

Ken Gigliotti / Winnipeg Free Press

Jared McIntosh wields a mighty pen in addition to his hockey stick. The Winkler Flyers forward has got an early jump on a writing career.

ORDINARILY, the odds would be stacked against an African-American trying to play hockey in California while living on a tight budget with his single mom.

But there's nothing ordinary about Winkler Flyers forward Jared McIntosh.

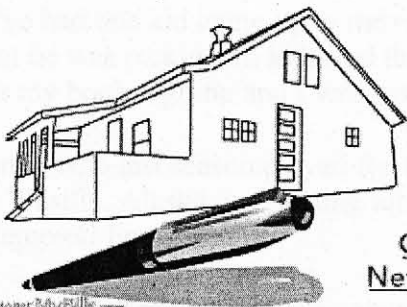
In his first season with the Manitoba Junior Hockey League's Flyers, Jared recently returned from a whirlwind trip home to Napa, Calif., where he and his mother Toni hosted a signing for his newly released children's book, *Apan*.

Jared, at 20, is the published author of a poignant story about diversity, prejudice and embracing differences.

"I think it's awesome. My son has made me very proud. He has a lot to offer," Toni, a youth diversion worker with the Napa Police Department, said in a telephone interview.

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Beginning when Jared was 11, she drove him two-and-a-half hours (return) to San Jose five days a week for hockey practices and games for seven years as he pursued his dream of becoming an elite player. Together, they faced prejudice everywhere they went, but were never defeated.

"These are things he's dealt with, but because of his personality, he always perseveres," she said. "My son is just a very likable, lovable person and he's got a big heart. I always told him you get back what you give, and he's always been one to give a lot."

Jared's book follows the adventures of Apan, a fictional creature living in a community on a Pacific Island.

Jared had created Apan, (Napa spelled backwards) originally a stuffed toy with one eye and feathers, for an extra-credit art project when he was in Grade 12. When he showed it to young students, it got insults at best, and he realized he had an important message to share.

"Ugly wouldn't even describe what people thought about it and they were making fun of it just because it looked so ugly," said Jared, who had volunteered with an elementary school class. They were in Grade 2 when Jared was in Grade 12 and introduced them to Apan.

"I took it to these second-graders and they started making fun of it, so I wrote a short story about it. Then I read it to that same second-grade class and they looked at the creature totally differently.

"Growing up, I had to deal with that a lot, especially being African-American and playing hockey. It went from an idea to reality really fast."

Toni said she remembers going with an 11-year-old Jared to a hockey tournament in Las Vegas.

"The kids kept targeting him and trying to hurt him because of his skin colour and skill," she said. "At a time-out, I was standing there and the coach pulled him aside and said, 'Don't take this anymore. You go out after them.' My son looked at him and said, 'No, I don't play that way.' And I thought, 'He really gets this.'

"After the game, a lot of people came up to him and said, 'If it was me, I would have gone ballistic.' But he said, 'You show people by example. If I'm a good player, eventually they'll realize maybe they should get to know me and there's more to me than just a person of colour.' He's always had that attitude."

Jared said the book's story also reaches out to would-be bullies.

"Don't judge someone without knowing them. Try to actually understand them," he said of his book's message. "My best hope is that kids will take whatever they can out of it in the positive sense.

"I've had one kid come up to me (at the Nov. 29 book-signing) and tell me that the book helped him and that he was picking on kids and that now he's trying to change. It really didn't hit me until I went home for my book-signing and I was just in awe of how many people actually wanted to read my book."

Jared, who last season played for the North American Hockey League's Alaska Avalanche junior A team in Wasilla, Alaska, is donating all proceeds from his book's sales to the Napa-area Holly Cranston Memorial Foundation.

The foundation, created in honour of an eight-year-old girl who died from complications caused by a genetic defect, had awarded Jared a scholarship a couple of years ago that sustained his hockey career at a time when his mom could no longer afford it. He hopes to earn a college scholarship after this MJHL season so he can pursue a post-secondary education.

Toni is working with representatives of the foundation and local Kiwanis Club to publish and distribute the book. In Winkler, the Flyers are planning to put a batch of the books on sale at home games in Winkler Arena in the near future. Back home in the Napa Valley Unified School District, Toni said each elementary school is to receive two copies, and 100 books are being given to a foster-home organization in the area.



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