



Matt Blair

● SEMI-FINALIST ●

By **SUE DESCHENE**, *Freelance Writer*

Thanks to their own perseverance and the generosity of others, Matt Blair and his family have overcome some daunting economic challenges. In 1999, Matt, his two brothers and parents, Robin and Troy Blair, were the recipients of the very first Habitat Home built in Brockville by Thousand Islands Habit for Humanity.

Those unfamiliar with the requirements for Habitat Homes may be under the mistaken impression that these homes are given entirely free of charge to the recipient families. But Habitat Homes are not "freebies." Families must complete at least 500 hours of "sweat equity" on their homes, meaning that they do construction, cleanup and administrative work on these houses right on through to completion.

But because of this misperception, Robin recalls, Matt endured a lot of teasing. "Because we were the first, there was a lot of mixed reaction in the community. There were a lot of people who didn't quite understand it and would make comments. I told him just to be brave and keep a big smile on his face."

The youngest of three boys, 15-year-old Matt is a Grade 10 student at Thousand Islands Secondary School. He has participated in the Youth Volunteer Corps since July 2008 and has already completed over 150 hours of community service.

Lesley Patry and Elizabeth Meyer, leaders of the Youth Volunteer Corps, nominated Matt to commemorate his devotion to serving others. "Matt is an excellent example of the fact that you don't need everything in life to succeed," they point out. "His positive attitude, sense of humour and passion for volunteering more than illustrate that."

The Habitat Home was a turning point for Matt and his family. Prior to that, they'd been living in a small three-bedroom home. Robin remembers that Matt's bedroom was a cramped space, not much bigger than a small closet. "So it opened his eyes that there is hope out there," she adds.

Habitat for Humanity was such a blessing in Matt's life that it has inspired him to help others, just as his family was helped. In his short career with the Youth Volunteer Corps, Matt has already served at Loaves and Fishes, helped out at various United Way functions (including the art gala and ethanol plant barbecue), worked at Ribfest, and he assists at Brockville Braves games.

Even though he doesn't have access to a family vehicle, that doesn't stop Matt, who is more than willing to walk or find some way to get to a volunteer project, no matter the time or day.

"He enjoys it very much, and I've encouraged him," Robin says. "He said, 'I've got all my (volunteer) hours in. Can I stay on?' That's what I was hoping for."