

# Native student bridges the gap between two worlds

APR 29 1987

87-5/6

By CATHY LORD  
Journal Staff Writer

Ben Houle was caught between two worlds.

His father pushed him to finish high school but his friends thought school was for losers.

"I was trying to be two people at once which I couldn't be," says Houle, who grew up on the Goodfish Lake Reserve in northern Alberta. "I was caught between two worlds — I wanted to have friends and I wanted an education."

Despite the pressure, he was one of two native students to graduate from the Grade 12 matriculation program at Ashmont secondary high school in 1980.

"When I started out in school, I had a negative attitude about it," said Houle,

24, a Cree Indian. "A lot of people had negative attitudes about education — all you could see around you was failure."

But Houle's negative attitude changed after he began Concordia College's university and college entrance program for native adults.

"When I first came here I was apprehensive about failure, but my confidence kept growing and growing — it's an excellent program for adult learners," he said in a recent interview.

Houle finished the one-year program with honors, attaining the second highest marks in the class. He has been accepted into the bachelor of commerce degree program for two years at Concordia, and the final two years at the University of Alberta.

"This is the highest level I've ever achieved — I know if I can keep up this attitude I can do it — I can't wait to get into this program in the fall and tackle it," said Houle, who attended convocation ceremonies at the college Saturday.

Class valedictorian Christine Hunter, 35, said she had a tough time during the early years of her education: "Kids would call us names and if we tried to defend ourselves, we'd end up in the principal's office."

Like Houle, she graduated from high school and always wanted to go back to school. Yet, raising three children took up all her time until she entered the college entrance program last fall.

The toughest adjustment Hunter made

was in her home life. "Before I was always at home for my kids — I helped them with their homework — it was hard for them to understand that I had to do my homework."

The program consists of intensive training in English and mathematics combined with career counselling, says Harry Lutzer, dean of admissions and continuing education.

The program is the brainchild of Paul Schmidt, education co-ordinator for the Goodfish Reserve, which sponsors the program.

The two-year old program graduated 28 students this year and 27 last year and many of the graduates have gone on to further studies or are working.

Don Pimm, who began teaching the program's English course in January, says he likes the program because the students are eager to learn.

"The challenge is we have to find a common ground in the way we approach things," says Pimm. "There's a certain timidity at first on the part of the students — some are afraid of failure so part of the job is to reinforce positive feelings about education."

Houle says native youths need more vocational information at an early age so they realize the vital importance of education. "Education is vital for the survival of the native people," says Houle. "I'd like to hear my daughter eventually say with pride that: 'Dad has a good education.'"