



Breanne Everett accepts her Governor General's Innovation Award from Governor General David Johnston, at Rideau Hall, May 19, 2016.  
Sgt Ronald Duchesne, Rideau Hall, OSGG Photo

# The Mental Weight of Innovation: Overcoming Doubt

Breanne Everett

*Dr. Breanne Everett took a huge personal risk when she chose to take a leave from her medical residency to pursue an MBA and focus on Orpyx, the business she co-founded based on her invention of foot sensor devices that provide feedback to diabetic users. As one of the first group recognized by Governor General David Johnston with his awards for innovation in 2016, we asked her to write about the importance of recognition to innovators.*

**O**n May 19, 2016, I was awarded the Governor General's Innovation Award (GGIA).

Even now, almost one year later, I question how I could be deserving of this recognition. I have come to acknowledge that the feeling of unworthiness will always go part and parcel with discussion of the Governor General's Innovation Award (GGIA). And I've found peace with this because I think this was exactly what His Excellency David Johnston knew

would happen (and intended to have happen) when he spoke to me as his equal, shook my hand, and placed the otherworldly, weighty copper trophy into my hands that day.

It was impossible not to be hyper-aware of the honourees accepting the inaugural GGIA on the stage with me that day: Dr. Jeff Dahn had pioneered methods and breakthroughs in lithium-ion battery technology; Dr. Robert Burrell had developed the world's first therapeutic application of nanotechnology for wound healing; Christi Belcourt is an established and prominent Métis visual artist whose work has generated due attention to issues of identity, culture and community division; Kinova (led by Charles Deguire) has revolutionized robotic assistive technology to push people beyond their physical limitations; and Mark Torchia and Richard Tyc have created the NeuroBlate System to make once-inoperable brain tumours accessible and treatable.

It was also highly predictable that including me in that crowd would stir those 'Impostor Syndrome' feelings. And yet, I think it was imperative that I receive the Governor General's Innovation Award.

**B**ecause when I say "I," I don't mean it in the sense of the singular pronoun. "I" am representative of a larger group. "I" am the emblematic budding entrepreneur, past the idea stage, but short of broad-reaching, tangible success (short of even being cash flow positive, for that matter). "I" am every person who has taken a big risk, knowing that the potential for failure exists, but for whom those doubts are vastly outweighed by positivity and determination toward achieving an end goal. In John Saddington's infographic, *The Emotional Journey of Creating Anything Great*, "I" find myself alternating between states of submersion in the 'Dark swamp of despair', and exhilarative suspension by the bridge of belief, persistence, family and humour that spans above it. "I" am every entrepreneur who has had to worry about making payroll, some-

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where between one and 74+ times. "I" am every person who has been told "no", that it won't work, and that it would have been done already if it was worth doing. "I" am every female entrepreneur who has been made to feel I am trespassing on traditionally male territory; that you can only ever have a maximum of one female on a project team, or else it gets too catty; that your male colleagues need to teach you how to dress. "I" am every person who doubts her self-worth because of being knocked down so many times, but who ultimately knows it's in there because there hasn't been a time when she hasn't stood up.

**T**hat is whom the Governor-General gave this Award to—not to me, but to a larger group of entrepreneurs who question themselves everyday about the decisions they've made. Innovation is a process. It starts somewhere. It does not start with overnight success. Recognizing innovative thinking, fostering an appreciation of it, and an expectation for it, is also innovative, in and of itself. Too often, that moment of recognition happens at the point of achieving an obvious success.

An important but often overlooked part of the task of setting a successful national innovation agenda will involve cultivating a healthy recognition of innovation—across the spectrum from ideation, actuation, and then finally realization. And the Governor-General's Innovation Award does just that.

Recognition is just as important for the R&D team as it is for the innovation ecosystem of which they are

a part. Certainly, being recognized at the highest level while just a budding entrepreneur comes with the challenges of feeling unworthy of this remarkable fellowship of leaders. More importantly, however, recognition can change the course of a person's life. It is a bet that she/he will succeed. It is an occasionally heavy expectation that she will succeed, or at least, that she'll die trying. It can lift up the entrepreneur, her company, their innovation, and the many people whose lives will change as a result of it, if successful. This has certainly been my experience. It's knowing that a bet has been placed on you, and that, if you succeed, then many other people will have succeeded, too.

Recognition by the GGIA changed my life. Full stop. But I also believe its impact goes beyond one medical device startup.

Canadians, I believe, have innovation pumping through their blood vessels. Sometimes it takes the smallest spark to turn an innovative thinker into an innovator—moving them from thought to action. Recognition was my spark. As a medical school student and then as a resident in plastic and reconstructive surgery, I had never dreamed of starting a business (beyond a medical practice). It was relatively uncharted, as I was unaware of any other residents who had done this, let alone set aside their medical career to do so.

**B**ut the inventor in me never stopped looking skeptically upon my environment, and I've always questioned how things are done—if perhaps there is a bet-

ter way. It was the spark of recognition between a clinical need I saw (better management of the diabetic foot), and a solution I could imagine (a sensor-based smart insole system) that started the engine turning. It was the recognition of my colleagues, collaborators, residency program, the University of Calgary, family, friends and mentors that turned my invention into an innovative business. A succession of sparks.

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I am not unique in having professional training and finding myself frustrated with the status quo. I am contacted on a near-daily basis by people who see themselves in my sto-

ry and are seeking perspective before they jump in. I see a groundswell of interest from medical students, residents and practising physicians in starting their own ventures, which I believe is rooted in the precedence of a growing group of Canadian “doctorpreneurs.” Taking the leap from being innovative to being an innovator sometimes only requires the nudge of recognizing yourself in others who are doing the same thing.

That awareness of the innovation environment—the existence of other innovators and their accomplishments (and failures), and of the larger and interconnected mesh of support for innovation—is critical for incoming innovators. It is not without supportive professional networks, risk-taking early stage investors, considered innovation-incenting grant programs, agenda-setting foundations, pioneering procurers and intrepid first users that this ecosystem can truly thrive.

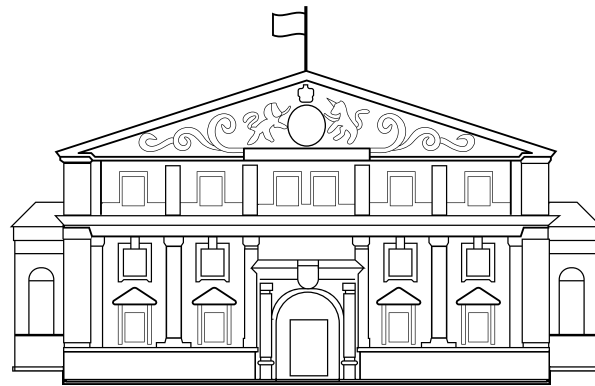
Canada is doing much of this well, but requires some considerable pencil sharpening when it comes to building a healthy, comprehensive

and truly “venturesome” venture capital contingent. I am confident with more focused attention on the criticality of innovation, and with giving a voice to our entrepreneurs, areas of ecosystem deficiency will be highlighted, dissected and addressed. With recognition, we will get there.

It is hard to describe the impact of the Governor General’s Award at the level of the entrepreneur: the tremendous awareness it has brought to our company, special consideration I receive when people know that my work has been honoured by the GG. But it is impossible to overstate the importance of programs that recognize innovators for their role in growing the innovation environment, knowing that when we do so, other inventors will recognize their own potential for action. The award established by His Excellency sets that tone on a national level. **P**

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