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STEVEN M. FALK / Daily News

THE ICEMAN LOVETH

**WHY FLYERS'
DONALD BRASHEAR
DEVOTES HIS LIFE
TO MISTREATED
KIDS PAGE 90**

Some insight into
Flyers winger
Donald Brashear:

Pet

Has a Pug named
Buddha.

Scoring

Highest NHL
single-season goal
total is 11 during
1999-2000
season for
Vancouver.

Smell

His favorite scent
is that of oranges.

Other sports

Enjoys golf, and
admits he's better
at hitting off the
tee than putting.

Transition

Traded by
Vancouver, along
with a draft pick,
on Dec. 17, 2001,
to the Flyers for
winger Jan Hlavac
and a pick.

Music

Self-taught
himself to play
the piano.

Language

Fluent in French,
his favorite
subject growing
up was English.

Transportation

A fancier of fast
cars, he owns a
Lamborghini.

Relaxation

His favorite
board game is
Monopoly.

Milestone

Scored a
career-high
28 points for
Vancouver in
2000-01.

Dream

If he could play
one other sport,
he'd like to be a
shooting guard
in basketball.

Rugged

Led the NHL in
penalty minutes in
1997-98 with 372
penalty minutes.

Sources: Flyers
media guide and
Zack Hill, Flyers
publicist



SEEVEN M. FALK/Daily News

Donald Brashear (left) poses with young friends during visit to a farm in Cherry Hill.

RE-ENFORCING HOPE

FLYERS' BRASHEAR SHOWS SOFTER SIDE IN WORK WITH CHILDREN

By **MARK KRAM**
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A YOUNG BOY climbs up on the lap of Donald Brashear. With big, searching eyes and a playful personality, the boy is one of five children living at the Florence Klemmer House in Mount Laurel, N.J., each of whom had been mistreated in some fashion by his or her parents and sent here by the courts to be placed for adoption. The boy is dressed in a Donovan McNabb jersey and looks up curiously at the 6-2, 235-pound Flyer, who has come here on this leafy autumn day for a visit.

The boy asks, "Is it fun? Being a kid?"

Brashear smiles. "Yes, it is," he says. "Being a kid should be the best time in your life."

The boy frowns.

"No?" Brashear asks. "What is it that you would like?"

"I want to be with my mommy," the boy says. "Spend some time with her, but I can't."

"Do you know why?" Brashear asks.

"Can't even call her," the boy continues.

"Do you know why?" Brashear asks again.

The boy considers the question, then says: "'Cause she didn't have enough money for me. 'Cause she didn't have food or diapers for me. 'Cause some people say she is on drugs."

Brashear draws him close. "So you know why you are here," he says. "Your mommy is having problems, and the people here want you have a nice life."

Dejectedly, the boy nods in comprehension. As he continues chatting with Brashear, another boy climbs onto the lap of the 31-year-old left winger, then another, then a girl. Soon, there are five children there, clinging to his arms and climbing up his chest. Giggling, one of them elbows another aside for more room. The girl then looks up at Brashear

and says, "Mister, can you come back again?"

Indiana roots

The big hockey player sees himself in these young children, the way it once was for him so long ago. Chiefly, he sees it in their eyes, the yearning to attach and hold on. Nothing is secure in their shattered worlds. Behind each of them is a world of horror, of pain so indelible that it leaves them unable to look at an adult with any degree of trust. Ahead: The uncertainty born of broken promises and that glimmer of hope deep within that someone will come along and love them. You can see it in the way they behave whenever a new face shows up at the door. It becomes an impromptu audition, a play for attention intended to win over and persuade strangers to look at them twice and perhaps give them more than just food and a bed.

This is the cheerless world that Donald Brashear knew as a boy.

From its very beginnings in Bedford, Ind., his own childhood was steeped in turmoil. His parents split up when he was just 3. The youngest of three children, he eventually went to live in Montreal with his mother, who married again and placed Donald into foster care. Brashear never understood why she had chosen *him* and not one of the others to get rid of, but concedes that he was "probably a lot to handle." He says he had a problem with bedwetting as a young boy, and that his stepfather handled it by wrapping him in a garbage bag taped at his waist. Half brother Danny Roy remembers that scene from their boyhood with chilling clarity, the sound of Donald crying as his legs thrashed about in the bag. "It is still a haunting thing to me," says Roy, who is a Montreal policeman and the only sibling with whom Brashear has remained close. "But somehow Donald coped."

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BRASHEAR

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Brashear pauses and adds, "It was humiliating."

Roiling anger grew within young Brashear as the years passed, and he became a handful for anyone who had to care for him. He was sent to a foster family in Montreal, then a second just outside of Quebec. Neither was able to control him. A voice inside his head told him, "Something is wrong with you. No one wants you." By age 8, he had landed with a third foster family in Quebec City. Brashear — who is black — became a target of racial slurs in elementary school and ended up in daily fights. Ongoing friction with his "new parents" over that and other problems just drove Brashear deeper into himself. While he concedes today that he owes a debt to them for hanging in there with him until he was 17, he says it has been years since he had spoken with them. Says Brashear, "I just keep moving forward in life. I do not look back."

Sports became a place for Brashear to vent. He became especially skilled in hockey and at an early age set the NHL as his goal. He discovered he could skate better backward than forward, so he began his career as a defenseman before switching at age 17 to the front line. He had the size. He also had an appetite for hitting, which would serve him well in years to come as an enforcer. Roy remembers that Brashear worked extraordinarily hard to improve himself as an athlete, once running alongside him on a hot summer day as Roy peddled furiously on his 10-speed. When Brashear signed on with Longueuil, of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League, he says it "really scared me that I would not succeed," that he would have to start over yet again. But the Montreal Canadiens signed him at 20 as a free agent, and he was off and running. In 10 seasons with the Canadiens, Vancouver Canucks and the Flyers, Brashear has distinguished himself not just as a fighter but a fine hockey player.

Brashear is surprised at how far he has come.

He smiles and says: "Everybody dreams, but dreams can only take you so far. A lot of hard work goes into it, but hard work is not hard if it is something you like doing. I was just always happiest when I was on the ice."

Off the ice is where things al-



STEVEN M. FALK/Daily News



ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ/Daily News

Above, Donald Brashear does his thing during Flyers' win last night. At left, he earns an assist on son Jaxxon's shot at the basket.

ways got complicated. Even as he accumulated successes as a player and formed his identity, the old voices banged around inside his head. One in particular was especially confounding: *Why did my mother give just me away?* That question plagued him for years. He did not see her during that period, but carried around what he calls "an image" of her in his memory. He had to know *why* it happened. When Brashear was 20 or so, Roy arranged for the two to meet again. They talked; little of consequence was said. Brashear remembers that she seemed a stranger to him. He has never seen her again. Says Roy, "I know Donald was disappointed with how it went, yet I think he got what he came for: closure. He wanted to give his

image of her a face."

Some things take years to work through. In the case of Brashear, the emotional debris from his childhood landed in many areas. He says today he learned early in life to keep his guard up, that he allowed few people to get too close to him. Cordial with his teammates in the dressing room, he prefers to keep to himself away from it. With the exception of Roy, there is no one in his family he is even remotely interested in seeing again under any circumstances. Apt to think back over those years as he sits by himself over a beer, he reminds himself he was just a child and he did nothing wrong. It was just the way it was. To clear his head and "just forget everything around me," Brashear will sit at a piano in a ho-

tel lobby on the road and play some old favorites. "When I am at the piano, it is just me and the piano. I enjoy that aspect of it."

The guard is still up.

But it is slowly coming down.

"Donald is so defensive," says Fredric Cyr, 31, a human-resources manager for a Montreal trucking firm whom Brashear calls one of his only true friends. "He just never opens up to people, but for those of us who have been lucky enough to know him from the *inside*, he is a very kind and even shy man."

The brooding countenance he wears in public simply vanishes when he is in the presence of children. He has two of his own with girlfriend Gabrielle: sons Jordan, 4, and Jaxxon, 2. And he has developed a strong connection with the children at the Florence Klemmer House, a pre-adoption group home where the residents are undergoing therapy for issues such as loss and abandonment. Children who end up there are in the care of the state of New Jersey, and generally have been through four or five foster homes due to behavior issues. On his tour of the facility that sunny October day, Brashear is led by the children from room to room, tugged this way and that by imploring voices: "Come here! No, over here!"

He sees that one of the bedrooms has a bare wall and asks a boy if he would like to have a Flyers poster to hang there. The boy

yells, "Yeah!"

He asks them if they would like to come to a game. They yell, "Yeah! Me too?"

He then gathers them in a private group and says, "Now if you are good, and do your schoolwork, I will come here and take you to visit my home."

The children cheer again. Brashear gets up to leave but is stopped by one of the boys, who looks up at him and asks: "Do you have a dog?"

Fall frolic

It is a few days before Halloween when Brashear comes back again and takes them on a hayride at Springdale Farm in nearby Cherry Hill. The children pile into the back of a wooden wagon brimming with straw and sit alongside Brashear. With a heavy rumble, the engine of the tractor starts up and begins to laboriously drag the wagon into the field, which is dense with harvested cornstalks. The gray sky hangs low on the horizon as the wagon splashes through a puddle and into a narrow lane that leads into some woods.

"The woods!" one of the boys shouts.

The driver leans back over his shoulder and reminds everyone to keep an eye out for a blue heron by the pond up ahead.

Brashear asks how everyone plans to dress up on Halloween.

A boy shouts: "A cowboy!"

A girl raises her hand and adds: "A witch!"

Another boy just peers out at the pond and says, "Where is that bird the man said we would see?"

The tractor stops in a large field and the children climb down from the wagon. They disperse in every direction and begin picking up pumpkins from the ground. They are told they are each allowed two. With a strutting air of accomplishment, they sure enough come back with a pumpkin under each arm, and one by one climb back into the wagon. One of the boys holds up his selection and announces: "I want to give this one a scary face."

The tractor starts up again and grinds into gear. It moves across the brown earth.

The girl says, "Who wants to make pumpkin pies?"

Brashear grins and says, "Who wants to *eat* pumpkin pies?"

To which the boy answers triumphantly, "I *love* pumpkin pie!" ★