

Keeping Tina Leonard's legacy and spirit alive

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Caleb Mihill, a 2022 Lake Placid High School graduate and recipient of the first Tina Leonard Award, poses on Jan. 14, 2023, at the Olympic Jumping Complex while working for a video production company during the 2023 FISU Winter World University Games. (Photo provided)

LAKE PLACID — A year ago, Caleb Mihill was anchoring the Blue Bomber Weekly News on YouTube as a Lake Placid High School senior. Now he's studying digital media and communication with a concentration in journalism at Hilbert College in the western New York town of Hamburg, just south of Buffalo.

Upon graduation last June, Mihill got a boost in his college funding as the first recipient of the Tina Leonard Award, a \$1,000 scholarship for a LPHS graduate "who is proving that anything can be achieved despite any obstacles life throws their way." It is funded through the Lake Placid New York Rotary Foundation.

Tina Leonard — the former owner/operator of Tina Leonard Real Estate in Lake Placid and longtime volunteer at civic organizations such as the Lake Placid Rotary Club — died unexpectedly in September 2021 at the age of 63.

The award was created to honor her memory, her spirit, and further her legacy of giving and overcoming obstacles and achieving success. She had trouble with her sight since she was a teenager and gradually went blind later in life, but that never stopped her from operating her own real estate business and volunteering for the Rotary Club.

On Feb. 3, Tina's daughter, Daci Shenfield, caught up with Mihill on a Zoom call to see how his first year at college is shaping up and how the Tina Leonard Award has helped inspire him.

"It has inspired me to continue to blaze my own trail and continue to be the person who I am," Mihill said. "Tina was a trailblazer herself, helping anyone she could along the way. I really want to follow her lead. It's been inspiring that way, by living a wonderful life while helping as many people I can along the way."

The award has also reinforced in Mihill that he's exactly where he needs to be in life and that he should continue to push through challenges in his life to achieve his goal of making the world a better place.

"And hopefully it will do the same for future recipients as well," he said.

"Trailblazer, I love that word," Shenfield said, "because I think there needs to be more trailblazers. I agree, I think my mother was a trailblazer, and Caleb, I think you are a trailblazer yourself."

The Tina Leonard Award is open to LPHS graduates who have overcome challenges or obstacles in their lives, as Tina Leonard did after she lost her sight.

"Blind wasn't a struggle," Shenfield said about her mother. "It was an obstacle she overcame. So we wanted the importance of an obstacle that somebody has overcome, whether it was physical or not."

Each candidate for the Tina Leonard Award has to write an essay about a challenge or obstacle they've worked through in their lives. Mihill didn't go into detail about his challenges for this interview, as he wanted to keep them private.

"I had some health issues come up that prevented me from going down one path in my life, but they pushed me down an entirely different path," he said.

After granting the award to Mihill, Tina Leonard's family wrote down some comments about Caleb:

“This student was chosen because they had their military dreams and aspirations shattered due to an underlying physical ailment, but then that student volunteered and found a different passion to pursue that will still bring them to do some of the same things they had always wanted, but through journalism instead of military service.”

Mihill encourages any LPHS senior who faces an obstacle to apply for the Tina Leonard Award, no matter how big or small.

“Everybody’s obstacles look different,” he said. “It does not have to be physical. ... You may brush off some things as not being a big deal or an obstacle, but it very well could be.”

Seniors should embrace your obstacles, he said.

“Tell how you overcame them, and give them the credit that they deserve because while they may stink, they may be pretty brutal, without those obstacles, you wouldn’t be who you are today.”

After Mihill received the award last summer, he wrote about it for the Rotary Club’s monthly column in the Lake Placid News:

“Tina and I had a friendship like no other. In my high school career, I helped her with projects, talked with her on the phone and was recognized by the Rotary Club for work I did in school for our weekly news program, the ‘Blue Bomber Weekly News.’ I even volunteered for several years at the ‘Dam Duck Race’ that Tina founded and co-chaired, when I was in elementary school.”

During the Feb. 3 Zoom call, Shenfield asked Mihill if there are any takeaways from college that he can share with future Tina Leonard Award prospects.

“If you want something, you can get it,” he said. “It doesn’t matter who or what stands in your way. The only thing stopping you is really you.”

Mihill talked about the transition from high school to college, which can be difficult, and his biggest piece of advice to graduates making that transition is to make sure they have a support system.

“Whether that be family, friends, pets, whatever it is, find that support system,” he said. “I know I certainly have with my parents and family. They’re always cheering me on, supporting me every step of the way and encouraging me to reach the biggest goals that I set out before myself.”

Shenfield stressed that the Tina Leonard Award doesn’t have to go to somebody making a transition from high school to college.

“If somebody chooses that their path is not college, that’s 100% fine,” she said, adding that the award should help a senior fulfill a goal they have after graduation.

Do what makes you happy, what makes you feel fulfilled, Mihill said.

“Do this while also helping others along the way to find what makes them happy and make their world a little brighter, too, just like amazing Tina did. So live your life with love and happiness, and remember whatever it is you want to do in life, do it.”

After applicants submit their essays for the Tina Leonard Award, their names are taken off before they are evaluated by a committee, to eliminate personal biases in case they know the seniors.

Learn more about the Tina Leonard Award online at <http://lpnyrf.org>.