

City's top citizen named

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When she speaks at national and international conferences about fighting childhood obesity, she's known as the founder and leader of Transformation Inc., an organization dedicated to eradicating childhood obesity in our generation.

To kids in trouble in her Bloor-Dixie neighbourhood, she's known as Auntie Elvenia.

She's also a mother of three and grandmother who believes her children are God's blessing on her for helping the children who belong to so many other people.

Now Elvenia Gray-Sandiford can add another title — 2013

Mississauga Citizen of the Year.

This year's recipient of the Gordon S. Shipp Memorial Award doesn't walk the corridors of power. She's not connected with politicians or titans of industry.

She and her children founded Transformation Inc. in 2007 to help kids dealing with poverty and

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'Mother hen' passionate about people and youth

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violence. It also helped her cope with the deaths of her husband and mother.

That focus has changed to fighting childhood obesity.

It's Gray-Sandiford's way with children that Ward 3 Councillor Chris Fonseca most admires. She pronounced herself amazed and delighted when told her friend has been

named Citizen of the Year.

The two met several years ago in the local parks where Gray-Sandiford runs summer camp programs.

"Elvenia is a mother hen," said Fonseca. "She's a wonderful person and so very passionate about people and youth."

Lee Nunes, 63, who nominated Gray-Sandiford for the honour, was equally pleased.

"She deserves it," said Nunes, who lives near his friend and often helps her out.

When Gray-Sandiford settled in Mississauga in 2004, she saw that nobody was paying attention to the young people in her neighbourhood.

"At church and in the community, I was asking young people about their lives," she said. "The kids always saw me in the neighbourhood and I'd stop them if they were doing something wrong."

She has cried with young people, beginning on the first Family Day in 2006 when she was called to the home of a young woman whose baby's father had just been shot and killed. At 2 a.m. she found herself the only adult in a house of grieving, angry teens.

"I talked to the kids and asked them where their lives were going," said Gray-Sandiford. "The moment was right. Their hearts were open and that was my chance to get them to start thinking about going back to school."

She learned when she first came to Canada from Jamaica as a domestic worker in Vancouver that until a person or community is ready to change, nothing happens.

"All I want is your butt in the chair and I'll be as manipulative as I have to be to help," she said. "I've had kids go to college who never thought of it."

When four fathers of kids in her first summer camp had heart attacks, she started doing cooking lessons in Peel schools to teach them how to prepare nutritious meals.

She had created a dance program as a volunteer in Vancouver. In Mississauga, she cre-

ated the Get Your Move On program to encourage fitness.

Gray-Sandiford draws on up to 50 adult volunteers for her youth programs and has about 200 youth volunteers. Her problem continues to be funding.

"I'm always busy with programs," she said. "I'm not real efficient as a fundraiser. But this is who I am, and people like Russ Pooley (of Mississauga Parks and Recreation) and Chris Fonseca believe in me."

What keeps her going is the work, and the people who need her.

Gray-Sandiford has held two conferences at the University of Toronto Mississauga focusing on fighting childhood obesity. She has started a newspaper written for and by teens to get that message out.

She has recently done a telethon with *Rogers Cable* and she has a teen video competition on the go along with all her regular programming.

Sometimes she says she's tired and doesn't know how long she can keep going without funding. In the next breath she's talking about how she's looking for somebody to build a portable skate board ramp for an upcoming street party.

Gray-Sandiford will be presented with the award on May 16 at 4 p.m. in the Grand Hall at the Civic Centre.



Elvenia Gray-Sandiford

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