

'I FOUND OUT WHO MY TRUE FRIENDS ARE. I FOUND OUT MY PARENTS REALLY LOVE ME,' TEEN BEATING VICTIM SAYS

Family lives through tragedy

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

One year ago, Jonathan Wamback woke up with the kind of youthful enthusiasm that comes with knowing summer is endless and your future is golden.

Classes over for another year, the Grade 9 student at Newmarket High School was off to Upper Canada Mall in search of a summer job.

His mother, Lozanne, dropped him off.

"I had a feeling I had to say to him, 'Honey, be careful.' I said that a lot," she said.

"He was walking away from the car, but I felt I had to say to him, 'Be careful.' He said, 'Mom, don't worry, I can take care of myself.'"

Jonathan put in an application at Sears, although he later told his grandmother he thought he scored a job at a Newmarket restaurant.

It was a step toward independence, an important move for a young man who had grown up under the eye of two loving but over-protective parents.

Life was good for the popular 15-year-old — summer was here, a driver's licence was only six months away, he had a girlfriend, tons of friends and the possibility of a summer job that would provide him with money to buy a new set of golf clubs.

An accomplished golfer with a seven handicap, Jonathan was set to play in the Buick junior invitational golf tour being held at numerous courses around southern Ontario.

That evening, Jonathan wandered over to Ken Sturgeon Park, across the street from his home in Newmarket's affluent Stonehaven neighbourhood.

He was confronted by three youths near the public bathrooms.

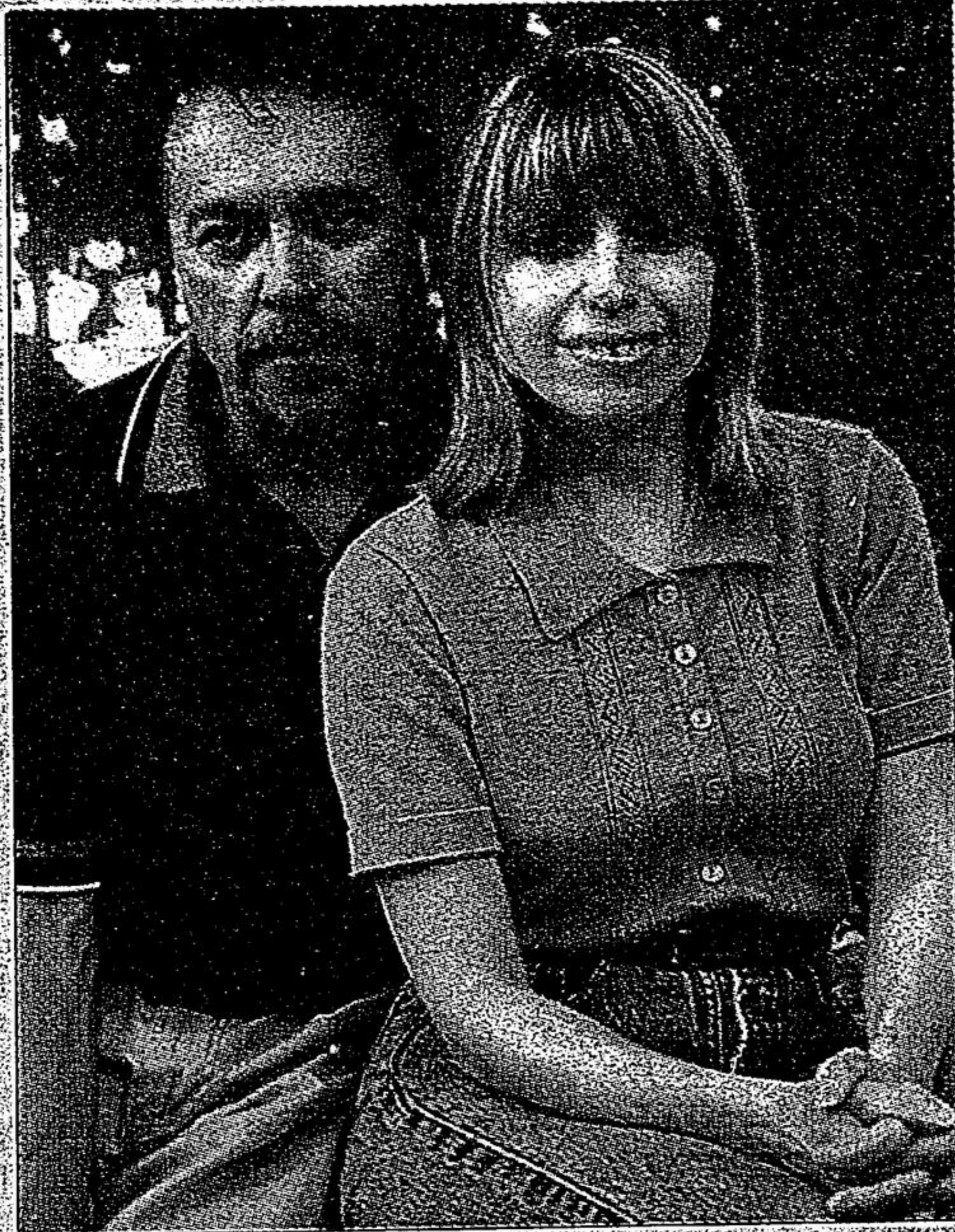
There was a loud argument and a fight.

Jonathan fled, taking an indirect path toward his home.

The attackers climbed into a grey car and hunted for Jonathan, finding him between two houses near the park.

Although Jonathan was severely beaten about the head, he managed to get home.

He called two friends and asked them to come over. Jonathan told them about the beating, but decided not to worry his parents.



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Joe and Lozanne Wamback are thankful their son is alive and they have taken giant leaps to change the law that would make violent young offenders more accountable for their crimes. Jonathan, tired of being the centre of attention, declined to pose for the photograph.

At the time, he thought the worst that would happen was he'd wake up with a bad headache.

But Jonathan didn't wake up the next morning.

In fact, that night he had a seizure and lapsed into a coma that would last three months.

It was only after Jonathan was at Sick Children's Hospital in Toronto that his friends told the teen's parents about the beating.

And there was more.

The friends said Jonathan had been threatened several times by a group of teenagers, payback after he called the police six months earlier to report a boy who was vandalizing washrooms in the park.

Shortly after the beating, police arrested three youths and charged them with attempted murder.

The charges were later reduced to aggravated assault. The trial for the youths, who can't

be identified under the Young Offenders Act, is scheduled for October.

Today, the first anniversary of the attack, Jonathan still wakes up with enthusiasm for the summer and his future.

But what a difference a year makes.

Jonathan is allowed to sleep in because it helps repair the devastating brain damage he has suffered.

Once awake, his mother physically helps him get out of bed.

While Jonathan can take a few steps, Lozanne is at his side to keep him steady when he loses his balance.

She helps him with his daily washroom rituals and to get dressed before they head downstairs.

"I have to help him, but not as much. He's getting stronger," Lozanne said.

"He can do the majority of the

work himself. I'm just there to steady him."

Unwilling to go outside in his wheelchair — determined to venture into the neighbourhood only when he can walk — Jonathan spends his days indoors with his mom unless they have an appointment.

While friends visit, it's not the same for a teenager who longs to be hanging out with his pals.

"He wants to be independent. He doesn't want anybody to help him do anything," his father Joe said.

"That's his goal, just to be normal again, just to be regular."

In the morning, Jonathan plays on the computer or watches TV.

His afternoons are consumed with physiotherapy, occupational therapy, educational therapy and speech therapy.

"It's probably been the worst year of my life and the best year of my life," Jonathan says, as he takes a break from playing on the computer Tuesday night.

The worst is understandable. But how could a year filled with terror and pain be the best in his life?

"Because I found out who my true friends are," Jonathan said.

"I found out my parents really love me."

Unwilling to limit himself, Jonathan registered yesterday for Grade 11 at Newmarket High. He's determined to walk to his classes this fall.

Joe and Lozanne credit a number of influences with saving their son — Jonathan's fierce determination, their faith in his recovery, and the overwhelming support from residents of York Region and across Canada.

"Our lives are changed inexorably through what I call a catastrophic event," Joe said.

"I can only describe what we went through as sheer terror. There's no other word strong enough."

But amazingly, the Wambacks are upbeat about the last year, despite the huge challenges they face for years to come.

"We're the luckiest family in Canada, bar none. I haven't the slightest hesitation in saying that," Joe said.

"For a father to come home and see his son smile and have him say, 'Hi dad,' and I can hold him and be with him. Given a lot of what we were faced with, I'm the luckiest man in Canada."

A LOOK AT THE PAST YEAR

JUNE 29, 1999

Jonathan Wamback, 15, is severely beaten after fleeing from three youths who confronted him near the public washrooms in Ken Sturgeon Park, across the street from his Stonehaven home. Wamback is able to get home, where he collapses into unconsciousness. He is taken to York County Hospital and later transferred to the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, where he remains comatose on life support. He undergoes brain surgery.

Three teens, who cannot be named under the Young Offenders Act, are charged with attempted murder.

JULY 6

York Regional Police meet with the Newmarket Crown attorney to discuss transferring two 17 year olds and a 16 year old to adult court.

The maximum a youth can receive on an attempted murder charge is three years plus two years probation. The maximum adult sentence is 25 years.

JULY 21

Jonathan's mother, Lozanne, talks about the vigil she and her husband Joe have been keeping at their son's side.

Jonathan is no longer in a deep coma — he is moaning and laughing. He has been moved out of the intensive care unit to a private room in the trauma ward.

JULY 28

Jonathan is transferred to Bloorview MacMillan Centre in Toronto where he will undergo extensive physical and occupational therapy as he slowly emerges from his coma.

NOV. 27-28

Joe Wamback is the featured speaker at the National Association of Professional Police Officers annual convention in Ottawa, where he delivered an hour-long speech describing a victim's perspective on youth violence.

JAN. 10, 2000

Jonathan and his parents hold a press conference at Toronto police union headquarters to announce a petition, to toughen the Young Offenders Act. The petition now has 400,000 names and has become a national campaign.

Also joining the fight are two other families whose lives have been forever touched by violence — the parents of Dimitri "Matt" Baranovski, the Toronto teen killed Nov. 14, and Calgary's McGloan family whose son Clayton was murdered.

JAN. 15

Jonathan turns 16.

JAN. 21

Attempted murder charges against three teens accused of beating 15-year-old Wamback into a coma are reduced to aggravated assault, sending a wave of despair through those who hoped the case would be heard in adult court.

JAN. 26

The OPP announces it will not lay charges against York Regional Police, The Era-Banner (The Tribune's sister newspaper) and two daily newspapers for publishing Jonathan's name.

The OPP conclude the victim's family wanted the name published.

FEB. 23

Joe Wamback takes his fight against the Young Offenders Act to Ottawa, appearing before the federal government's House justice committee. The committee is reviewing Bill C-3, which proposes changes to the legislation. Wamback doesn't feel the bill goes far enough to toughen the act.

MARCH 7

Crown attorney Mary Lou Dickie announces she won't seek to have the case against three youths transferred to adult court. Under the Young Offenders Act, they face a maximum sentence of two years if convicted.

APRIL 6

One of the youths charged with beating Jonathan is arrested with his mother and brothers following a drug raid by police. They face a total of 50 charges.

APRIL 10

The Wambacks launch a national bus shelter poster campaign against the Young Offenders Act. More than 800,000 Canadians have signed the petition.

APRIL 30

Joe Wamback is part of a panel on the Young Offenders Act on the CBC radio program Cross Country Checkup at the Newmarket Theatre.

MAY 1

Justice Terence O'Hara sets a three-week trial beginning Oct. 3 for the youths charged with aggravated assault on Jonathan.

MAY 13-14

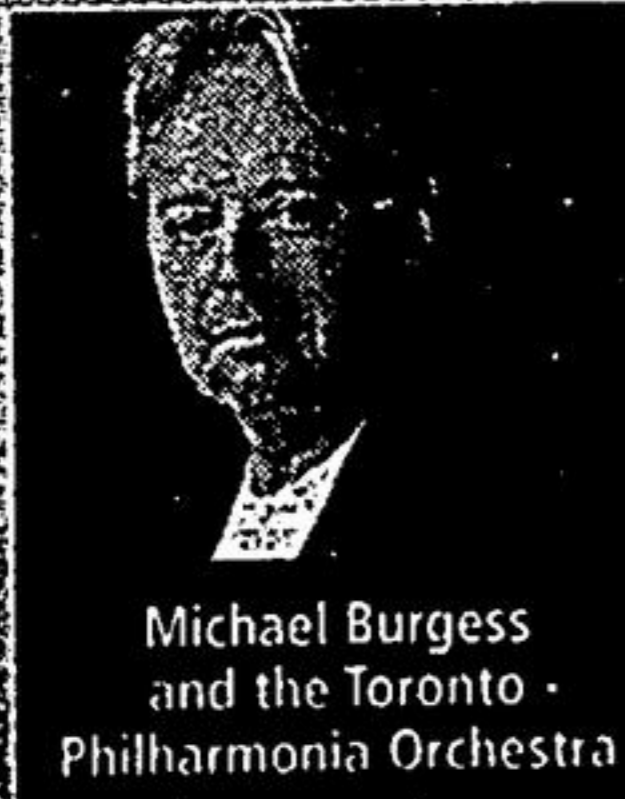
Joe Wamback attends federal Conservative convention in Quebec City. He reveals he's been approached by the party to run in the next election, a decision he is discussing with his family.

JUNE 28

Jonathan registers for Grade 11 at Newmarket High School.

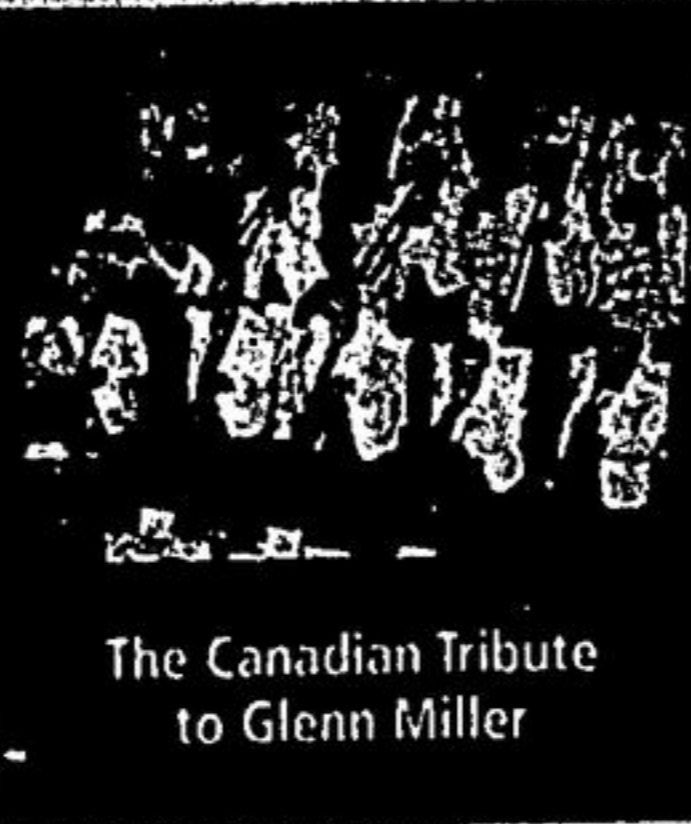
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