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Guelph teenager receives national award for his suicide prevention plan

Irvine accepted the Samara Canada Everyday Political Citizen Award Tuesday in Toronto

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Noah Irvine has been selected as an under-30 winner of the Samara Canada Everyday Political Citizen Award. Irvine wrote letters to every member of parliament across Canada in an effort to advance the discussion surrounding mental health and to call for a national suicide prevention plan. Kenneth Armstrong/GuelphToday

Noah Irvine didn't intend on becoming the poster boy for mental illness and suicide prevention, but the Guelph teenager is promising to use his new-found notoriety to continue to press for change from all levels of government.

For Irvine, winning the Samara Canada Everyday Political Citizen Award is one more opportunity for him to push for the creation of a national suicide prevention plan and to advance the discussion on mental illness.

"I never wanted to use my parents' deaths to get something in terms of recognition, I used it so people could understand what the actual face of mental illness and suicide is in Canada," said Irvine.

He accepted the award Thursday in Toronto.

Irvine's story went national this summer when he expressed his displeasure with the lack of response he received after [writing letters](#) to every member of parliament in Canada, challenging them to take action and address the country's suicide crisis.

Since then, he has received a personal phone call from the Prime Minister of Canada, met with the federal Health Minister and received a standing ovation from the Ontario Legislature, to name just a few of his achievements.

Irvine doesn't plan on going away or giving any of them a break.

"Out of all of this, what I have learned is, as much as the government will promise a lot, it's up to us as Canadians to hold them accountable."

...of an... what more... as much as the government... promises... he up to us to hold them accountable," he said.

Irvine said his experience in engaging the conversation at the political level is an example of how democracy should work.

"Many politicians promise lots of things and then say they will get back to us, but it's up to us to hold them accountable. I think I've done a pretty good job of that," he said.

Last year, Jill Goodreau was teaching Irvine in her Grade 11 intro to Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology at GCVI in Guelph.

Knowing the history of his family, Goodreau suggested Irvine write a letter about his experiences.

In the letter, Irvine explained how he lost his mother to suicide when he was just five years old and about the loss of his father in 2015 to mental illness.

His father was 40 when he died and his mother was just 24 years of age at the time of her suicide.

"At the time the plan wasn't to necessarily send it to anybody, but to write it and get a mark. He did his research and the letter came back well written and articulate," said Goodreau.

She challenged him to actually send the letter off. It was Irvine's idea to send it to every member of parliament across the country.

"I think by channelling his frustration into the letters, he took it beyond what my expectation was," said Goodreau.

"It was just a pebble that he grew into a mountain," she added.

Goodreau said the change she has witnessed in Irvine since has been incredible.

"He's gone to speak at other schools about his experience. He was the kid that wouldn't do any presentations in class. The confidence that it has built and the honouring of his parents has been truly remarkable," she said.

Irvine said the experience of writing the letters has given him the encouragement to pursue a university education.

"I had never really considered post-secondary at all. I have a learning disability and it really affects every facet of how I learn and how I do in school."

"It's only because of this that I realize you may be labelled with something, but you can become more than that. I think I have proven it," he said.

No final decision has been made, but Irvine is considering applying for a Political Science program or History.

"I am doing a lot more than I ever thought I could without a high school diploma. How much could I do with one and with a university degree?" he said.

Irvine now lives with his grandparents and credits his entire family with supporting him while he has been dealing with the national spotlight.

"Obviously it's not easy to see your brother or your sister on national television and knowing they are not around anymore, but some family have told me it's good to know they didn't die for nothing. Their deaths actually contributed to some form of change, some sort of conversation was started because of their deaths," said Irvine.

Stories like Irvine's — of students meeting and exceeding their expectations — is one of the reasons Goodreau said became a teacher and she said she is so proud of his decision to pursue a higher education.

"He has to go into politics. I have told him he has the skills to be able to do that," she said.

Irvine was one of four winners in the under-30... Citizen Award and, at age 17, this year's youngest recipient.

Samara Canada is a charitable organization... Kendall Anderson, managing director of Sama... everyday political citizen.

"He took that personal issue and raised it to the... experiencing the things he experienced will be able to do that, so he is really giving a voice to... d Anderson.

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Irvine said it was an honour to have been nominated with such a group of politically-engaged young people.

“To be nominated and then to be picked among other people who are doing amazing things for this country — moving forward with issues they care about and wanting to do more in their communities — I think it’s excellent,” said Irvine.

He said the ceremony will give him an opportunity to meet other young people engaged in the political process.

Irvine also sees the ceremony as an opportunity to get his foot in the door in having face-to-face conversations with the senators expected to be in attendance.

Irvine has spoken with many members of parliament, but so far has met with very few members of the Red Chamber.

“When you’re unelected it’s hard to find you. They’re a little harder to get a hold of,” said Irvine.

A federal mental health secretariat would provide a spotlight focusing on mental health at the highest levels of government, said Irvine, and he would like to see mental health ministries created within provincial governments.

Goodreau said the fact Irvine sees the ceremony as an opportunity to continue to advance the conversation instead of simply accepting praise is one of the things that makes his story so compelling.

“He did not do this to pad a resume or get a course credit. This is very real for him,” she said.

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