

## Charity celebrates impact of five 'everyday political citizens'

App developer, dance troupe founder and an anti-violence crusader among those honoured by Samara Canada.



Janelle Hinds is being honoured for being an "everyday political citizen" by a national democracy think tank. She was chosen by juror Margaret Atwood for creating Helping Hands, an app that matches young folks with volunteer opportunities based on their interests, and her work to increase diversity in STEM. (VINCE TALOTTA / TORONTO STAR)

By **SABRINA NANJI** Democracy Reporter  
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A civic engagement "app queen," the founder of a dance troupe that raises awareness about missing and murdered Indigenous women and a teenage mental-health advocate who just met with the prime minister's policy-makers are among the handful of Canadians being feted for their work as "everyday political citizens."

In Toronto on Thursday night, Samara Canada, a national charity that promotes political engagement, will recognize five regular people who are making a difference in their communities.

"The Everyday Political Citizen project recognizes how ordinary, unelected people can make a difference because they take the time to care — about a cause, about a community, about something bigger than themselves," said Jane Hilderman, executive director at Samara Canada.

For 2017 — the fifth year the organization has run the cross-country contest — there was a four-way tie in the under-30 category, rounding out

five winners in total.

They were picked out of more than 200 nominees by a panel of celebrity judges including author Margaret Atwood, writer and activist Desmond Cole, CBC host Rick Mercer, television personality Ed the Sock and Senators Doug Black and Andre Pratte, among others.

#### Article Continued Below

Here are this year's "everyday political citizens" on their work.

#### The self-described civic engagement 'app queen'

Mississauga's Janelle Hinds, 25, was chosen by Atwood for "increasing youth civic engagement," according to Samara. Hinds created [Helping Hands](#), an app that matches students with civic engagement opportunities based on their skills and interests.

It started as a way to assist her peers in finding and keeping track of volunteer work that lines up with their goals. This year, the provincial government gave her a grant to help facilitate workshops that would encourage youth engagement, particularly in diverse communities.

She's also being lauded for promoting science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education for women and people of colour, who are typically under-represented in those fields.

"There aren't a lot of Black people (and) very little Indigenous people in STEM and it's so, so important because if we want products that meet the needs of diverse people, we need diverse people working in there," said Hinds, who graduated from McMaster University with a biomedical and electrical engineering degree.

#### The awareness-raising dancer

When Lorelei Williams founded Butterflies in Spirit — a dance troupe for family members of Indigenous women who have gone missing or been murdered in Canada — she was [honouring her aunt, Belinda Williams](#), who went missing in 1978, and her cousin Tanya Holyk, whose DNA was reportedly found on the farm of serial killer Robert Pickton after she went missing in the 1990s.

The troupe began as a way to raise awareness about her loved ones and empower others battling for the rights of Indigenous women. Since its inception five years ago, the dancers have performed on high-profile stages, including for Amnesty International.

"I never realized how healing and how powerful dance actually is," she said.

Williams, from Vancouver, is also the women's co-ordinator at a not-for-profit Aboriginal community policing centre there that focuses on building relationships between city police and First Nations communities.

She is the sole winner in Samara's over-30 category and was nominated by B.C. MP Jenny Kwan.

#### The mental health advocate

At 17, Noah Irvine has already managed something most Canadians could only hope to do in their lifetime — talk policy with the prime minister.

Irvine lost both his parents to mental illness — his mother died by suicide when he was five, and about a decade later he lost his father to a drug overdose. He shared his experience [in a letter to all 338 MPs](#), urging better mental-health services, but only heard back from a few dozen. So he started calling constituency offices from coast to coast asking why so many politicians had ignored his letter. His efforts quickly made headlines and MPs started calling Irvine back.

This fall, the Guelph teen landed meetings with the offices of the prime minister and federal health minister to discuss his ideas for a national suicide prevention strategy and a mental health and addictions secretariat.

"One thing that I had to learn is you have to be very persistent. You can't give up, because there were times when I was not getting responses, or people (were) brushing me aside — you know, it doesn't feel great. But at the end of the day, I knew why I was doing it. I think that's the main thing, that you know in your heart it's right," Irvine said.

#### The anti-violence crusader

Teagyn Vallevand, a 21-year-old advocate who lives in Whitehorse, was celebrated for running workshops across the Yukon to educate Indigenous youth about violence in the community.

Youth for Lateral Kindness, which she co-founded with her partner Aurora Hardy, focuses on "lateral violence" — when members of a group are violent toward their peers — in the hopes of eradicating such behaviour.

"It can leave you feeling really powerless," she said. "If you don't know how to reclaim your power in healthy ways . . . that can lead you to take power from others the easiest way you can . . . you try to take power from the people that are closest to you, your family members, your friends, people in your community."

She's also advised First Nation councils on the impact of lateral violence and runs history lessons from a First Nations perspective for non-Indigenous people.

#### The carbon-reducing engineer

Calgary resident Nabaa Alam, a process engineer at Imperial Oil, won for his work in the renewable energy industry.

He is behind a project that received \$10 million in funding from the Alberta government that would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 112,000 tonnes by 2020, equal to removing 23,000 vehicles off the road for a year, according to Samara.

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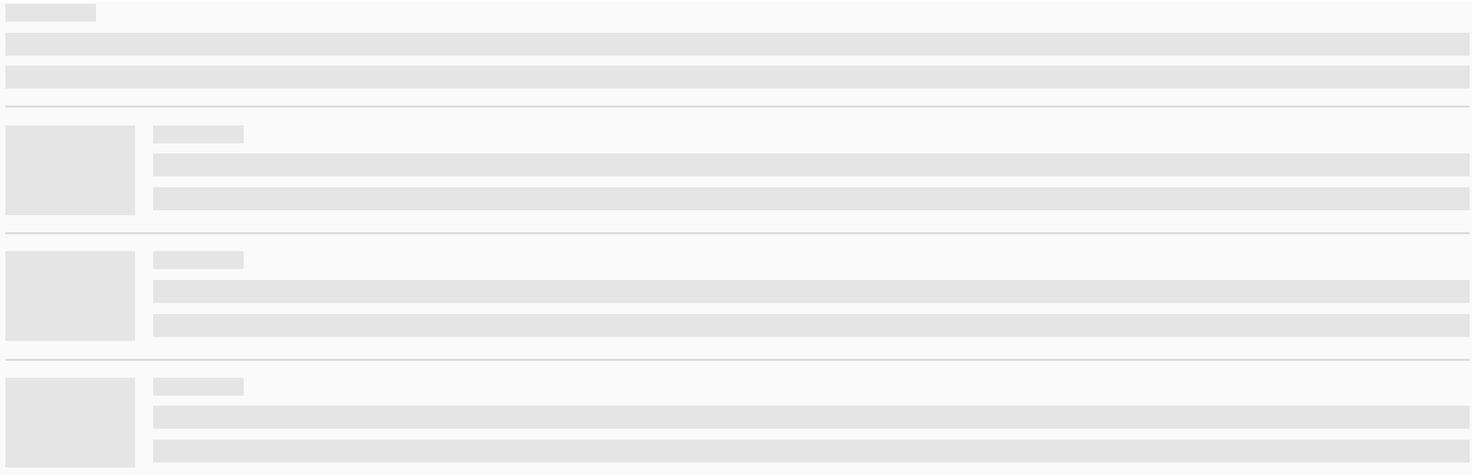
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