

Directions: Read the article and annotations carefully. Place the annotations where you think they belong in the margins of the article. Use at least 20 annotations.

What's in a Name? A Lot, as It Turns Out

By ERIK ECKHOLM MAY 9, 2010

PASADENA, Calif. — With his frizzy hair pulled into forward-protruding spikes and his goggle-size glasses, Max Pauson resembles one of the futuristic comic-book characters he admires and draws. Ebullient and eager to show a sketchbook filled with startling portraits, he seems to have identity to spare.

But this promising art student's strong sense of self was hard-earned. It was forged in an unstable, emotionally wrenching childhood and, in an odd detail that might serve as a metaphor for his struggles, it comes after 19 years of life without a legal name.

His birth certificate read only "(baby boy) Pauson." Name to come.



His father had disappeared. His mother — in his words, “a pack rat who takes a really long time to decide on anything” — did not pick a first name at the hospital in San Francisco in 1990. And she never followed up, leaving him in a rare and strange limbo.

While Mr. Pauson was long aware of the blank spot in his identity, he never quite had the time or means to correct it. He lived with his mother in a house that sometimes lacked electricity. He spent time in foster care and returned to live with his mother in homeless shelters and in public housing. Finally, at 15, he ran away to live with friends' families.

In an era when identities and backgrounds are scrutinized more than ever, he still managed to get into schools, though he never tried to obtain a driver's license.

“Sometimes I thought it was kind of cool, like the Man With No Name in ‘The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,’ ” he said last week in his subsidized apartment here, which is provided by a group that helps former foster-care children.... When Mr. Pauson was in grade school, child welfare officials came to ask him about his mother and conditions in their house. “I didn't know what to say,” he recalled, only hinting at how torn he felt at the time: “I was a little kid, and my mother was my idol.”

“I was about 13 when I realized that my mother had problems of her own that weren’t my fault,” he said, and a few years later “I knew I couldn’t stay at home anymore.”

Mr. Pauson said he got involved in drugs briefly but found his way with the help of mentors, public and private aid and, most of all, his love of drawing....

“I always used art as an escape,” he said. He said he was a tormented outcast in middle school, but once he entered San Francisco’s School of the Arts, a magnet school where nonconformity was valued, “I finally felt comfortable being myself.”

“It was kind of like Hogwarts,” he said of the high school. “The teachers were all real characters.” Even so, he did not always fit in smoothly, said Thomas Morgensen, one of his art teachers there.

“When he arrived, he was wired and not real focused,” Mr. Morgensen said. “He was well liked, but some of the teachers had a hard time dealing with his energy level.” He often cut classes, too. But Mr. Morgensen and others saw that he was serious about his work.

Mr. Pauson’s portfolio won him a full scholarship to the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. He was also accepted by Hillsides Youth Moving On, a nonprofit group that provides subsidized housing to former foster youths, along with counseling, job aid and life skills that many never picked up. He bicycles the five miles from the Hillsides apartment complex to school.

His artwork... includes energetic portraits and humorous takes on popular musicians like Jimi Hendrix, Billie Holiday and the duo Gnarlz Barkley, all done in a cartoonish style that Mr. Morgensen praised as “very controlled, but in his own crazy manner.”

The Hillsides program requires that residents take a job — part time if they are in school — and Mr. Pauson found one teaching art to children that required a thorough background check. His legal void caught up with him. Hillsides found a lawyer who helped him create an official identity with the weighty name he had imagined for himself as a child: Maximus Julius Pauson.

When the big day came last year, it was an anticlimax. After six months of paperwork and waiting by Mr. Pauson, a judge hurriedly stamped “a flimsy piece of paper,” he said. “It wasn’t at all like the scene in ‘Roots’ when the father holds up his baby to the sky and says his name.”

Still, he added, “The whole world changed for me.”