



Strong Man

Having made his mark as an internationally recognized bodybuilder, professional football player, dedicated educator, and highly successful businessman, Mike Katz, '66, 6th Yr. '76, establishes a scholarship to help others succeed.

By Natalie Missakian

Mike Katz, '66, 6th Yr. '76, achieved fame as a bodybuilder and former Mr. America who costarred with Arnold Schwarzenegger in the 1977 documentary "Pumping Iron." He also played football with the New York Jets and spent three decades as a teacher, a job he describes as his "calling from God."

But it was his foray into the world of business — as owner of five Planet Fitness gyms in the New Haven region — that gave him the financial wherewithal to establish a scholarship at Southern, Katz says. And he credits Southern for equipping him with the business sense he needed to become so successful.

Ironically, the degree that prepared him for the business world had nothing to do with business. It was a sixth-year certificate in supervision and administration of schools, which he pursued with the thought of moving into a principal's job. That never happened (by his choice — Katz realized he would miss the kids too much), but the degree did not go to waste.

"It was sort of like an MBA for me," Katz says. He credits the program with teaching him how to run a school, which he says is much like running a business. "I took that information and used those skills to try to be more successful in the business field."

Katz established the Mike Katz Endowed Football Scholarship at Southern in 2004 to assist student-athletes on the varsity football team, where Katz honed his own athletics skills as a fullback under the late head coach Jess Dow.

At the time, he says, coaches didn't understand weight lifting and discouraged it, fearing the extra bulk would slow athletes down. Katz proved it wouldn't. He was one of the team's fastest players, even though he was so muscular he needed custom-made shoulder pads.

"And when I went to the Jets, Southern let me borrow my shoulder pads from college because they didn't have big enough pads for me," he says.

He says he turned to weight training as a preteen to cope with bullying; kids often teased him because he was Jewish, overweight, and wore glasses. "They used to call me porky," he recalls. He started lifting weights in his parents' basement, and as he grew stronger, the teasing stopped.

"It obviously gave me more self-esteem as I got stronger and bigger and became a better athlete," he explains. "The picking on was over at that point."

He went on to become a football star at Hamden High

School in Connecticut. After graduating in 1962, Katz enrolled at Southern, where he studied to become a health education teacher — his dream since seventh grade. Katz says he was inspired by his own health education teacher, an ex-marine who gave him "no-nonsense direction" when he needed it most.

"He did that for me. I wanted to do that for other kids," he says. "As corny as it may sound, my calling from God was to be a teacher. That's what I do best."

After college, Katz spent two years with the New York Jets but a knee injury ended his career at the beginning of the 1968-69 season. The Jets went on to win the Super Bowl that year, while Katz turned his attention to teaching. He took a job as a junior high gym teacher in the public school system in Hamden, Conn., where he worked for 33 years. He retired in 1999.

Outside of school, Katz continued to train and compete in bodybuilding, winning the Mr. America title from the International Federation of Body Building in 1970 and two years later, Mr. World. He also qualified for the 1976 Mr. Olympia, placing second in the heavyweight division.

Through his friendship with Schwarzenegger, his training partner, he got a bit part in Sally Field's breakout movie "Stay Hungry." But he is most famous for his starring role alongside Schwarzenegger and Lou Ferrigno in the hit bodybuilding documentary "Pumping Iron," which highlighted Katz's quest for the 1975 Mr. Universe title.

In 1979, he opened the East Coast's first World Gym in Hamden with his friend and business partner, Jerry Mastrangelo. They switched to a Planet Fitness franchise in 2004, which they run along with Katz's son, Mike Jr.

Unlike World Gym, Planet Fitness caters more to families and novice gym members. "We call it the judgement-free zone," Katz says. He says they made the change because they thought Planet Fitness had a better business model.

Katz said he has enjoyed reading letters from scholarship recipients over the years thanking him for helping them attend college. He has continued to add to the scholarship fund balance each year and strongly believes alumni should show their gratitude by giving back, especially those who have enjoyed financial success.

"I heard a quote recently: 'He who dies with the most money is the biggest loser.' There's a lot of sense to that," Katz says. "You don't have to die broke, but what are you keeping your hundreds of thousands or millions for when you ought to give back to a place that helped to make that all possible?"