

MIGHTY TONKA & THE PRINCE OF SCOTCH PLAINS



Last week I spent the day photographing comedian **Mike Marino**, who returned to his New Jersey roots to headline a fundraising event for his high school alma mater's hockey team, the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Raiders. Mr. Marino has performed in every major comedy club from New York to Los Angeles and his comedic style made him a regular sketch player on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Still, the absurd spectacle of this 52 year old comedian returning to the hallways of his former high school was not lost on Marino. Racing through the building greeting security staff, teachers and students with a non-stop flurry of quips and reminiscences, he tried to find his old hall locker while proudly brandishing his original locker key as if it had some magical GPS powers that could somehow lead him to his Holy Grail. After [kicking one recalcitrant locker](#) a few times after a 3rd failed attempt, he stopped looking. Listening to Marino proudly note that his band jacket (he introduced the congas into the band's repertoire) still fits, one gets the sense that his connection and fondness for his family and East Coast community (he now lives in North Hollywood, CA) is unshakeable and strong.

I was looking forward to spending a day with Marino. It's always interesting to meet people who have made it big in an unforgiving, dog-eat-dog industry. Plus, Marino and his skits that affectionally poke fun of New Jersey Italian-American culture are hilarious. He plays the "uno tosto" (tough guy), a persona that earned him the moniker "*New Jersey Bad Boy*." Yet meeting him for the first time in his childhood home provides a different perspective. Quiet and unassuming, among his first words were, "Come on in. Make yourself comfortable. My house is your house." It was not just *his* house; it was his *family's* house, which he lovingly restored and in which his father still lives. He took us on a tour of the modest homestead. The dresser upstairs had been his father's as a small boy; the baseball gloves in the shadowbox had been his grandfather's. Despite fielding seemingly incessant business texts and calls, his mind chewing over the details of the show later in the evening, Marino is clearly grounded, and his familial home and community roots run deep.

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“I never thought I’d be saying, ‘When I was young...’ and ‘The way things used to be...’” – repeating themes in Marino’s act that night at the sold-out high-school auditorium. Appearing on a stage that he last appeared on in 1981, one couldn’t help but sense his nostalgia. “I’d rather be 17 than 52, that’s for sure,” he said as we walked by the old cafeteria. Lots of kids want to grow up to be famous, live in Hollywood, and bring laughter to sold-out venues when they grow up. Few will. But if they grow up with the *Tonka* (big) heart of Marino, they’ll be a success.



Mighty Tonka and the Prince of Scotch Plains
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