

# Former OHL player out to shift dialogue around homophobia

By **Jamie Mountain**

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A prisoner to the guilt of being gay he is no longer.

Former OHL goalie Brock McGillis was at the Townshend Theatre here last Wednesday to share his empowering message with Fort High students of self-love and inclusion while aiming to help change the negative perceptions of LGBTQ athletes and individuals.

From a young age, McGillis knew he was gay and felt he lived a life full of lies.

He felt he would never be accepted for who he truly was, seeing as he grew up in a culture of hockey: minor hockey, the OHL, university hockey, and semi-pro in Europe.

"Hockey has always been very homophobic," McGillis noted. "I can't count the amount of times I've heard phrases like 'that's gay' or 'what a fag' in the dressing room over the course of my hockey career.

"Those words are used to belittle players because hockey is hyper-masculine, meant for the most macho of men."

It wasn't until McGillis met

Flames' president Brian Burke—through connections he had made in hockey that things started to come into perspective.

Burke already had come out publicly as gay and had his own NHL aspirations as an executive.

McGillis reached out to him and the two quickly became friends.

"Brendan inspired me and motivated me," said McGillis. "He put the thought in my head long ago of doing what I'm doing now.

"We both had dreams of making the NHL, myself as a player and him in management, and trying to change culture, change sport culture.

"Now, it's what I'm doing and want to do with my life," McGillis added.

"He had a tremendous impact on me and I'm grateful every day that I met him."

Tragically, Burke was killed in a car accident in February, 2010, which McGillis said he "cried about for days."

Burke sent a message to McGillis on Facebook just two days prior his death that read, "I can't wait until the day that

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you're out like I am."

That resonated with McGillis and in 2016, he "came out" to his younger brother, who also was a semi-pro hockey player. Then with his support, he came out to the rest of the family.

When injuries finally took their toll and his hockey career ended, McGillis said it felt liberating and that he finally could be free and experience life as a gay man without judgment from the hockey community.

Shortly after, he began to work with athletes in his hometown of Sudbury, helping them with on-ice and off-ice training. He also started coaching players who were looking to advance to the next level (OHL or NCAA).

McGillis noted he already has seen a shift in dialogue among the athletes that he coaches, and very rarely do they use homophobic language in his presence.

When they do slip up, McGillis said they always are very quick to apologize.

Lately, McGillis has been visiting schools across Ontario, including here in Fort Fran-

ces and in Atikokan earlier last week (his scheduled visit to Rainy River High School last Tuesday was cancelled due to the poor road conditions), spreading his message of ending homophobic language to students.

He plans to make his way across Canada moving forward.

McGillis believes students are beginning to shift away from the normalized perceptions of LGBTQ people.

"I get a lot of messages that I've created some awareness or now they get it," McGillis told the Times.

"I think that's [been] an issue—people just using language that's so normalized in their culture that they don't realize the impact it has."

McGillis ended his presentation last Wednesday by sharing his social media accounts and encouraging students to reach out to him if they feel led to do so.

To learn more about McGillis and his travels, you can follow along with him on Twitter @brock\_mcgillis, Instagram @b\_rock33, and Facebook @brockmcgillis.

# Brock McGillis

While There Are Still Barriers To Identifying As Part Of The LGBTQ+ Community, Brock McGillis Is Working To Break Them Down



**Former OHL goalie Brock McGillis was at the Townshend Theatre last Wednesday to share with Fort High students his struggles of being a closeted pro athlete, as well as to share his empowering message of self-love and inclusion while also aiming to change the perceptions of LGBTQ athletes and individuals. McGillis is the first hockey player to come out publicly as being gay.**

**—Jamie Mountain photo**