

Politically engaged residents say giving Torontonians a voice is key

Claire Prashaw, 36, and Kevin Vuong, 25, were among the recipients of the “Everyday Political Citizens” nominations given out by a non-profit last month

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Published on: December 9, 2014

It was a banner year for voters in Toronto. The Big Smoke set a post-amalgamation record for turnout on Oct. 27, while voters reversed a long-term decline on the provincial stage by increasing participation at the ballot box in June.

But even so, nearly four in 10 eligible Torontonians didn't vote in the municipal contest. Barely half of Ontarians did in June.

That's partly why Claire Prashaw and Kevin Vuong are remarkable. They're careful and committed political participants, so much so that they were shortlisted as “Everyday Political Citizens” in a countrywide contest this year.

The award, organized by Samara, a charity that encourages political participation, took nominations from across the country, and a jury narrowed the list down to 12 contenders for the top prize.

As nominees, Prashaw and Vuong say political engagement could help heal some of Toronto's rifts and unite a city divided by wealth, neighbourhood, access to transit and more.

“It can't be just up to one mayor and one council. It should be up to each and every one of us to make Toronto a better place,” said Prashaw, 36.

As a single mother of a 6-year-old boy, Prashaw said she knows just getting by in the city can be onerous, even for somebody like her, with a relatively well-paid job working as a political staffer at Queen's Park. The [stratification of wealth in Toronto](#), compounded by the rising tide of house prices and rent, is one of the major cleavages in the city, she said.

“Technically I think I should be middle-class,” she said, adding that her \$815 per month in daycare fees has helped push her to move into a home that she rents with her son and two other people.

“Even those of us who have good jobs, it can put you in line at the food bank before you know it,” she said.

Vuong also sees divisions in his adopted city. Having moved from Brampton more than three years ago, he now volunteers on the Toronto Youth Cabinet, lobbying city hall on behalf of younger residents. Age, Vuong said, is a significant divider in town, whether it is seniors' access to vital transit

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services or people in their 20s who feel they're on the outside looking in when it comes to the political process.

"Sometimes it's hard to get our voice heard, and it can be very discouraging," said Vuong, arguing that this pushes young people away from getting involved in local politics.

"It's a positive feedback circle with absolutely nothing positive about it," he said.

So assuming that Mayor John Tory's promise of a more united city, "one Toronto," is a good thing, how do we fix the fissures in our community?

Prashaw contends the city should try to make progress on issues that unite people. Child care is a good example, she said. Many people in various regions of the city, in different income brackets, will identify with a need for more affordable child care (the GTA is home to the most expensive child care in Canada, according to a [recent study](#)).

"That's a good example of something people could be united around," Prashaw said.

Finding new avenues of engagement is also part of the solution Vuong proposes. New grassroots initiatives encouraging citizen participation are top of mind, he said.

As an example, he cites "participatory budgeting," where people in each ward of the city get to come up with ideas and vote on how to spend funds allocated to their neighbourhoods.

But even if Toronto is a divided city, with many disengaged people, Vuong is quick to praise the place.

"We're a strong, resilient city, especially in light of what we went through with the Ford years," he said, referring to the crack scandals that dogged Rob Ford's tenure as mayor.

"We had to be a strong, united city to deal with that."