

## Broadview Heights Business Spotlight - January 2017



Our first ever Broadview Heights Business Spotlight shines on locally owned gym Functions of Life, located at the southern end of Broadview Heights, off of Broadview Road! In December 2016 Broadview Heights Economic Development Director Kristina Sorensen sat down with Mike Soster, owner of Functions of Life Gym in Broadview Heights, to learn more about the business and its success story.



**Q:** Tell me how your business got started. How long has Functions of Life been around?

**A:** Functions of Life has been in business for about 4 years now, all of which have taken place here in Broadview Heights.

Many years back, I had the opportunity to work with one of the best trainers known to the fitness world, Todd Durkin, which enabled me to take a different perspective on fitness, sports performance, and wellness in general. During my time there, I was able

to have a few “game changing” moments for myself, giving me a vision of what I could create here in my hometown of North Royalton. As much as I loved the training atmosphere at FQ10 with the big name athletes and some amazing trainers to learn from, I knew I had to make a move for myself, and that’s when I took the unlikely leap back to the East Coast. I decided to complete my Master’s Program at California University of Pennsylvania in Human Performance and Injury Prevention. It was also during that time I had to really decide what direction I wanted to take with all of this.

I tried to figure out what my place was in this field. It’s a tough profession. I worked for a few gyms and I didn’t really agree with a lot of the things that they were doing but I was going along with them because I didn’t know any better and I needed to make money. It got to a point where a lot of my clients really liked what I was doing, so I knew I had some support if I went out on my own.

**Q:** How did you make the connection here to Broadview Heights?

**A:** Well, I didn’t have much money to work with, so I was filling up PVC pipes with sand at Edgewater Park to use as fitness equipment. There was a guy there, he was locked out of

his car. He asked me, “Hey, can you give me a hand? I’m locked out of my van.” To be honest, my response was negative at first, but he seemed harmless so I helped him get in his van. Come to find out, he was Mike James, the coach for many baseball teams in Broadview Heights. Literally about an hour later, we decided it would be a good idea to go into business together.

I began training his baseball teams about 4 times per week, right there in the unit that is now Next Level Auto Detailing. I believed in what I was doing and had no other options at the time. It paid my bills and got me going in the right direction, but those teams eventually disbanded and stopped training with me. That left me in quite a tough situation. That’s when a very important person came along.

As any desperate business owner would, I tried to let everyone in town know that I wasn’t just open for business, but I was also willing to do whatever it took to build my vision and eventually give them a facility that could meet all of their fitness and sports performance needs. While building the website, I got a call from a curious customer, her name was Anna Lucas. I told her if she believed in us, and also brought me referrals, I would lock her in to a special rate that would not change. So she did it and I worked the same deal with those new customers. I can literally say that in one year, 1 person quickly turned into over 200 just by referrals. Then another 2,000 over the next few years. Our philosophy was to simply create raving fans out of our clients by delivering a world-class service within a fun and energetic atmosphere. No contracts, no membership fees, and if you wanted to leave, then you could leave. It was a system that kept us all on our toes and also let the community know that we believed that much in our programs.



**Q: So do you still talk to Anna Lucas?**

**A:** Of course - she comes all the time! She’s been here for over 750 classes. I don’t think I’m getting rid of her anytime soon, which I’m more than okay with.

**Q: How did you end up at this location?**

**A:** My business outgrew the space I shared with Mike James, so I had to search for a bigger building. I got lucky with the building two doors down, which was owned by Dominic Del Corpo, where Functions of Life is currently housed.

We opened this location in September 2013. I didn’t have the money for up-front investment, so I pooled funds together by asking generous friends and family. If it wasn’t for their help up

front, I couldn't have made it all happen, but somehow they fortunately saw a glimpse of my vision and ran with it.



Ever since our grand opening, we've continued to grow pretty steadily. January 2014 we had 767 clients per month, and then two years later, we had 1,767 clients per month. New clients would quickly realize how our place was much different than other gyms, unique and fun, but serious when we needed to be. Our goal for 2017 is to break the 2,000 member mark, but like I said before, we don't like to think about numbers.

**Q: How do you find your employees?**

**A:** I like to think they find us. They love training at a place like this versus a big box gym. I pay them well because I try to avoid a high turnover of trainers, to feed back into the level of quality product I am trying to promote. No one wants high turnover. Personal trainers and class instructors work very hard and they typically aren't compensated for that. I have tried to build a compensation plan that rewards my trainers for the amount of time that they are putting in towards their clients. This makes it more of a career for my employees; they are invested in the business and are more committed than someone out looking for another job. We feel we have special relationships with our clients, which goes a long way when knowing exactly how to take care of them and their needs. We go the extra mile to give them additional services that we don't gouge them for, and their loyalty is enough for us to keep doing it. Don't get me wrong, they definitely take care of us as well. We have absolutely amazing clients up here, I can't say it enough.



**Q: It sounds like a real sense of community.**

**A:** Yes, it's a very big fitness family bridged between hard working young professionals, little ninja warriors, everyday Mom and Dads, and even some pretty tough retirees. Today they were giving each other gifts, which was awesome to see. When your clients are more connected to each other, we realize it makes them more motivated to actually *come* to the gym. So we nurture that type of thing as much as we can.

**Q: You said there wasn't a membership, how does that work?**

So, we're not like one of those places that just charges to get in the door. Our door simply stays open, and you can make purchases based on the frequency of training you need, whether that would be through personal training session, fitness classes, or whatever else. We structure it like this because we know we can motivate our client base enough to actually show up. Membership gyms rely on people *not* coming - if all of their members who pay actually showed up, the gym could not accommodate it. None of those gyms can.

**Q: What's the training philosophy that you use?**

**A:** Functions of Life is derived from a type of training called functional training. Functional training means working towards a physical purpose, such as eliminating back pain, making an athlete accelerate faster, creating athleticism in a young soccer player, or simply giving a guy in his mid-30's the ability to landscape his yard, play with his kids, and live a long healthy life. The great thing about functional training is that the by-product is real fat loss. When you walk in our gym, you won't find many machines. You'll see TRX, battle ropes, dumbbells, barbells, medicine balls, resistance bands, and many more "toys" as we call them. I will say, even though functional training is our main philosophy, it doesn't mean we don't stray away when we need to. Our trainers are very good at adapting to different training methods, depending on the client at hand.



We have a variety of high energy classes to keep people engaged and interested, no matter what their skill level. At our gym, you'll see kickboxing, boot camps, American ninja warrior, strength and speed classes, boxing conditioning, and even tabata. Each one of our adult classes are centered around fat loss and muscular strength, both of which promote most of what people want for themselves. Fat loss is very hard to figure out.

There's no formula you can learn in college that can tell you how to create fat loss, and there's no book for it either, you simply have to know how to do it from experience with real clients. We're comfortable in stating that we have near perfected it, which gives me confidence that we will be in business here for a long time.

**Q: Can someone just walk in and begin?**

Yes, there's no startup fees or anything like that. You want the right program? Then we start immediately. Most people take classes, and if that's the case, they just buy a package and start right away. All new clients get a free consultation, which shows them exactly what we do and how we do it. After a short discussion about goals and some fitness

testing/measurements, we run them through a very basic workout. From there, we usually have all the tools we need to build their program.

I've got one client who is 53 years old, and everyone tells him to cash in his chips, forget about working out, and just relax. Well, that's not who he is. He's a man that always wants more out of life. Told me he went to 8 trainers before us and said this was his last stop. Didn't have the best knees, but we started making goals and took it one step at a time. Three years later, he's doing some absolutely amazing things with a physique that he never thought he would have. Tells me every day that our gym changed his life, which of course motivates the heck out of me to continue delivering the best services we can.

**Q: What are your top priorities that you focus on as a business owner?**

**A:** I want Functions of Life to be our clients' true home for fitness and performance. Whenever they have a question, I want them to come to us. We all have very unique skills and experiences, formal education on training, we practice what we preach, and we also remain very up to date on our industry at all times. The average person in the community might see us as just another gym with a few trainers off the street, but once you get to know each one of our staff members, you'll quickly see why we rose to the top so quickly. These trainers are some of the best I've worked with and I'm not afraid to say that at all. So as far as my priorities, I would say it is to take care of my trainers the best I can. If I do that, I can only see that reflecting in how well they treat their clients as well.



For myself, I tend to be very passionate about our youth training programs, which was my main focus when I started. More than anything, I want confidence in my kids here. When a young athlete has confidence, you get more out of them in every way, physically, socially, and even educationally. Lucky for me, I'm in a position to easily give them that confidence. Taking it further, we want them to understand that this stuff should not be seen as "hard," instead it should be seen as fun and challenging.

**Q: As a small business owner who do you use for resources on how to learn to manage your business?**

**A:** Of course my accountant, and then I also have clients who are local business owners that I've grown close with such as Elegant Ice's Aaron Costic and Sequoia Financial Group's

Gerry Knotek. Although they are in completely different professions, it's more about discussing how to make smart and reasonable decisions during difficult or opportunistic times. I tend to be a huge risk taker though, which not everyone agrees with. But the way I see it, as long as you're betting on yourself, you're good. Just put in the work and make it happen.

**Q: It sounds like Todd Durken, your initial boss, influenced your philosophy on how to do business and that it stuck with you, made an impression and has been what's worked for Functions of Life.**

**A:** Yeah, Todd was never as focused on kids training like I am, but, I did take from him the idea of treating your clients like family. I took it from there and realized if you already have families coming to you, why not provide service for all of them. Todd is an extremely motivational guy. He travels all around the world doing motivational fitness. He hired me, probably because I was a military guy. I got very lucky with the internship I had with him and anything I need, even to this day, he's got my back. He's done a lot of good work in his years. The main thing is creating good customer service and taking care of your people.

**Q: What does 2017 look like for Functions of Life?**

**A:** We just opened up another new gym, giving us additional space, which gives us flexibility to have multiple classes going on at the same time and meet the demands of our clients. Summer camps will most likely run much smoother with the extra space as well. Another thing I realized is we are missing out on certain demographics that I feel really need us. Recently I got in touch with families of kids with Type 1 Diabetes and started to create programs to bring them together. If there's one thing I want to eradicate, it's young kids feeling different in a negative way. Our job, aside from fitness and performance training, is to create a positive mentality within people, that gives them the confidence to take on the world. Whether it's kids or adults, that's really what it comes down to. Your mindset controls your life, and you have to nurture the things that control your mindset. In the end, we're all about just living with a purpose and simply giving it all we got. Pretty sure if we follow that, 2017 will turn out just fine.

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