

City muzzles a hero

Staffer gets major award for work with youth - but his bosses won't let him talk about it

By [MARK BONOKOSKI](#)

Last Updated: 6th March 2009, 3:45am

One of Toronto's unsung heroes got his song sung the other day -- winning the first ever Community Award for Youth Service presented by the Committee of Youth Officers for Ontario (COYO), an association of police officers dedicated to combating and preventing youth crime.

It is no small honour.

COYO has been around since 1979 and this year, for the first time in its 30-year existence, it has honoured someone from outside police ranks.

Too bad the honouree can't speak to it.

His name is Al Crawford, a recreation specialist with the City of Toronto and, while it would seem appropriate to get a few words from him regarding his award and his work with Toronto's youth, this cannot be done.

Al Crawford is not allowed to talk.

His overseers at City Hall, in fact, have him under what amounts to be a gag order.

There is no other way of describing it.

"You have to get permission first," said Crawford.

He was apologetic, but insistent.

"I am not allowed to talk to the media," he said.

Indeed, even after being honoured with a first-ever award for community service, Al Crawford is not allowed to say a word without potentially putting his job on the line -- even if they ended up being innocent-sounding quotes such as his love of working with at-risk youth.

Can't be done.

So a call was placed to Crawford's supervisor in the parks, forestry and recreation department who, in turn, passed the buck to the department's media hotline.

"Unfortunately Al Crawford is not a spokesperson for the City of Toronto or for the division," said James Buttivant, of the parks department's media hotline.

"So he is not authorized to speak to the media or to answer questions."

But he just won an award, I tell him.

"Doesn't matter," said Buttivant. "That's the way it is."

Who told you that? I asked.

"I can't say," said Buttivant. "And, no, I cannot connect you to the person who told me because that person isn't authorized to talk to the media, either."

So, who's next up the line? I asked.

"No one," said Buttivant. "This is the end of the line."

It was then suggested that I e-mail my questions to him, and he will try to get them answered.

To which I responded -- (profanity deleted) -- that this was a human-interest story that demanded first-hand quotes from the person who won an award, not irrelevant third-person bureaucratic nonsense, or quotes from some third-party functionary supposedly speaking for Al Crawford when only Al Crawford knows what Al Crawford would say or think.

But it got me nowhere.

Not even a call to the department's general manager, Brenda Patterson, could get the gag order lifted.

Instead my call went ignored. Or misplaced.

Perhaps Ms. Patterson, too, is saddled with a gag order under Mayor David Miller's regime.

So, to get a bit of insight, we were forced to turn to Const. Scott Mills, head of the School Crime Stoppers program, and last year's winner of the Toronto force's much-touted Bill Hancox Award for Excellence for his School Crime Stoppers commitment, named in honour of the undercover cop who was stabbed to death in August 1998.

Mills has worked countless hours with Al Crawford.

"Al is the most-dedicated and hardest-working individual I know in Toronto when it comes to doing the right things for the kids that really need the help to get on the right track," said Mills.

"I speak to many kids each and every day, and the kids know Al Crawford and what he does for them. This is a tribute to the work that Al does."

According to Mills, Al Crawford, among other things, operates the city's TROOP program, which takes kids and cops on camping trips -- in the spirit of true "inclusion and community building."

He also is a champion of the BMX Bikes program.

"He can be counted on to move bike ramps in the rain, in the snow, in the evening, and all weekend long if the need arises," said Mills. "When something goes wrong at any of his facilities he is there within minutes of being notified trying to correct the problem as best he can.

"He has assisted me and my police colleagues to create sustainable long-term programs for youth that will teach them the skills to be productive members of society," said Mills. "His words, 'Ready For Enjoyment ... Ready for Employment,' is a motto that is a guide in my daily routine dealing with kids.

"Al Crawford has hope, vision and, most importantly, he takes action," said Mills. "Al doesn't just talk about taking action, he takes action.

"And we need more people in this city doing what Al Crawford does."

Now if only Al Crawford could speak for himself.

But, alas, he cannot.

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