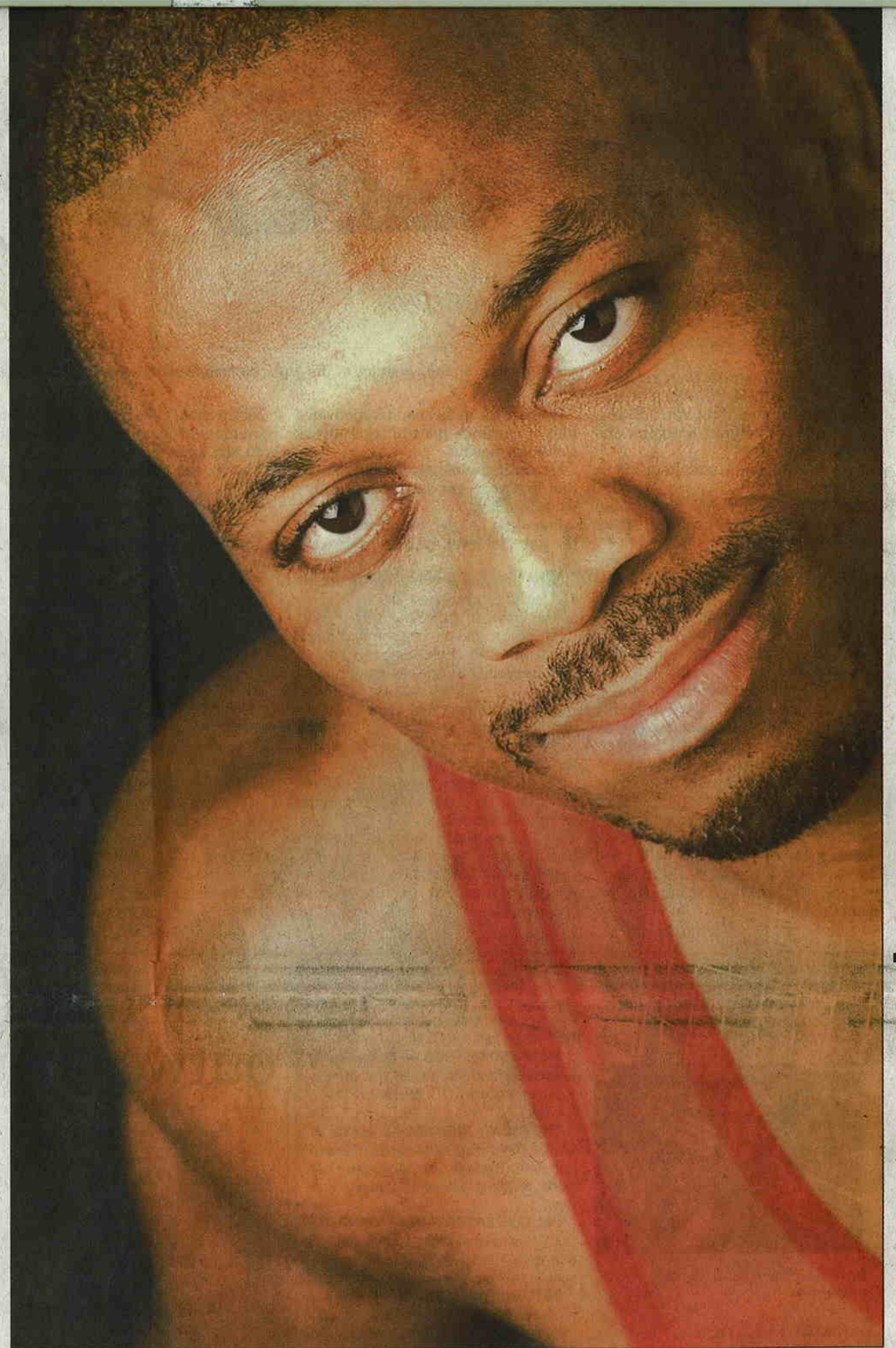


Making choices



Nick Ugoalah wins gold at the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester, England.

Nick Ugoalah lived a troubled life and eventually spent time in foster homes. He turned things around to win gold in wrestling at the Commonwealth Games. He's eager to tell you how to go after your dreams, too.



Motivational speaker Nick Ugoalah is coming to Niagara this week to deliver the keynote address at the Family and Children's Services Fall Gala.

PHOTOS SPECIAL

By **CHERYL CLOCK**
Standard Staff

It was almost three decades ago when the taxi arrived in the village.

It was a big event. The father, who had left his family when his eldest son was three years old, had returned to Ihie, a small village in Nigeria, to bring his children to North America. To Canada.

Nine-year-old Nick Ugoalah waited with his mother and siblings, a younger brother and sister. Most of the villagers had gathered to see them off.

Little Nick was excited. The village meant freedom to him. One big family. But he was excited about the new adventure that was before him.

The taxi arrived. His father got inside and Nick felt the grip of his mother's hand release from his.

The door closed.

His mother, dressed in a beautiful traditional wrap, remained outside.

It was then Nick understood. She was not coming to Canada with them.

"I remember that day so clearly," says Nick Ugoalah, now a 36-year-old man.

"She looked at me. It was like ... goodbye." She kept the plan a secret. A mother knows her son. Nick was a determined boy and he would likely have run away to the bushes and missed the plane.

When he realized his mother wasn't going to be part of his new life in Canada, he burst out of the cab and with tears rolling from his eyes, grabbed a piece of her dress in his hand.

"If you're not going, I'm not going too," he shouted between frantic sobs.

She took him aside. Calmed him. Talked to her eldest boy about the responsibility he has to care for his brother and sister.

"You go to Canada," she told him.

Nick got back into the cab. The door closed. And they were gone.

He cried all the way to his new home.

They lived in Elkford, a little town in the east Kootenays of British Columbia. A town with one grade school and at the time, no high school.

His coal miner father had a new wife.

His dad was abusive, and Nick ran away many times. But that deep sense of responsibility to his siblings always drew him back.

In Nigeria, his mother worked at a local market and Nick was often left to care for them.

"If I leave, they're still there," he thought.

Then one day, Nick realized he had another option. He was 14 years old when he told a teacher about the abuse.

Eventually, Nick and his siblings were placed in separate foster homes.

"Leaving my dad was the biggest decision I'd ever make in my life," he says.

A decision born from fear. But one that would make him stronger. Confident. And an inspiration to others.

His story has many chapters. And many important people who each filled vital roles in his life journey.

Every one of them gave him something quite simple, yet extremely powerful. They gave him a chance.

He often wonders if it was fate that brought them into his life. That if any one of those people were missing, would he be who he is today.

WHO WHERE WHEN

WHO: Nick Ugoalah will be the keynote speaker at the FACS Fall Gala

WHERE: White Oaks Resort and Spa, Niagara-on-the-Lake

WHEN: Nov. 7

TICKETS: \$125. Proceeds support FACS programs. The event includes dinner, and a live and silent auction.

CALL: For more information or to reserve tickets, call 905-937-7731 ext. 3304.

Today, Nick is a motivational speaker and lifestyle coach who lives in British Columbia. He travels across Canada. Speaks to students. Business professionals. And anyone who wants to learn how they can connect with their own powers.

On Friday, Nick will deliver the keynote address at the Family and Children's Services Fall Gala. He will also be speaking to foster parents and youths in care.

A long time ago, Nick was in foster care in Welland.

He will tell his audience that life is full of circumstances. And choices.

The day he decided to leave his father for good, he made a choice to have a better life.

"You make a decision which way to go," he says.

"To believe a better life does exist."

It's a belief he held close to his heart, even

as he was bounced among foster homes. He was living with a foster family in B.C., went out drinking and got labelled a bad kid. A troublemaker.

He wasn't really. But from then on it just seemed like no other home wanted a kid with a bad reputation, deserved or not.

"There's a stigma often attached to kids in care," he says.

"People think they're bad kids. They think you're there because you've caused your own problems."

Then he met the McLellans. His fourth foster family in as many months.

Elaine was a nurse. Ian a minister.

They were supposed to have Nick in their Fernie, B.C., home for just three weeks that summer.

It lasted three years.

"Nick and I just bonded," says Elaine Allum (the couple has since divorced).

She asked the child protection agency to keep him longer.

He was a scared, skinny, at times angry young boy when they met. There were times when she'd stay up with him into the wee morning hours listening to him talk about his father.

"He needed unconditional love," she says.

He joined a gym. Even took Judo lessons.

"He had in him a drive," says Elaine.

The time they drove across Canada to Ontario for a wedding, Nick came too. They camped along the way, and everywhere they stopped, Nick had to find a gym, says Elaine.

When the couple moved to Welland, they invited Nick to come too.

He finished his school year with another foster family, then joined Elaine, Ian and their three-year-old son Grant.

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