

Toronto and Markham youth win national Youth Award

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Toronto, Ontario – The work that Leonardo Zuniga, 26, and Nadia Warsi, 19, are doing in their communities make it pretty clear they are not “the future” that so many older adults talk about – rather they are already today’s leaders. Their roles in improving their cities of Toronto and Markham, respectively, has garnered them the Canadian Urban Institute’s 2009 Youth Awards to be presented at the Urban Leadership Awards.

“We often hear older adults say that the youth are the future of our cities and country. But as Leonardo and Nadia have proven, young people are not waiting for us to hand over the world to them sometime in the future, they are making contributions to improve their communities right now,” said CUI President and CEO Glen Murray.

About 500 elite members of Canada’s who’s who of city building will gather in Toronto on June 5 at the Royal York Hotel to honour Zuniga, Warsi and 17 other groups and individuals (www.canurb.com/awards/ula/leadershipawards2009.php) across the country who are making Canadian cities exciting and dynamic places to live and work.

Warsi was a student at the Islamic Foundation High School when she first started having a voice in her community and encouraging others to speak up. She joined a school press club and wrote letters to the editors of mainstream media that were often published. Her volunteer activities included tutoring elementary school children, working for DAREarts Foundation, coordinating biweekly forums with “at risk” youth encouraging them to contribute to positive change in communities. She also donated time to the Canadian Cancer Society, Hearth and Stroke Foundation, Markham Food Bank and the Markham Stouffville Hospital. Now in university Warsi says the breadth of her volunteer experience has prepared her for campus life and pressures.

“I would tell other youths, don’t volunteer for the sake of it. It should be because you really enjoy it. You need to really find a passion and commit to something that matches your talent. Once you find that talent really channel that in the right direction,” said Warsi.

Zuniga’s path to the CUI’s Youth Award, first started in Mexico, where as young gay man he felt increasing unsafe and came to Canada to find a new life. He immediately became active in the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer) community and has participated as advocate at the Canadian Council for Refugees, Canadian High Commission for UNESCO, Toronto Youth Cabinet, among other NGO’s and grassroots movements. He’s the Equity Representative on the Youth Action Network Board of Directors, as a member of Supporting Our Youth, a community development project collaborating with other youth to create a resources guide for LGBTQ youth newcomers to Ontario.

“I believe these kinds of awards help to make progressive changes by giving us the opportunities to create awareness for our different issues. The message for other cities is to listen to your young people and help build alliances between young people and adults and seniors. We are not the future, we are the present. We are here right now,” said Zuniga from his home in Toronto.

The Urban Leadership Awards (ULA) Program honours Canadian individuals, groups and organizations that have made significant contributions to improving the quality of life in Canada’s cities and urban regions. The 2009 ULA’s have been made possible by the generous support of a variety of corporate sponsors including Gold Sponsors - Loblaw Properties Ltd., Scotiabank, TD Bank Financial Group, the Ontario Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure, Environics, the City of Toronto, GE Canada and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Community Builder Sponsors include Toronto Hydro, Local 27 of the Union of Carpenters and Allied Workers, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and Great West Life, London Life and Canada Life Assurance Companies.

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The judges for this year's awards included Canadians who have dedicated their lives to public service and who have detailed knowledge of the local stories and triumphs of Canadians in their home communities. Under the chairmanship of the Hon. David Crombie, the committee included; Al Duerr, former Mayor of Calgary; Newfoundland's Dr. Linda Inkpen; Dr. Antonia Maioni, Director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada; John Kim Bell, founder of the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation; Ms. Mitzie Hunter, a Vice President at Goodwill Industries; and, Dr. Nola Kate Seymoar, President and CEO, International Centre for Sustainable Cities, based in British Columbia.

The Canadian Urban Institute (CUI) is a non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing the quality of life in urban areas across Canada and throughout the world.

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