

Dear Canada Life, sponsor of the Canada Life Indigenous Student Awards.

I am very grateful to have received your support this academic year. For me, this past year has been a year of transition from competing and training as an elite Sprint kayaker to becoming a full-time university student and co-founder of Manitoba based non-profit, Waterways. During this transition I moved away from my community in Winnipeg to join my better half in Montreal. Change can often be exciting but comes with its own challenges, financially, emotionally, and spiritually. Receiving this award could not have come at a better time.

Since I was 11 years old kayaking has been my life's focus and greatest challenge. The sport taught me how to set goals and strive to be the best version of myself. Most importantly kayaking helped my connect with my community and strengthen my identity as a Métis man. Throughout my journey I have come to realize how culture and identity play a vital role in life. Unfortunately, many Indigenous youth throughout Manitoba do not have access to safe, culturally relevant programs as I did. I chose to retire from high performance sport and pursue a degree in management at the John Molson School of Business. This program will teach me the skills necessary to create sustainable opportunities for Indigenous youth to access and practice their culture. Through the management program I want to grow as a leader, and learn about social entrepreneurship, so I can apply my abilities in a tangible way to lift up my community.

This year is my first year in the four-year commerce program at Concordia University where I will major in management and minor in political science. Receiving the Canada Life Indigenous Student Awards has saved me much financial worry which has enabled me to successfully transition into life as a full-time student.

Thank you for generously supporting me and my dream of Indigenous youth, empowered and connected to identity, culture, language and land.

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James Lavallée