



Student, Incoming Student Named Among Canada's Top Youth

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Guelph student Abid Virani and Sofia Okem, who plans to attend U of G in the fall, have been named among Canada's "Top 20 Under 20" by Youth in Motion.

The national awards program recognizes young Canadians who have demonstrated significant innovation, leadership and achievement all before turning 20.

As part of the award, Virani and Oke attended a conference in Toronto last week.

Virani, a third-year international development student, was recognized for helping to establish Student Reach International (SRI), an organization that provides students with humanitarian opportunities.

"The best part of this award was the opportunity to meet all the other recipients," said the Guelph resident. "The people were just phenomenal. It was a really humbling experience and it left me in awe to learn of all the incredible accomplishments the other young recipients have achieved. This awards program is important because it shows young people are involved and capable of doing outstanding things."

Virani and four friends created SRI in 2007 to teach youths about global citizenship.

SRI now runs programs in nine post-secondary institutions and more than 20 high schools and elementary schools across Canada. The organization's main project, Reach Lesotho, is a course currently offered in three Guelph high schools that includes an international development trip to southern Africa.

Virani will create a documentary based on the experiences of the students from the inaugural 2009 class.

"My goal is to send the documentary to 1,000 schools across Canada in order to spread the message that young people can make a difference."

He is also helping to raise funds through SRI for the Bracelet of Hope campaign, an initiative aimed at raising money for AIDS clinics by selling bracelets created by rural women in Africa.

The organization is providing fundraising resource kits to schools. Virani is also launching a YouTube video challenge to raise awareness of the project.

"Our goal is to raise \$25 million for the campaign and we are still looking for volunteers to help with this project."

Oke made the Top 20 list for her academic and athletic achievements as well as her volunteer efforts.

Along with a classmate, the 17-year old student at Centennial Collegiate Vocational Institute won regional and national science fair competitions for a project on reducing side effects of chemotherapy. Inspired by a family friend battling cancer, Oke learned how to target tumour cells and sensitize them for “programmed” cell death while reducing the harsh effects of chemotherapy.

Oke volunteers for Habitat for Humanity, St. Joseph’s Health Care Centre, the Red Cross and the Bracelet of Hope campaign. She was named by the City of Guelph among its "Top 40 Under 40" in 2009.

She was named MVP of her competitive soccer team and placed 10th out of 1,000 in an international high school business competition.

Her brother, Isdin Oke, a current U of G student, was named to the Top 20 last year.

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