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Runaway 'stayed alive for a reason'; Taunted for her deafness and race, her struggles motivated her into a lifelong role of activism, writes Nicholas Keung

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As a newcomer from Trinidad in the 1970s, Beverley Halls was constantly taunted by other school kids in a city still getting used to its growing Caribbean population.

Not only was she one of the few blacks in her elementary school near College and Shaw Sts., her deafness made her an easy target for exclusion and bullying.

It wasn't until she was 12 that a teacher discovered her hearing problem, noticing she did not respond even when someone spoke right in front of her.

"It was just horrible. I hated everything here," recalls Halls, who arrived in Canada in 1969 to join her parents. "I wanted to go back home to Trinidad every day."

Halls says her experiences as a struggling newcomer have motivated her lifelong activism on social issues ranging from immigrant settlement to education, affordable housing, food access, disability, income security and violence against women. For her tireless volunteer work, she is among six recipients of the 2007 New Pioneers Award for community service.

When Halls finished her education at Old Orchard Public School, she hoped for better things in high school. Instead it only got worse; she dropped out of West Toronto Collegiate in Grade 10 and ran away from home.

"You feel isolated and truly believe that you're less than others. Whenever you try to do something good for yourself, you get put down again," recalls Halls. "With the bombardment of hatred, I fell in despair."

A "loafer" she met at a mall seemed caring but also led her into a life of drug and alcohol abuse.

She lived on the streets for a few months, then moved to an aunt's home in Manitoba to get straight. Even then, she suffered from depression and once tried to end her life. Eventually she won the battle to shed her addictions.

"I believe I stayed alive for a reason," says Halls, now living in Mississauga and the mother of two adult daughters. "I can't change what already happened. I just have to accept myself in every way."

Halls later went back to school and began to devote her life to helping others.

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The provincial government appointed her to the board of the College of Nurses in the 1990s.

She has volunteered at Foodshare, Second Harvest, York Hispanic Centre, Co-op Housing Federation of Canada and the Income Security Advocacy Centre.

"Kids must understand that not being accepted is not a reason to go out there to injure yourself," she says.

"I could have had a different life. What I've gone through has allowed me to help others and be a catalyst for change. Everyone should lend a hand to the community. It's the best way to celebrate your humanity."

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GRAPHIC: checking Colin McConnell toronto star Community volunteer Beverley Halls was ostracized in school as a new kid from Trinidad with a hearing disability. She spun out of control for awhile, before righting her life and reaching out to others.

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