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Jane-Finch booster overcame mental illness to 'pay it forward'

Paul Nguyen to receive award for his advocacy work

North York Mirror
The founder of website jane-finch.com will receive a mental health award from the Ontario Peer Development Initiative (OPDI) Monday, Oct. 6.

Paul Nguyen will receive the Pay It Forward Award for community service and overcoming mental illness at the ceremony held at Holiday Inn Yorkdale.

"I went through depression as a young person, did all the 'crazy' stuff, self-harm, and I was a cutter," he said.

"I seldom wear T-shirts at formal functions for fear of people seeing the scars on my arm. It was a dark chapter and mental health wasn't as on the radar as much as today, but I had friends who stuck by me. (Colleague) Sue Chun was the one that nominated me and encouraged me to tell my story in the hopes of inspiring others, in particular in Jane-Finch, to seek help. It's not a common discussion that happens in the community as the focus is always on jobs, guns, gangs, etc."

Nguyen, who went through this dark time for two years 15 years ago, said he felt shame during his struggle.

"It's almost the same as not telling people you're from Jane and Finch," he said.

"So I want to turn it from something negative to something positive, like how I am proud to say I'm from Jane and Finch today. Mental health supports has improved by leaps and bounds. There is so much more accessibility to programs and to end the stigma about it. I hope more people come out to share their past pains; it's a good way to close the chapter by helping someone else who is going through bad times."

OPDI is a group of peer support groups that deal with mental health and addictions.

According to nomination criteria for the Pay It Forward Award, nominees have publicly acknowledged living with mental illness or addiction and have overcome significant challenges or barriers and paid it forward by using personal experience to advocate for change in systems or practices in Ontario.

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\$40,000.00

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1x \$5,000 2X \$10,000

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