

face of the future

BY CHRIS TRABER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE SOMERVILLE

By rights, there should be a cut or two. Maybe a scar. A bruise would make sense. But there are none.

Surprising really, particularly when your life's mission is breaking glass ceilings, toppling ivory towers, smashing stereotypes, fighting injustice and continually bending to elevate others.

In fact, award-winning social activist Michelle Dagnino is as remarkably unscathed by her battles as she is unaffected by the accolades she receives for engaging in them.

At first blush, the exotically attractive 23-year-old Woodbridge resident and daughter of Uruguayan parents appears every bit the vibrant movie and MuchMusic loving university law student she is. On closer scrutiny, she's the

impressive epitome of one whose parts are greater than the whole — almost impossibly so.

Born in Toronto, her working-class immigrant parents moved to Victoria, B.C. when she was four.

"I grew up in a household of very strong women who told me a woman could do whatever she wanted in the world," she said during an interview squeezed into her standard 16-hour work day. "As part of a working class family, I developed a sense of social justice and an awareness of the divisions in society and how we all fall into different categories."

While her adolescent girlfriends fretted with body image, looking good for boys and generally defining themselves by others' opinions, Ms Dagnino endeavoured to be the voice of reason. In Grade 10, she founded Aspire,

One of Maclean's magazine's 25 faces of the future and a YWCA Young Women of Distinction recipient, Michelle Dagnino is making a difference today

a weekly mentorship program featuring talks by accomplished women. Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Carol Shields was among her first guests.

Shortly after moving to Woodbridge at 17, Ms Dagnino won seven scholarships, including the national Garfield Weston scholarship worth \$10,000 annually for four years. She enrolled in political science at York University, graduating with her BA in 2002 and MA a year later. Next year, she will earn a specialized honours LL.B. degree from Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto.

As if her dizzying academic pace was not enough, consider her extracurricular volunteer commitments, which include, but are not limited to, current program co-ordinator of the Youth Action Network, a national chain of youth groups dedicated to empowering youth to be active community participants, consulting to the Gendering Adolescent AIDS prevention program, a directorship on the World Youth Centre board and globetrotting as a delegate to the United Nations special session on children.

At 20, Ms Dagnino, fluent in English, Spanish and French, completed a one-year stint as co-ordinator of an anti-child labour campaign for the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions in Brussels. The job entailed travelling from Thailand to Argentina consulting with union leaders, social workers and community activities.

An oft-sought after speaker at dozens of international conferences, Ms Dagnino recently accepted the YWCA's Young Women of Distinction award and was named as one of Maclean's 25 faces of the future.

How she manages her pace and passion for social change is answered only with a self-effacing smile.

"I've always been a volunteer, always wanted to help others and be a good person. I wasn't political until I attended York. They taught me to think critically, to have a critical consciousness."

Ms Dagnino's latest pursuit is drawing attention from multiple segments of academia and society. *Where is the Love?: The Commodification of Gender in Hip Hop* is an ambitious educational manual targeting those caught up by pop music that demeans females, black women in particular.

Viewing Obie Trice's *Gotta Have Teeth* video was the watershed for Ms Dagnino. The musician mocks women for not being physically perfect. Another popular artist, Jay Z, released a song, *99 Problems But a Bitch Ain't One*, which played up the dangerous stereotype of women being mere accessories, convenient commodities.

"Hip hop is the defining social movement of the last two generations of young people and forms the collective consciousness of youth around the world," she stated. "It is a mainstream phenomenon, clearly recognized by all genders, races, classes and ages.

"As such, we begin to internalize the images and lyrics and they become

embedded into the psyches of people over time. The argument then can be made that although hip hop culture is frequently condemned for its misogynistic exploitation of women, this misogyny has its roots in the culture in which we live."

Female rap and hip hop artists are perpetuating the stereotypes, she contends.

"People like Foxy Brown and Lil Kim are representing women as nothing more than objects that can be bought and sold."

The manual, she said, will be a valuable tool in examining gender relations and how hip hop has affected women in a negative manner. Ultimately, the text, she hopes, will assist educators in combating the negative images of women in hip hop.

Affecting positive social change is not without challenges, Ms Dagnino said.

"In the 1960s and 70s, there was a strong feminist movement and now women are taking a more conservative role," she said. "I talk to a lot of young women who really feel they've made strides. They say the glass ceiling is broken. But they have such little sense of history, such little awareness of the struggles women go through on a daily basis around the world. It's just not in their experience.

"Young people are generally not aware of their world beyond their front steps. Many Canadian women are born with certain privileges and don't seem to understand they have distinct advantages over millions of others in the world."

Ms Dagnino will continue to fight for the rights of women and children and campaign against racism.

Education is the key.

"Schools are missing media literacy programs. Young people today take their cues from pop culture. It will have an impact on their future.

"I believe in equal opportunity for everyone, that we should all start from the same block. I think post secondary education should be free and that Canada should maintain its status as a country that offers great social services for the benefit of its citizens and those who want to become citizens."

Not surprisingly, Ms Dagnino is leaning toward a career as an educator.

"I see myself as a lawyer in the broader purpose of educating people about their rights. Law can be a vehicle for change." **11**

