

Fighting for her right to Aspire

[Final Edition]

The North York Mirror - North York, Ont.

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| Date: | Jun 26, 2004 |
| Start Page: | WKPAG |
| Text Word Count: | 581 |

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At the young age of 23, York University student Michelle Dagnino has already contributed a lifetime's worth of achievements in the battles for workers' and women's rights.

She has worked tirelessly with the labour movement in Canada and abroad and more recently has become a vocal critic of sexism in hip-hop culture.

Dagnino first became socially active in high school, when she noticed that many of her friends were falling victim to a society that often victimizes impressionable youth.

"There were a lot of problems emerging amongst my friends, especially among the teenaged girls," she said. "They were having problems with self-esteem and eating disorders, their grades were dropping and their involvement in extracurricular activities was dropping, too."

To help combat this problem, she founded Aspire, a club that paired teen girls with adult mentors, women who were established in a variety of fields.

"We had all kinds of community leaders, authors, lawyers, artists," Dagnino said. "Girls could pair up with someone who was established in a field that they were interested in and find their own niche."

From there, she soon found herself working tirelessly for other causes about which she felt strongly about. She went overseas to fight for labour rights with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, spending time in Venezuela, Bangkok and parts of Europe. Much of her time was spent combating child labour, but she branched off and worked toward helping set stricter labour and safety standards overall.

"Our job was to talk to the governments, but also spoke to the workers and employers to educate them," she said.

She went on to serve as a delegate at the United Nations' Special Session on the Child. While she relished her work abroad, Dagnino always felt the urge to return home.

"I always wanted to work in Canada because I felt there was a lot that had to be done in my own community," she said. "We're quick to look overseas for problems but sometimes ignore the problems we have at home."

Once back in Canada, she began working with the Youth Action Network, discussing the impact of the images presented in pop culture with young people.

Dagnino was specifically concerned with the way that women were presented - usually as sex objects - in hip-hop videos.

"Young people often don't realize that pop culture is selling us a product," she said. "We tend to think of pop culture as organic, but it's really constructed to make young men and women consumers."

Dagnino speaks with youth about the images in music videos and asks the young people how they interpret those

images. She then gives her own interpretation, making sure to point out what she sees as problems.

Her training program, *Where is the Love? The Commodification of Women in Hip Hop*, focuses on the mistreatment of women of colour in pop culture.

"I'm not meaning to preach," she said. "I just want to share information. I'm creating a manual for other teachers so they can teach and promote media awareness."

Currently studying for her law degree after earning undergraduate and masters degrees in political science at York, Dagnino said she hopes to use her legal knowledge to lobby and mediate disputes in a non-violent fashion.

Dagnino was recently named one of Maclean's Magazine's 25 Faces for the Future and was awarded the YWCA's Young Woman of Distinction Award for her work.

[Illustration]

: MICHELLE DAGNINO Founder of Aspire

Credit: North York

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