6pm, a limited number of lucky participants will join Jake Norris, Head Distiller, Stranahan's Colorado Whiskey – The Rocky Mountain's premier craft whiskey distiller for an exclusive tour into the world of BBQ. With a glass of original straight Rocky Mountain Whiskey in hand, participants will then be taken on a behind-the-scenes tour of top award winning cooks who are competing in the 17th Annual Colorado BBQ Challenge. Participants will learn tips, tricks and maybe even a few secrets from the cooks themselves as they prepare their competition dishes.

Who is Big Mike?

Honoring a pitmaster and a friend...



Mike McCrea was injured in a flash-over from a propane tank in late September last year. Mike spent a night in an emergency room in Grand Junction, refusing to be flown to the burn unit in Denver. Why? Because he had a barbecue competition in Grand Junction the next day, and he didn't want to leave his team a man down.

Yeah, you read that right: Second and third-degree burns to the arms, face and hands, but McCrea had work to do. He and his team made all four turns for the competition, according to the BBQ guys, finished out the vending operation, and only then -- once all the work was done-- did he check himself in to University Hospital in Denver, where he was immediately put in the ICU that evening.

He seemed to be improving through the week, and even was released. But he started feeling poorly again and went back to the hospital -- where he was diagnosed with pneumonia and passed away shortly thereafter.

This is how hard the guys who make your dinner for you work. This is what cooks do. The world is now down one pit man, plainly dedicated to his craft. Mike was a staple competitor at the Frisco BBQ Challenge for over 10 years. We miss you Big Mike!

All proceeds of the Big Mike's sauce tent go to the CRAEF program which teaches the next generation of Chef's.

**Excerpt from Westword*