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Indigenous women's advocate lands national citizenship prize

Canada's 'everyday political citizen' for over 30 goes to Vancouver's Lorelei Williams, founder of Butterflies in Spirit dance troupe

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Missing and murdered indigenous women's advocate Lorelei Williams, founder of Butterflies in Spirit dance troupe, outside of the Native Education College on Dec 6, 2017. Williams is the winner of the Samara Canada everyday political citizen award.

By: David P. Ball Metro Published on Thu Dec 07 2017

"I just can't believe it, actually," Lorelei Williams told Metro after she learned she is Canada's Everyday Political Citizen over 30 this year. "Keeping it secret until it's announced has been hard — I wanted to see my kids' reaction!"

That announcement — that she was chosen by Samara Canada out of nine shortlisted Canadians — was unveiled Thursday evening in a Toronto ceremony.

"The greatest joy for me is how much I get inspired every year meeting folks like Lorelei," Jane Hilderman, the non-profit's executive director, told Metro in a phone interview, "who have actually been doing this for a while but haven't necessarily hit the national platform yet they deserve.

"Lorelei has managed to find a way to take tragedy — the experiences that affected her family — and turn that into something other people can relate to, be involved in, and … offers some healing."

Hilderman hopes Williams can use Thursday's award "to talk about her work on missing and murdered Indigenous women that's she's been tirelessly devoted to."

The 37-year-old Skatin and Sts'ailes First Nation member, who studies Aboriginal justice at Vancouver's Native Education College, has been one of B.C.'s most outspoken advocates for missing and murdered Indigenous women.

It's an issue she knows personally, and speaking out — through a steady stream of media interviews, through her dance troupe Butterflies in Spirit, and through the Aboriginal policing centre where she works — hasn't been easy, she revealed.

Williams' cousin Tanya Holyk's DNA was found on serial killer Robert Pickton's farm; her aunt Belinda Williams remains missing; and other women in her family have

suffered violence in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

In fact, she said it's "weird" but fitting that Thursday's ceremony is coincidentally her late cousin's birthday.

"This is hard work," she said. "It's emotionally draining. But I feel like she's with me on this journey, and that's an honour.

"I'm doing this for my aunt, my cousin, and my daughter — and myself as an Indigenous woman."

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