

MEGAPHONE

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HEART, SOUL & ROCK 'N' ROLL

The Rickshaw, which first opened in 2009, celebrates 15 years as one of Vancouver's most beloved live music venues

HONOURING hidden heroes

By Sophie Kelk

The Courage To Come Back Awards, presented by Wheaton Precious Metals pay tribute to those who have overcome overwhelming challenges and now selflessly give back to their communities. They are the hidden everyday heroes that

deserve to be recognized and be celebrated for their contributions.

The Courage To Come Back Awards, now in their 26th year, are also a major fundraiser for Coast Mental Health Foundation. To date they have raised over \$27 million in support of mental health programs. Thanks to the generosity of donors, Coast has been able to offer innovative and enhanced

programs that wouldn't otherwise be possible including peer support training, brain training, music therapy and more.

Each year hundreds of people are nominated to receive a Courage Award in one of five categories: Addiction, Medical, Mental Health, Physical Rehabilitation & Youth. The awards gala event took place May 23 in Vancouver. Here are the 2024 recipients.

Youth



Samantha Sewell

"I realized that my disability and the bullying were nothing to be ashamed of and that others were going through very similar things."

Samantha Sewell was born with Apraxia of Speech, a neurological disorder that impedes speech and causes anxiety. As a child, she was told she would never be understood by others. Through hard work and dedication, she did learn to speak, and said her first understandable sentence at the age of 15.

School was an unbearable nightmare for Samantha. Without special provisions for her disability, she was underestimated and fell behind. She endured years of physical and emotional bullying, not only from her peers but also a teacher, who told her she was "retarded" and sent her to practice in a closet. She became depressed and considered suicide.

But Samantha never retaliated, and incredibly, she started a movement called, "Be someone's hero, not a bystander." She also won her first beauty pageant and realized she could use this as a platform for her anti-bullying movement. She decided she wanted to make a living by making a difference. She continues to win pageants in B.C., Canada and internationally, growing her platform and spreading her message of hope. She is Miss Universal Global 2024.

Despite the huge amount of focus, work and preparation that public speaking entails for her, Samantha gives talks on anti-bullying and inclusion on radio shows, at schools, in New York fashion shows and more. She is also a sought-after model.

Fluent in ASL, she qualified as an early childhood educator and has opened her own inclusive childcare centre, creating a safe and welcoming space for children that aren't accepted elsewhere. Samantha also finds time to volunteer at hundreds of events to raise awareness for causes and has trained in suicide prevention. ◀

▲ Samantha Sewell has overcome a neurological condition to excel in both personal and professional endeavours. Photo submitted.



Addiction

▲ After a tragic start in life, Kevin Parker is rewriting his personal story through incredible perseverance. Photo by Avi Dhillon.

Kevin Parker

“I never imagined I would have achieved some of the things that I’ve been able to do knowing years ago I was on the brink of death numerous times.”

Kevin Parker’s journey from poverty, addiction, violence and homelessness is a testament to his resilience.

Growing up with no food on the table or lights in the house, he was forced into a life of crime to provide the basics for his family. And, as a bi-racial child in the 1970s, he struggled to fit in. He turned to drugs to cope, starting with marijuana, soon escalating to cocaine and crack by

the time he was 13. Surrounded by cousins and brothers in the same destructive cycles, his life was overtaken by addiction and crime for more than 20 years.

He lived in an alley in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (DTES) for over a decade. He was stabbed, took a hatchet to the head, was tortured, beaten, shot at, and convicted of 31 crimes.

But, following more than two years in prison, Kevin was sent to a treatment centre and he has now been sober for 15 years.

He got his first legal job, reconnected with his wife Chylo and was finally able to be a dad to his two boys. Tragically, almost nine years later, Chylo passed away of sudden brain cancer, but against all odds, Kevin did not relapse. He has

since remarried and he and his wife Amy have two additional sons. His family is one of his proudest achievements.

Kevin has become a powerful and inspiring voice in the recovery community. He has led the way for many of his childhood friends and family — in addition to hundreds of others — to follow in his footsteps of recovery.

He shares his story in many public settings to help others and advocate for harm reduction, as well as diversity and better inclusion for black people. He managed B.C.’s first complex care housing facility in Surrey, and now works at the SpencerCreo Foundation supporting peers in the DTES with supportive employment and wrap around supports. ◀

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Physical Rehabilitation

▲ Surviving being shot four times was just the start of a series of triumphs for tenacious athlete Leo Sammarelli. Photo by Avi Dhillon.

Leo Sammarelli

“My message is very clear: No matter how difficult and hopeless your situation may be, you and only you have the power to change it.”

Once the Canadian Light Weight Boxing Champion with Olympic aspirations, Leo Sammarelli was on the path to athletic stardom when his life changed forever.

At the age of 22, he was shot four times in a case of mistaken identity, the bullets ripping apart his lungs, internal organs and spinal cord. He would never walk again. Colostomy bags, urinary catheters and severe neuropathic pain became his new reality.

Leo went through an intense physical rehabilitation, re-learning basic life skills and how to manage his new conditions. But mentally he also struggled to come to terms with his new life, to see a way forward and to manage the stigma associated with being a gunshot victim.

The opportunity to participate in the Paralympian Search later that year shifted his thinking and gave him new purpose. He was invited to join several teams and chose to join the Para Nordic team. Soon, rigorous training and sheer determination paid off. He has won medal after medal at national and international events, branching into a wide range of sports including wheelchair racing, cycling, swimming and martial arts.

He takes on seemingly impossible challenges, including the Grouse Grind

on his hands, and completing the 122-kilometre RBC GranFondo cycling event — the only paraplegic to do so.

Leo has also returned to his boxing roots, founding West Coast Wheelchair Adaptive Boxing. He leads in person and online classes to promote physical fitness for people with spinal cord injuries and able-bodied athletes alike.

Leo’s inspirational passion goes far beyond sport. He generously shares his story at events and with his extensive social media following to inspire youth in difficult circumstances. He reminds them that they have the power to change the course of their own lives.

He also participates in research, volunteering and fundraising for numerous causes. ◀

Baylie McKnight

“I have come a long way, and I believe I had the courage to come back not only for myself but also as a wounded healer to make a difference in the community and the world.”

From a very young age, Baylie McKnight experienced mental health challenges, including loneliness and emotional dysregulation. She struggled with her peers in school, and talked about suicide and engaged in self-harm. Lacking appropriate support, she abused alcohol and drugs. She was pregnant at 13, took crystal meth, was raped at 15, was unhoused, and in and out of abusive relationships for many years.

After several false diagnoses, she was finally diagnosed with borderline

personality disorder (BPD) at 18. But she was soon to discover that BPD was highly stigmatized and underfunded. Many in the health community continue to wrongly believe that people with BPD are attention-seeking and manipulative. There was almost no support available, and Baylie had to travel from Victoria to Vancouver once a week, every week, for over a year to access the only treatment option.

Her mental illness caused barriers with her schoolwork, in accessing health care and treatment for alcohol dependency, getting a driving licence and much more.

Despite this, Baylie graduated from school a year early and completed a masters degree in social work. At 16 she stopped taking drugs and began providing street outreach to others in need. She shared her story

with kids across B.C., solidifying her purpose in life to help others.

Knowing the critical gap in services, at 21 she started the Borderline Personality Disorder Society of B.C. with a friend — who sadly passed away by suicide soon after.

Today, thanks to Baylie’s leadership, compassion and incredible personal dedication, the organization offers support groups and Dialectal Behaviour Therapy in person and virtually. They reach people across the province, Canada and the world. These supports can often be lifesaving and life changing.

Baylie has also fulfilled her dream of opening a private counselling practice. ◀

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Mental Health



▲ Baylie McKnight has fulfilled many dreams after overcoming a traumatic start in life. Photo by Kyra Kelpin.



Medical

▲ Monica Gärtner has overcome formidable health challenges. Photo by Avi Dhillon.

Monica Gärtner

“I’m not a superhero, I’m just a woman with a disability that has a great deal of perseverance and a desire to help my community live with dignity.”

From the day she was born, Monica Gärtner has faced challenges most could not imagine. She has a rare bone disease called Osteogenesis Imperfecta, causing her bones to break easily. As a result, she has had over 500 fractures — something as small as a cough could cause a broken rib.

As a child, she felt excluded from day-to-day activities in school and was bullied, which took an immense mental toll, and led to suicidal thoughts. She couldn’t see

a future for herself. But she persevered, completing her studies and becoming strong enough to manage many tasks — such as getting items out of a fridge — that might have seemed impossible.

Despite facing discrimination at every turn, Monica gained full-time employment. She was underestimated and overlooked for roles and promotions by employers because of her disability, and had to work extra hard to prove herself time and time again.

After two car accidents, a fall out of her chair which resulted in multiple fractures, and months of rehabilitation, she continues to work full-time. Less than a year ago, both of her lungs collapsed. Her medical team didn’t think she would survive and she was denied certain supports because

they feared breaking her bones.

But Monica did survive, is back at work and continues to defy the odds.

Remarkably, Monica finds the time and energy to fulfill her life’s mission: to show that people living with disabilities can live equal lives to able-bodied people. She shares her story through public speaking, writing and acting.

In 2016 she published a book, *Overcoming the Impossible: A Life of Trials and Triumphs*, about her story.

She also founded the Canadian Assisted Travel Society to support people with disabilities who want to travel. She has volunteered her time on multiple charity boards and mentors her peers. ◀

To learn more about the Courage to Come Back Awards, go to couragetocomeback.ca