

Homeless man who saved drowning teen gets tributes, housing and a medal

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WINNIPEG — After seven years of being homeless, existing in the shadows of Winnipeg's bustling downtown, Faron Hall is not used to this kind of attention.

At a small clearing on a bank of the Red River - the place where Hall sleeps most nights - a throng of reporters and the mayor listened Wednesday to his every word.

"It's overwhelming," Hall, 44, said in a quiet voice to a row of television cameras. "I just live the simple life, get by day by day."

Hall is being hailed as a hero for risking his life last weekend to save a drowning teenage boy. The act of bravery from a member of the city's least fortunate has captivated Winnipeg residents and has garnered Hall praise, offers of help and recognition from city hall.

"He saved a young man's life," Mayor Sam Katz said as he handed Hall a medal to pay tribute to his actions.

"The city of Winnipeg has a protocol involved, and when a citizen goes to the length that you did and risk your own life to save another human being - it's the mayor's award of valour."

Hall was sitting on the riverbank Sunday with his friend, Wayne Spence, when he heard a loud splash. He looked up to see a young boy in the water. Despite the fact that he's a chronic drinker and not in the best of health, Hall was moved to jump into the frigid, fast-moving water to try to help.

"Adrenalin, and the fear in him. He was calling," Hall recalled Wednesday.

"That was it. I couldn't really live with myself if I just let him go by. He was in dire straits, to be honest."

Hall had not swum since he was 13, when he took swimming lessons at an inner-city pool. Still, he managed to battle the current to get to the boy, who initially tried to latch tightly onto him. Hall pushed the boy back for a moment, then grabbed hold of him and started dragging him to shore.

Hall's strength ran out several metres from the shoreline and disaster loomed. Spence waded out and dragged both Hall and the boy onto the riverbank.

Since the rescue, Hall has been showered with gifts. A woman who witnessed the rescue has given him a room in her home. Katz has given Hall two seasons

tickets to the minor-league Goldeyes baseball team. The Southern Chiefs Organization has offered him bus fare to see his father on a reserve west of the capital city.

"I haven't seen (my father) in eight or nine years now. I just need quiet time, go fishing."

Hall recognizes the attention and offers of help have put him at a "crossroads" that might allow him to turn his life around.

"I believe I gave that little guy back his life. I've got to get my life back as well. That's what I plan to do."

Hall was not always down on his luck. He was once a teacher's aide, but family tragedies, including the killings of his mother and sister in separate incidents, drove him to life on the streets. He lost contact with his children - a situation he hopes to reverse.

While Hall is anxious to get away from the spotlight, he hopes his story will persuade people to see homeless people in a new light.

"Just respect (them), 'cause they're people too. Show compassion. Not pity, 'cause I believe none of them want pity.

"I just treat people the way I want to be treated, which is with respect and understanding."