Victim of abuse finds loving family

By ANN HAUPRICH

Herald Special Emerson Ritchie-Dickinson now lives a happy existence as part of a Halton family who love and respect him tremendously.

But for much of his childhood, Emerson was a victim of physical and emotional neglect and abuse. His alcoholic mother left him at an early age in the care of his grandmother on an Indian Reserve in Georgian Bay. Although he loved his grandmother deeply, Emerson was often lonely. Because he was illegitimate and of mixed blood, he was ridiculed and ostracized by his peers on the reserve. He was terrifled to walk down the street alone because of the constant tounting and beatings inflicted upon him by other children.

see him every month or so, she would get drunk and ruin the long brothers. They were scared too." anticipated visit.

Emerson, the worst was yet to come. son began to fall in school and also

When he was about 8 or 9 years old. his mother decided she wanted him to come and live with her in Burlington. By this time, she had remarried - and Emerson was devastated to discover his step-father also had a severe drinking problem. During drinking episodes, Emerson's stepfather would use him as a punching bag and Emerson eventually came to view the beatings as an inevitable

part of his life. "My step-father had a short temper. He would just grab the first thing he could find and hit you with it - usually his fist," recalls Emerson, now 21. Emerson says he used to welcome invitations to sleep over at the homes of his friends "because I felt safe there". I felt protected when I was in their homes. At my house, I couldn't sleep at night When his mother finally came to because I was so scared. I also wanted to protect my two younger

Despite the fact that he was ex-As difficult as those years were for tremely bright and talented, Emer-

developed a habit of compulsive stealing. "I would look at kids and the things they had and I knew I would never get nice things like they had from my parents. The only way I could get a bike or an electronic gadget or nice clothes was to steal

them," he says. A turning point came in Emerson's life when a teacher caught him trying to steal a bike when he was in Grade 6. He was subsequently placed on probation for six months and began to have regular contact with a social worker, who referred him to the Port Nelson Project in Burlington, which is an after school project for troubled adolescents. "That's when I really opened up," reflects Emerson of his days at Port Nelson, "I took the bus there every day after school. I was really relieved to have a place to go. The counsellor there took me to bockey and football games and on trips to places like Ningara Falls and the African Lion Safari and I became a real pool shark competing with guys

who were 17 and 18 when I was only 11 or 12."

"Then one day," Emerson says, "I just got sick of it -- the ways things were at home. I was crying -it had been a particularly bad weekend at home and I just couldn't take it any more. So when I went to Port Nelson on the Monday, I told the counseller everything and he was great ... he just took right over. He said I could either go to a group home or a foster home. I thought a foster home sounded better than a group home ... I was more interested in a place where somebody would love me than a place where I'd have to earn points for special privileges."

Emerson says the hardest part about going into foster care was telling his mother and step-father of his of his decision, "It hurt a bit, but I was glad I was leaving. I think my Mom realized it was the best thing for me ..."

The rest of the story reads like a fairy tale ending.

Emerson was placed in the spacious home of Barb and Grant Dickinson of the Village Green in Burlington. The couple then had four school aged children living at home so Emerson had lots of company his own age and struck up a particularly close relationship with the Dickinson's son, Paul, who is now 20.

"I was a little scared at first," remembers Emerson. "I came from a masonite townhouse in the slums of Burlington to this big house in a nice neighbourhood that seemed like a mansion."

Unlike a lot of foster children who resent being taken away from their homes and placed in foster care. Emerson was grateful for the protection and new opportunities the ex-perience afforded him.

In retrospect, however, Emerson thinks he's a stronger, more sensitive person because of the pain he endured as a child. His dream now is to have a full-

time career as an artist. His natural

abilities are evident in the paintings on display at the Dickinson home, "I'm really able to express myself through art. I especially like to paint nature scenes and wildlife because I grew up surrounded by them in

Georgian Bay." In recent years, Emerson has helped the C.A.S. by speaking to foster parents



EMERSON RITCHIE-DICKINSON (Photo courtesy of Holton Children's Aid Society)

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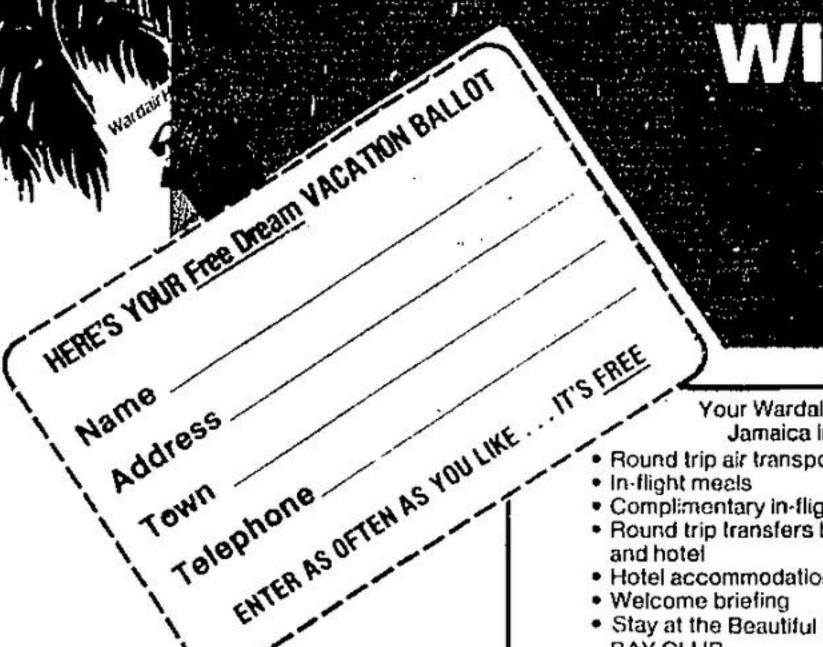
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