



May 4, 2017

# Volunteers celebrated with June

# Callwood Awards

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The caller on the other end of the line was a bit surprised when Elma Gabriel-Mayers didn't express much effusion after being informed she was a June Callwood Outstanding Achievement Award for Voluntarism recipient.

There was a reason for the reserved response.

On Good Friday 2016, the septuagenarian suffered a brain haemorrhage at The Church of the Nativity in Malvern and spent a week in intensive care unit.

"I remember asking the caller if I should be excited which, in retrospect, might not have been the right way to react to good news," said Gabriel-Mayers. "On the other hand, I have endured a lot in the last year and just felt that being alive is really what I should be thankful for."

Launched in 2009, the awards celebrate dedicated individuals and non-profit organizations who have made lasting and meaningful volunteer contributions in their community.

Being rewarded for giving her time and effort freely is not something that Gabriel-Mayers counts on.

"I believe when you are working to assist people, you really are not doing that for accolades," she said. "On the other hand, this award tells me that

even though we may think people are not noticing what you are doing, they are and I am humbled by the honour.”

Gabriel-Mayers passion for community giving started before she migrated from St. Vincent & the Grenadines in 1968.

As a 16-year-old member of the Stubbs Cultural & Social Club in her rural community, she and a few of her teenage peers used some of their pocket money to purchase a cow.

“The village butcher killed it and we cooked meals for some of the needy residents,” recalled Gabriel-Mayers, the sister of leading Caribbean architect Moulton Mayers who designed the Bank of St. Vincent & the Grenadines building. “For others who wanted to do their own cooking, we gave them some meat.”

Shortly after coming to Canada, she joined the St. Vincent & the Grenadines Association in Montreal where she spent five years with friends before heading to the Greater Toronto Area where she became a member of the St. Vincent & the Grenadines Association of Toronto that she has served in several administrative capacities, including president for a year.

Gabriel-Mayers started attending The Church of the Nativity at the same time of increased gun violence in Malvern nearly 14 years ago.

“We had a meeting at the church that was attended by Toronto Police 42 division members who came to tell us how to protect ourselves,” she recounted. “I thought that we, as adults, had an obligation to reach out to our young people instead of trying to keep ourselves safe from them and I told the officers that.”

Tammy Taylor Deane, a member of the church’s youth committee who was in the audience, agreed and reached out to Gabriel-Mayers who published

a book of poems, 'Standing Tall in Echoes of Destiny', three years ago.

“Tammy basically said ‘our friends are getting shot’ and we, as a Black church, weren’t doing anything about it,” she said. “When she asked if I could help them, I agreed. We marched in the community to protest the senseless gun violence and, with the help of 42 division, delivered gifts to needy families over the years.”

Very few have a stronger sense of promoting civic responsibility and projecting the positive images of a community often negatively stereotyped by mainstream media than Paul Nguyen who was among this year’s June Callwood Award winners celebrated last week at the Toronto Reference Library.



Paul Nguyen

The product of Vietnamese immigrants who fled to Canada after the Fall of Saigon in 1975, Nguyen has spent his 37 years in the Jane & Finch community.

“When people ask me why I still live there, my response is always ‘Why not?’,” said the social activist. “As a child, I tobogganed down the hill in winter and played hockey with friends of various ethnic backgrounds. I had a very good childhood there and I still harbour very fond memories.”


The C.W Jefferys Collegiate Institute and York University graduate launched Jane-Finch.com. 11 years ago to showcase positive stories in the challenged community.


“There are so many good things happening in this neighbourhood and there are youths who are shining,” he said.


Heritage Skills Development which has hosted the Scarborough Afro-Carib Fest the last five years, was recognized with an award for excellence in volunteer management.

“It is amazing to be recognized for the work we do,” said the organization’s executive director Charity Lebeanya. “Our goal has always been to build our community and our volunteers are vital in making that happen. Events such as this remind us that there is a lot of good being done in the world and it encourages us to empower, connect and collaborate with one another.”

June Callwood, who passed away in 2007, was a journalist, author and one of Canada’s most well-known social activists. She founded or co-founded more than 50 social action organizations.

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