



Everyday Political Citizen project recognizes Canada's unsung heroes

Nominees prove that political involvement doesn't require being partisan

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Published on: December 23, 2013

At a time when Canadian life has been dogged by scandal, from the Senate affair to the Rob Ford fiasco, is there still hope for politics? One non-partisan research group answers with an emphatic “yes.”

Some months ago, Samara, a charitable organization that encourages all Canadians to get involved with politics, started a project it dubs The Everyday Political Citizen which invites members of the public to nominate unsung heroes who are helping redefine democracy with positive actions.

Nominations close Dec. 31.

“We all know the voting turnout story and it’s a terrible one. We see declining turnout for over 30 years, notwithstanding the millions of dollars that are spent for elections every time we have one,” said Alison Loat, co-founder of Samara, by way of explaining why the project was undertaken.

“People are growing more and more dissatisfied and feeling less and less connected with politics. So we were trying to come up with a creative way to shine a light on how things can be better and how individual citizens can contribute to that.”

The Everyday Political Citizen project has identified some extraordinary role models.

Samara’s aim is to see a citizen nominated in each of Canada’s 308 federal ridings by Dec. 31. In the new year, a panel of esteemed and politically active Canadians – which include names such as comedian/commentator Rick Mercer and former federal Reform party leader Preston Manning – will select their top picks.

The winners will be announced Feb. 3: They get a one-on-one chat with Mercer, and a tablet filled with Canadian books and music.

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At the time of writing, there were already about 200 nominations. The nominees' activism has ranged from writing children's books on Canadian rights and freedoms, to hosting vigils for missing and murdered indigenous women. Here's a look at a few nominees:

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Nicole White's moment of realization came early: one person can make a difference.

"Coming out in rural Saskatchewan in 1999 was scary," said White, 36, an advocate for gay and queer issues. She admits to having received death threats.

White fought to legalize same-sex marriage. She and her partner were among five couples in 2004 to successfully undertake a court challenge of Saskatchewan's marriage laws on the grounds the laws discriminated against gay couples.

"Instead of just complaining of something not being right in the community, I try and figure out how we can make some tangible change," said White.

White has played a significant role in improving the lives of vulnerable communities in Saskatchewan. She helped organize Pride festivals before these became mainstream, worked with the group AIDS Saskatoon, and has focused on anti-poverty work and skills-building at READ, a voluntary literacy organization.

In 2011, White ran unsuccessfully for the NDP provincially.

"They ran me in a conservative area of city and I'm a Metis woman who was working with people under (the) poverty line so there was a lot of public education happening on doorsteps," said White, who is one of three citizens in the federal riding of Saskatoon-Rosetown-Biggan nominated for the EPC project.

"I don't know what my life will look like in five years but I'm excited for what's to come."

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Leesee Papatsie grew up hungry. As an Iqaluit resident, she knows that in the North, eating is expensive. For much of her life she hadn't considered it possible to do anything about it: there isn't even an Inuktitut word for protest.

But after she became a grandmother, that changed. After picketing outside grocery stores that were selling food whose expiry dates had passed, Papatsie felt there had to be a better way to raise awareness. In May 2012 she founded the "Feeding My Family" Facebook page, which now has almost 20,000 members. The page helps northern communities compare prices and inform one another of specific food issues they face.

"Inuit have always come together when it comes to hunger, and the page has definitely brought people together," said Papatsie.

Through urging her community members to speak up, she has helped push the Nunavut government to finish its own food strategy plan, which has been in the works since the territory was born.

Papatsie, 47, ran in the 2013 territorial election and came second in the Iqaluit-Sinaa riding. Unfazed, she says: "I encourage people to step up and I realized, if I'm telling people what to do, why don't I do it myself and show people we all can try?"

Here's a sense of why she's so concerned about food prices: The cost for a three-litre jug of orange juice in the North can run to more than \$19; two litres of milk: \$14; a holiday turkey: \$96. These prices are three times what it costs for the same products in the rest of Canada.

Many people only have one or two stores to choose from, so options to boycott or push back on pricing are limited. Regardless, Papatsie insists she'll keep the heat on. For the EPC project, she has been nominated for Nunavut.

"I truly believe that we can all make a difference, it's about chipping away at this big issue."

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It took nearly 10 years after immigrating to Canada from India before Viva Dadwal truly realized she was Canadian. She was representing the nation as a diplomat at the UN, and wondered why she didn't identify with the country she has called home since age 14.

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“I had a hard time identifying with one political party and still do,” said Dadwal, a public servant working on foreign affairs and investment treaties.

The 27-year-old Ottawa resident has dedicated herself to connecting her peers to politics in hopes of staving off in other young people the sense of disengagement she initially felt.

The fact that in Canada few MPs in Parliament are under the age of 35, and only about nine per cent of MPs are visible minorities is something Dadwal has worked to improve through non-partisan volunteer work.

Her latest passion is founding the Friends of Sir John A. Macdonald Ottawa chapter. She wants to link grassroots activism with political power to help Canadians realize they can make a difference.

“I’m inspired by what he did to bring Canada together. I’m hoping to see how Canadians can start identifying with this man ... unifying immigrants, young people and aboriginal communities to continue to build Canada, because history generates identity,” said Dadwal.

One way Dadwal has worked to get the conversation going is by starting “pop-up” libraries — a social experiment where she dropped off donated books with no instructions or warning — in public parks throughout Ottawa this past summer. The aspiring parliamentarian watched people talk to one another, take books home, and even donate some for others to enjoy.

“I feel like in Ottawa there seems to be different communities. The parliamentarians, public servants, diplomats and students, French Canada and English Canada and none of them interact much and the idea was to get those conversations going, and especially in community places locally,” said Dadwal.

For the EPC project, she is nominated in Ottawa-Vanier.

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Since the age of 17, Japreet Lehal has written a youth directed column for his regional newspaper.

“When I began writing I felt that although a lot of topics were discussed in the papers, there was really no youth representation, no advice for youth, so that’s why I began writing,” Lehal said.

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A politically engaged family and strong encouragement from an influential grade school teacher combined to help him find his voice.

Lehal's voice gained national prominence earlier this year when he penned a column about the Quebec Soccer Federation's turban ban. "Some of my favourite columns are ones when I've encouraged people to really speak out," said Lehal.

His experiences as a member of the Simon Fraser University senate and as an executive in his high school human rights club have helped him develop, he said. "I always try to learn from anyone I meet, to keep an open mind when I look at any topic.

"Everyone you meet throughout your life, they each have a different influence on your life. Your peers, teachers, parents, it's a combination."

The keys to being a politically inspiring citizen are the "ability to stay open to opportunity, to be continuously learning throughout your lifetime, to be able to embrace (the) multicultural spirit inside yourself. Truly being able to think at the end of the day; we're all the same, we're all equal," he said.

Lehal is nominated for the EPC honour in Surrey North.

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Jonathan Brun wants to see a democratic reboot.

"If we want democracy to stay relevant, we need to modernize it and part of modernizing means making the system much more transparent and accessible to everybody; citizens, companies, non-profits, charities," said Brun, who started Montréal Ouvert in 2010.

"At the time, Montreal had no open data portal, no policy and about 10 cities in Canada had open data," he said. So, along with members of the technology community in Montreal, Brun set out to create a vision of open data in Montreal that "will help empower communities, individuals and also reduce corruption."

Historically, "when government fails, it gets ugly fast and for a lot of people," he said. "I think we have to constantly be on guard in terms of our government institutions and how we can keep them relevant to society."

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Open data provides citizens with the ability to peer into inner workings of government. Through freely available data sets, information can be disseminated allowing for figures on calls to 311 or information on road construction to be accessed by anyone.

Brun said he is inspired by “people who have spent 20 years working on a specific issue” who don’t get the personal accolades. “Those are the people I think are really amazing,” he said. “We have to change the dominant message being sent out to young people, and also older people who still have a lot of talent and capacity to contribute to communities.”

He’s nominated for Samara’s EPC project in the federal riding of Laurier-Sainte-Marie.

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