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Award surprises health counsellor

Sudha Coomasamy from St. Joseph's Women's Health Centre was named a 2010 Public Health Award recipient

Tags: Women, Award, Hospital

By Shawn Star

December 28, 2010

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Originally published in our Bloor West print edition(s).



PHOTO COURTESY ST. JOSEPH'S WOMEN'S HEALTH CENTRE
A COMMUNITY HERO: Sudha Coomasamy

Like many community heroes, Sudha Coomasamy wasn't thinking about awards or recognition when she started bringing much-needed services to Toronto's Tamil community.

So naturally, when the community development worker and mental health counsellor at St. Joseph's Women's Health Centre was named a 2010 Public Health Champion Award recipient, it came as a surprise.

"I never thought it would end up the way it did," she said. "These things take a

long time, so you hear about the nomination then three months down the road you get a phone call ... and it's a wonderful surprise."

Coomasamy co-founded the Tamil Service Providers Coalition (TSPC) in 1999, which in its 11 years has grown to include about 45 member agencies serving Tamil communities across Toronto. She said it was something that she saw as a necessity to the community.

"When I first started working, there were maybe one or two others that I knew who were Tamil-speaking and working in a mainstream organization providing services to newcomers," she said. "(The TSPC) was trying to bring people together like a network so that they knew who was able to provide what.

"But also, to be able to advocate for more effective changes in making sure that services are being provided to the newcomer community and in this case, it was the Tamil community."



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After six years of successful operation, Coomarasamy still felt something was missing. So, she spearheaded the Tamil Woman Abuse Prevention Working Group, which has been meeting once a month to help fill some gaps in the services many of the women need.

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"(The TSPC) brought together all service providers who provided services in Tamil (language)," she said. "But we were noticing that when it came to violence prevention, we didn't know who was able to do what, so this was a response to that, so together we could make it more effective."

Still, Coomarasamy says there's work to be done, though she's not sure where her work will take her next.

"You don't plan these things," she said, adding that sometimes the ideas even come after a meeting. "Then you say 'Oh you know what? We don't have this, wouldn't this be helpful? We should do something like this.'"

Though the award is given to someone who makes "outstanding contributions to protecting and promoting the health of Toronto residents," Coomarasamy doesn't want to take all the credit for her award.

"It's not individual, I think it's teamwork, definitely. You cannot do this kind of work on your own, you have to have other people working with you," she said.

"It takes a lot of time, a lot of work in the communities and a lot of frustration, too," she added.

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