

Pierrefonds man nominated for national award for civic engagement

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When West Islander Benoit Langevin was 26 years old he was a skateboarder whose only contact with his municipality was through public security and officers telling him to follow the rules of the road.

Seven years later, and Langevin is on the short list for the Everyday Political Citizen of the Year award — the EPCitizen for short.

The national award is managed by Samara Canada and honours excellence in civic engagement. Samara Canada is a charitable organization dedicated to promoting citizen engagement through a variety of initiatives.

Twenty nominees were selected by 17 jurors from a pool of 350 submissions. This year's jurors include CBC satirist Rick Mercer, Winnipeg Jets defenceman Grant Clitsome and former mayor of Iqaluit Madeleine Redfern.

Langevin is an energetic 33-year-old who grew up in Pierrefonds and now lives near Cap-St-Jacques with his wife and one-year-old daughter.

For the last seven years, he has worked tirelessly as director of the youth-outreach initiative Action jeunesse de l'Ouest-de-l'Île (AJOI) along with a 22-member staff and a board of directors.

"I'm stoked," Langevin said mere hours after finding out he'd made the short list. "I'm still processing it. I haven't even told my wife yet."

Langevin was nominated by Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe, the NDP MP for Pierrefonds-Dollard.

"Benoit founded an organization that allowed him to bring real change vis-à-vis a social problem that is close to his heart," Blanchette-Lamothe said. "He is (shining a light) on the problems encountered by teenagers in the West Island, problems that are too often ignored or unknown to the local population."

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According to Statistics Canada, 32.9 per cent of the West Island population in 2006 was under 25 years old. Many of these young people were jobless and directionless. Every year, AJOI helps thousands of young people at risk of dropping out of school or getting in trouble with the law.

“AJOI gives them a voice,” Langevin said. “They are creative, intelligent, open-minded. They need to be listened to. I speak for them at city council meetings all over the West Island. I call what I do social entrepreneurship.”

Langevin’s goal is to get young people engaged in the community. He said so many young people are cynical about the political process or just don’t care.

“A lot of young people don’t know much about how the different levels of government work and that they can actually influence policy,” Langevin said. “Get involved in a small project at the municipal level, the province takes note. The province takes note and it might lead to a larger project at the federal level. There is always stuff involving young people going on at all levels of government.”

Langevin was diagnosed with AHDD when he was a youngster. His marks in school were horrible.

“If I wasn’t interested in something, I would fail at it,” he said. “But if I’m interested, nothing can stop me.”

He remembers a high school teacher telling him he could never be a social outreach worker because he tended to react too quickly to situations.

Langevin went on to complete a bachelor’s degree in communications at Université de Québec à Montréal and a diploma in social advocacy administration at Université de Montréal.

AJOI manages 42 initiatives, including running open-gym programs in schools and community and church halls that get young people off the streets to interact in a monitored, respectful environment.

“I put in 60-hour weeks and I’m paid for 40, but I don’t call what I do work,” Langevin said. “I’m my own boss and I am driven to do what I do.”

AJOI was recognized by the West Island Chamber of Commerce in 2010 and 2013. In 2012, Langevin won Centraide’s Prix Solidaire for his management skills.

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“It nice to be recognized, but mostly I love the visibility it gives to what we are doing at AJOI,” Langevin said.

So what’s next for the civic-minded Langevin?

“I wouldn’t rule out running for political office,” he said. “I have the energy for it.”