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**Arab: Remembering how Gary Carter caught my heart**

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Gary Carter. He will always make me smile, even through the sadness I feel upon learning of his death.

Thanks to Carter, the face of baseball for my generation, I gained instant celebrity status in Grade 9, at that horribly awkward age every teenager must go through, when even a little bit of something special that you have, that no one else has, helps. In this case, it was a simple baseball card.

A huge fan of the Expos - which for me was Gary Carter - I joined Carter's fan club. Much to my surprise, a package arrived in the mail a short while later. It was a personalized baseball card from "the Kid" himself. The inscription will forever be etched in my memory. It said: "Paula, keep smiling. All my love, Gary."

My classmates at school couldn't believe their eyes. Nor could I, no matter how many times I turned it over and examined that precious card. It was 1983, the year E.T. was up for an Academy Award, The Police topped the charts and the Expos were the darlings of the Major Leagues. Boys wanted to grow up to be Gary Carter.

Girls dreamed of growing up and marrying him. Heck, I grew up and even became a catcher for my softball league because of him.

It was all part of the glamour of the Expos back then, and that superstar team of talent for which Carter was the anchor. I knew the starting lineup by heart. I can almost still remember it today, with a little help from the Internet. On the pitcher's mound is Steve Rogers. Catcher is Carter. On first is Al Oliver. Second base is Doug Flynn. Tim Wallach is on third, and playing short stop is Bryan Little. The outfielders are Tim Raines, Andre Dawson and Warren Cromartie. And was there a better mascot than Youppi?

Oh, what a team! Carter loved the Expos as much as Montreal and Canada loved No. 8. He had his best years playing in la belle ville, where he later returned for a final season, so he could retire from the great game he loved, wearing an Expos uniform. Carter spent 12 out of his 19 major league seasons in Montreal and, as an Expo, hit 220 of his 324 career home runs.

My love affair with baseball was brief, and likely ended sometime around when the romance of the Expos died, along with the team's promise of the 1980s. My friends today are often surprised to hear that I can talk ball, or, at least hold my own, provided the conversation is brief.

"I didn't know you like baseball," they'll say.

I don't, not really. It was Gary Carter and the Expos who drew me in.

Carter was forever smiling, but his sunny disposition was too often ridiculed by a bitter world.

"It drove some people nuts that Carter played every day with the joy as if it were the opening day of Little League," Tom Verducci, veteran baseball writer for Sports Illustrated, wrote in a tribute to Carter this week.

Those who knew him best, insist he was genuine. I know first-hand that he made time for his fans. Over the years, I've often thought about what Carter wrote on my baseball card; the profundity of his message becoming increasingly clear. As I grew up, I couldn't help but observe the public's general discomfort with people who seem too happy, or who smile too much.

Carter understood that better than anyone. He reflected in his 1987 book, A Dream Season: "My enthusiasm for my family, and for baseball and other things too, strikes some people as a bit too much. My happiness crowds people a little."

Former teammate Mookie Wilson says: "The one thing I remember about Gary was his smile. He loved life and loved to play the game of baseball."

That life came to a premature end this week, when Carter died of inoperable brain cancer at age 57.

And the card? It's still in a box, in my parents' basement, along with my most treasured childhood memories. It's the sentiment of what Carter did for that 13-year-old girl, long ago, that I carry forever in my heart.

Paula Arab is a columnist and editorial board member.

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