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The star and his son travelled to Inukjuak to inaugurate its first hockey arena

[Susan Campbell](#) · CBC News · Posted: Apr 29, 2022 4:00 AM ET |



Guy Lafleur is welcomed at Inukjuak's airport in April 1988. (Makivik News)
Since the news that Montreal Canadiens great Guy Lafleur died, Quebecers have flooded social media channels with their anecdotes of having crossed paths with *le Démon Blond*.

Minnie Grey's story is a little off the beaten track.

It's 1988, and Grey was the young third vice-president of the Makivik Corporation, which represents the Inuit of Nunavik. At the time, she had spearheaded a project to build Nunavik's first hockey arena in her home village of Inukjuak, on Hudson Bay. When it was built and ready to be inaugurated, she wanted to invite a famous hockey player.

"And there was no one more famous than Guy Lafleur," said Grey, now the executive director of the Nunavik Regional Board for Health and Social Services.

In 14 seasons with the Canadiens, Lafleur won five Stanley Cups, multiple individual trophies and was the leading goal scorer in the history of the club.

In 1988, though, he was officially retired, although months later he would lace up again with the New York Rangers. When Makivik called, he readily accepted the invitation.

That April, Lafleur and his son, Martin, flew 1,472 kilometres from Montreal to Inukjuak for the dual inauguration of the community's new Tikittavik Airport and the Sikulik Arena.

Bigger than Mandela

Emanuel Lowi, now a professor of First Peoples Studies at Concordia University, was a young reporter covering Lafleur's visit for the Makivik News at the time with his colleague, Charlie Patsauq.

Lowi remembers hundreds of people from Inukjuak and other communities waiting under the spring sun as the airplane landed.

"As they were coming down the stairs, there were these crowds yelling: 'Guy! Guy! Guy!'" he said. "It was thunderous!"

Officials had to whisk Lafleur and his son away so the visiting dignitaries, including the local MP, wouldn't be completely ignored by the crowd.



Left to right: Inukjuak Mayor Jobie Epoo, MP Guy St-Julien, Guy Lafleur, Makivik's Minnie Grey and an unidentified Quebec government representative at the new Inukjuak arena. (Makivik News)

Lowi describes Inukjuak as a tiny village at the time, with a population of about 800. The only visitors were government officials and construction workers.

"No one of that stature had ever visited the north. And no one has since," says Lowi. "Nelson Mandela stopped over once in Iqaluit, in Nunavut. But in 1988, in Inukjuak, Guy Lafleur was bigger than Mandela."

Lafleur had a 'quiet dignity'

At the end of his first day in the community, after the official business was over, Lafleur was the guest of honour at a community feast. Grey remembers people from the community laying out food they'd prepared — caribou stew, fish, ptarmigan and more.

Grey accompanied Lafleur along the banquet table, explaining all the dishes. "He ate a bit of everything!"

At a private party later, people were dancing. The song *Lady in Red* by Chris de Burgh came on. Lafleur walked up to Grey, who was wearing a red shirt, and said: "You're dressed in red, so I would like to invite you to dance."

"We danced and I teased him about how I was in red, but his face was red from the outing on the land on a spring day!" Grey recalls.



A crowd of autograph seekers surrounds Guy Lafleur's son, Martin. (Makivik News)

Twelve-year-old Martin Lafleur stayed at Grey's house and hung out with her sons, who were of a similar age.

"It was incredible. They got along really well. He fit right in with the local kids."

Lowi says kids visiting from the south were a rarity in Inukjuak. A photo in the Makivik News at the time shows the young Lafleur engulfed in a crowd of "Inuit autograph hounds."

"Guy was the heartthrob of all the women in the town of my age," says Lowi. "But Martin was equally popular with the 12-year-old girls!"

Lowi spent some time with the star, who was bunking at the home of his best friend, Daniel Epoo. They shared a few beers and snuck out for a cigarette or two.

Lafleur's easy demeanor impressed him.

"He became part of the family," Lowi says. "He had this quiet dignity about him. And he certainly didn't indulge in the aura of a hero."

An ordinary superstar in the community

Lowi went along when a group from the community brought Lafleur on a two-day snowmobiling expedition.

They fished on a frozen lake and Lafleur pulled in a half-dozen trout. They stayed in tents on the lake overnight and Lowi shared lodgings with Lafleur, Epoo and Epoo's son Jonathan.

"I like to say I slept with Guy Lafleur," says Lowi, laughing. "We drilled a hole in the ice and jigged for fish in our sleeping bags!"



Members of the community erected an inukshuk to commemorate Lafleur's visit. Left to right: Annie Kasudluak, Louise Samisack, Guy Lafleur, Daniel and Jonathan Epoo, Guy Trudeau and Moses Nowkawalk. (Makivik News)

Lowi says during the time he was in Inukjuak, Lafleur would walk around the community, going to the store, and dropping by people's houses to say hello.

"There was a guy who played for the Montreal Alouettes called Johnny Rodgers. He was known as the Ordinary Superstar. That's what Guy was — a superstar who was just one of the people."

Grey remembers how Lafleur referred to his own small town beginnings in Thurso, Que., in his speech at the inauguration of the new rink.

"He hoped someone would get to the hockey world from the arena," Grey remembers. "He encouraged the kids to dream and to work hard to achieve something. That was really special."



Lafleur was at ease on a snowmobile and took happily to traditional activities. (Makivik News)

Years later, Grey was in line for a flight at Montreal's airport when she heard her name.

"I turned around and there was Guy. I was totally thrilled to be called out in the crowd by Guy Lafleur — he remembered me and we talked about his trip to Inukjuak."

Grey was saddened when she heard the news that Lafleur had passed away, 34 years almost to the day since he travelled North.

"I'm at my cabin not far from Kuujjuaq and it's beautiful spring weather. It's exactly the beautiful weather we had when Guy came to visit."

The last line in Lowi's story from the Makivik News in 1988 read: "Guy Lafleur loves Inukjuak and Inukjuak loves Guy Lafleur."

"He experienced the north like few people get to," Lowi says. "And I think it meant something to him."



Lafleur does the ceremonial puck drop to inaugurate Inukjuak's Sikulik Arena, the first in Nunavik. (Makivik News)

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