

VoteSmart aims to be 'one stop shop' for voters 'new and seasoned



By Brock Weir

As a political science student, being engaged in the civic life around her is second nature for Aurora's Kelsea Walsh. But it was quickly brought home to her this spring that not everybody feels the same way.

Ms. Walsh, who will be entering the fourth year of her studies at the University of Ottawa this fall, was home this past March when her mother, a PhD, asked her for the lowdown on the political scene.

'You're in political science, who do you think I should vote for?' Ms. Walsh recalls her mother asking, which took her slightly aback. 'While I am studying political science, and maybe I have a little bit more insight and training on what to look for and priorities, I was a little bit alarmed, to be honest, because they are all seasoned voters, they are all really smart, very hardworking citizens, and they all contribute to society. For them not to feel connected enough to Federal politics to make their own confident decision on who to vote for, that really alarmed me because they are definitely not the only ones.'

As the Federal election campaign kicks into high gear this summer for an October election date, however, Ms. Walsh hopes to reduce the number of people disconnected from their political life significantly through her Vote Smart campaign.

Vote Smart will bring together the confirmed candidates for the ridings of Newmarket-Aurora and Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill this September 14 and 15, for potential voters in the community to find out more about the candidates, why they are running for their chosen parties, and their top priorities for the ridings. The meetings will take place at Aw Shucks.

'The evening will start with presentations from candidates [introducing themselves and being asked questions] and they will each have 10 minutes to explain what Canada will look like in 10 years under their leadership,' says Ms. Walsh, noting the second half of each session will be getting into the details, including opportunities to take questions from the floor.

'I don't think [this disengagement from the political process] is the fault of anybody. I don't think it is the candidates' fault for not spreading the message enough and I don't think it is the voters' fault for not trying to inform themselves, but I think generally there could be some aversion to really getting into the deep politics because it is not easy to understand,' she says. 'There are a lot of priorities, there are a lot of different messages and sometimes the message just doesn't cover everything you need to know about what a party has in mind when they come to power.'

'Having said all that, the objective of the event is to give that channel of information to help people inform themselves. It is to make the whole process a little bit easier on voters because it can be hard to follow the news all the time. What if you don't listen to the radio? What if you don't get the newspaper? How do you know what to look for when you're Googling news?'

Putting together an event like this will also be something of a learning experience for Ms. Walsh, not just in the event itself, but also getting to know the candidates each vying for a vote within Aurora. And, in the end, that is really all one can ask for, she says, to make an informed decision and to find the channels to inform yourself.

That is what this event is meant for, she says. It is an understanding that your voting duty does not go [stop at] knowing who the candidate is as a person. I think the main goal is to say it is not just about party priorities; it is a balance of who the candidate is: Do you like them as a person? Is there a strong component of what party do they stand for? What are the party priorities and do these party values match your values and your lifestyle? How do you make sure your voice is represented properly? That is why voting for the right party and informing yourself is so important.