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Paul Nguyen is a success story for Jane-Finch and psychiatric survivors alike: Porter

Neighbourhood activist shines a light on the cultural stigma around mental illnesses among many immigrant groups in the Jane-Finch area.

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Paul Nguyen, who has received the Linda Chamberlain Pay It Forward Award, shows the scars from a darker chapter in his life.

By: **Catherine Porter** Columnist, Published on Tue Oct 14 2014

Paul Nguyen has spent the last 10 years cutting through the jagged stereotype of Jane and Finch.

He started the website [Jane-Finch.com](#) to project stories from his neighbourhood that don't include guns and emergency task force teams. Go there to see local youth dancing for a minimum wage hike, selling eggplants grown in a nearby urban farm, and tracing the Enbridge pipeline's route through the area. All of them are smart, well spoken and engaged in issues that don't involve violence and drugs.

Now, Nguyen is rolling up his sleeve to break a second stereotype.

His grey jacket sleeve. The left one.

It reveals a forearm notched, like a tree trunk, with a dozen white scars.

"Mental health is not spoken about at Jane and Finch — especially among young urban males. We have to put it on the radar," says Nguyen, 34.

"I was a cutter."

Nguyen has a war chest of awards. He added another last week: the [Linda Chamberlain Pay It Forward Award](#).

The others were for boosting neighbourhood morale, promoting diversity and mentoring youth. This one is for surviving a mental illness and/or addiction, and then helping others.

At the ceremony, Nguyen spoke nervously about those two dark years of his life, when he battled depression. It was 16 years ago, but before now, he rarely spoke of it.

He was in the final year of high school. He had lost someone.

"I was always crying like a baby," he tells me later, over coffee. He stopped eating and lost weight.

"I found my grandmother's sleeping pills. I thought maybe I wouldn't wake up," he says.

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"I graduated to self-harm."

By self-harm, he means the cuts down his arm. To make them, he used a "fancy knife" — one his parents had bought from a door-to-door salesman. It had jagged edges. To reach blood, he often had to saw at his skin.

"I wanted to lessen the pain," he says, "or take control. I don't know."

He missed classes. When he went to school, he fell asleep at his desk — drowsy from pills. He failed a number of courses, and had to redo the school year.

He ran a car through a bush onto a neighbor's front yard.

These were all clear warning signs.

But no one spoke to Nguyen about depression or mental health, he says. Not his parents, two Vietnamese boat people who were working hard at factory jobs. Not his friends, one of whom told me he was worried about Nguyen's reaction. Not his teachers or the police officer, who was kind enough (his words) to not charge him for the car accident.

Nor did he seek out help.

This was long before Olympian [Clara Hughes](#) made depression mainstream and [Linda Chamberlain](#), among others, dispelled societal fears about schizophrenia. ([Chamberlain](#) helped found the Dream Team, psychiatric patients who speak publicly about their experiences and lobby for supportive housing.)

Even today, mental illnesses are buried at Jane-Finch like in the rest of the city.

A [report](#) by the North West Community Mental Health Network published two years ago reveals there is a large cultural stigma around mental illnesses among many immigrant groups that make up 60 per cent of the neighbourhood.

Many Caribbean countries regard it as a weakness, not an illness. There is no Somali term for "mental health," the report states.

Meanwhile, the area is a boiling pot of risk factors: high rates of poverty and unemployment; language barriers; difficulties adapting to a new culture; discrimination. Add to that the social stigma of living in what is often labelled the city's "most dangerous" neighbourhood.

"I noticed the parallels between the Jane-Finch stigma and the mental health stigma," Nguyen says. "You feel ashamed. You don't want to talk about it. You hide it."

Nguyen was lucky. His depression faded and has never returned. He went on to university and good jobs in television and communications. He is a success story for the neighbourhood and psychiatric survivors alike.

But, his depression lasted two long years. Had he sought treatment, it likely would have ended much sooner.

By talking about it now, Nguyen wants to save other people from following his path.

I applaud him.

"I'm hoping it will encourage other people, especially in my neighbourhood," he says, "to talk about this issue."

Catherine Porter is a Star columnist. She can be reached at cporter@thestar.ca

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