



Michelle Dagnino
Social Justice Activist and Youth Culture Expert

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About Michelle:

Michelle Dagnino, MA, LLB, is a young social justice advocate, author, lawyer, consultant and speaker. Michelle is currently the Executive Director of Youth Action Network (YAN), a 10,000 member strong national charitable organization dedicated to youth activism and empowerment. Michelle has been a social justice advocate since her teen years, and has founded and led several award-winning organizations that promote community engagement, diversity in thought, and critical thinking amongst and between citizens. Her nationally recognized founder projects include Aspire, a mentorship program for young women in high school; Where is the Love, a national media literacy program using images and examples from hip hop and pop culture to teach engagement, global issues awareness, and leadership; and YouthActivism.ca, a national portal of youth-lead initiatives and opportunities.

Michelle's innovative and thought-provoking work has garnered her more than a dozen national and international awards including the 2004 YWCA Woman of Distinction award and the Rotary Youth Impact Lifetime Achievement Award. Her high profile work also led to Maclean's calling her "one of the top 25 leaders under 30" in Canada, featuring her on the cover of the magazine.

Michelle is recognized as one of the leading youth culture experts in the country, and has been the frequent subject of various newspaper and magazine articles, including cover stories across Canada, and has been featured on CBC Metro Morning, Global Television, CityTV, TVO, CNBC, and The Hour, among dozens of other media. She has also been the subject of two documentaries.

The Toronto Star named Michelle "a woman to buoy the soul," while the City of Toronto honoured her with the Person's Day Award in recognition of her leadership and contribution to the community. In November 2006, Michelle was named by the Globe and Mail and the Women's Executive Network as one of Canada's Top 100: Most Powerful Women.

Michelle's record of community building has brought her to the attention of organizations and governments around the world – Michelle has spoken in countries as diverse as New Zealand, Poland, Thailand, and Germany, on issues of youth engagement and the meaningful participation of underrepresented citizen groups. In her own community, Michelle sits on the boards of the Family Services Association, the Ontario Association of the Chiefs of Police Youth Committee, and the Law Society of Upper Canada Equity Advisory Group; the programming committee for Girl Guides of Canada; is an assessor for the Canadian Merit Scholarship Foundation and Top 20 Under 20.

As a role model to young people across Canada, Michelle inspires individuals to do something about the problems surrounding their communities. She teaches them how to create solutions that are sustainable, inclusive, and focused on positive change.

Michelle is a graduate of Osgoode Hall Law School and holds a Master's degree in Political Science. Her first book on hip hop activism was published in the fall of 2006.

Speaking Topics:

Waiting on the World to Change: Creating Leadership Now!

Michelle has spent her life committed to educating, equipping and encouraging youth leadership and in this motivational keynote she inspires that same passion in her audiences. In examining the issue of leadership from a developmental perspective, Michelle puts forward that innovative leadership promotes and focuses effective creativity to achieve remarkable breakthroughs in organizations and communities. Michelle reaches out to individuals by talking about changing your life first... and then going on to change the world.

Michelle's speaking points include:

- Personal stories about Michelle's own journey from local to global activist
- Philosophies of change: how has leadership been historically envisioned – and how does it need to change to meet modern needs
- How to get people meaningfully engaged in a manner that is inclusive and forward-thinking
- Why young people must be part of the movements for social and environmental justice

Creating a Culture of Creativity and Innovation in the Workforce: Engaging Generation Y

Hiring, engaging and retaining staff is a serious issue for us at all times, but even more so today with our robust economy and highly competitive job market. How do employers ensure that young, committed, emerging leaders in their field connect with opportunity and receive the recognition they deserve? This workshop offers exceptional insight in how to engage employees in making the workplace a forum for nurturing leadership, creativity and innovation. Drawing on Michelle's background in law, community member engagement, demographic profiling, statistical analysis and leadership programming, her speaking points include:

- A demographic overview of the workforce – a fascinating look at the defining characteristics of Generations X, Y, and the Baby Boomers and how the similarities and differences impact our work lives
- What has been the impact of hip hop and other pop culture movements on the workforce
- How to overcome intergenerational differences in the workplace to ensure a harmonious environment
- How to ensure diversity is valued
- How to identify young leaders and include them in the process of coming together to explore and create solutions for the future.

Connecting with Youth

Amid stories of disengagement amongst our young people, lack of leadership opportunities in the community and workplace, and the worries about the “brain drain,” we face the question of: how to do we connect with young people? We need to connect with youth on a more meaningful level – how do we involve them as valued members in the decision making process and encourage innovation and creativity? Michelle has spent her career inspiring youth to take challenges and teaching organizations how to do the same.

Michelle’s speaking points include:

- An insight into Canadian youth: who they are, what they want, what they need, and how we can help them
- Trends in the youth movement – what’s important and how we can help
- The value and importance of engaging youth on a meaningful level
- Governance and youth engagement
- How we can support and promote youth engagement

Girls speak out: How do young women navigate self-esteem issues in today’s pop culture

Increasingly, today’s young women have to navigate through a minefield of images, lyrics and attitudes that cause young women to question their own self-worth. Women are bombarded with images of what they should look like, highly unrealistic expectations that cause women to be plagued with self-doubt. Women’s self-esteem issues do not arise in a bubble; they are the result of distorted representations of “beauty” and mixed messaging that is passed on through the generation. Women need to learn how to develop the tools and resources to build stronger self-esteem. Young women particularly need to learn to embrace their strengths and support one another as they strive for success. How do we teach our young women to excel?

Michelle’s speaking points include:

- How did Michelle get involved with helping women – what was her impetus for bringing young women together
- How pop culture media manipulates images of women (and men!)
- Women and the confidence gap – studies show that girls suffer plummeting self-esteem and reduced expectations as they enter adolescence, but what are the personal stories behind the statistics
- What are some of the tools and resources women can turn to build stronger self esteem.

Seeking out and Being a Mentor

“Mentorship” is the buzz word of the movement, but what does it really mean? Michelle founded her first mentorship organization when she was still in high school, understanding the importance of young adults having positive role models in the community to look up to. Since then she has expanded her understanding and study of mentorship to employ it as a central part of her community and professional work.

While many corporations seek leadership improvement and most rate coaching and mentoring as important, a recent study of more than 300 organizations revealed that only 50 percent actually have such programs in place. This presentation looks at why mentorship is important to the success of any organization, highlighting best practice models, and examines issues such as: planning for knowledge transfer, clarifying roles for peer mentors, setting expectations, and establishing channels of communications.

Michelle’s speaking points include:

- What is mentorship?
- Why it matters – and is essential to the growth and wellness of any organization
- How mentorship can help the bottom line
- What are the responsibilities of a mentor and mentee?

Hip Hop Culture: Why it Matters

Hip hop has become the defining social movement of the echo boomers generation. A generation of youth – urban, rural, racially-diverse, poor and rich - define themselves according to their pop culture idols. These representatives of pop culture are our current day heroes, as young men and women follow the trials and tribulations of hip hop moguls and teenage pop stars with a degree of intensity and commitment historically reserved for faith based worship. Hip hop culture icons are indeed our new idols of worship, and young people emulate their every move. Some worry that this has created a generation of youth overly-concerned with material gain, a distorted view of gender relations, and broader lack of community responsibility. How do we get young people to care again? And how can we use pop culture and the media as a tool of empowerment and knowledge?

Michelle’s speaking points include:

- The history of hip hop, the major players from both the music and industry side, and the controversy surrounding the culture and the music
- Why is hip hop an important social movement, why we need to know about it, and how do we embrace the positive aspects of hip hop
- How to use ‘hip hop activism’ to encourage community involvement

Speaker's Philosophy:



My discussion topics are fluid, topical, dynamic, and incorporate elements of the event. I make myself available for pre-event conference calls/meetings to ensure we are all on the same page and I also participate in post-event debriefings. I can make my talks interactive, and I seek input, questions and answers from the audience.

My work is first and foremost as a community organizer. Professional speaking is an outgrowth of this work, and I do it because I am passionate about the issues I speak about, and because of a personal mandate to educate, inform and inspire others to make an impact in society and to live their lives to their fullest potential.

I speak from personal experience, informed by practice and theory, drawing from my decade-long experience as a community activist and leader, organizational director, and consultant both in Canada and internationally. I also bring an academic understanding to my speaking topics, including skills and knowledge developed during my Master's research and legal training.

I make myself available long after the event is over. Through email, through phone calls and personal contacts, I have gone on to develop relationships with motivated event participants who were inspired by my words to take action themselves. I have worked with post conference participants to place them in board directorships, volunteer placements, supported their own project development, and acted as a mentor to those seeking guidance and inspiration. I haven't done any of this because I was paid to do so – I truly believe in what I do and I want to help others achieve as well.

Selected Media Quotes:



"Today, the first-year student at York University's Osgoode Hall Law School laughs easily at herself during an interview near the Toronto office of Youth Action Network, a national social justice organization... Reflecting on her so-called early days is "always funny," she says, "because I'm 23, right?" But get Dagnino talking about the things she's done - kick-starting an annual anti-racism conference for youth, or speaking to governments around the world as the first envoy on child labour for the Brussels-based International Confederation of Free Trade Unions - and the passion of her views can't be missed." *Macleans*, May 2004

"...From an early age, Michelle has been involved with the fight for women's and children's rights, along with anti-racism work, especially with youth. Michelle founded Aspire, a mentorship group for young women, and most recently is working on another project "Where is the Love?" - a training program highlighting the anti-woman images and messages that young women experience in the popular media, especially in hip-hop music. All of her endeavours have a shared theme: that each and every individual in society has a right to equal opportunity of leadership access, career development, and engaged community involvement." *Deal*, September 2004.

"At only 24 years old, Michelle Dagnino has contributed a lifetime worth of community involvement and change in the society around her. Dynamic, inspiring and incredibly intelligent, Dagnino is a true role model for any youth that yearns to make a difference." *Random Sample*, January 2005.

"By rights, there should be a cut or two. Maybe a scar. A bruise would make sense. But there are none. Surprising really 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 justice advocate is as remarkably unscathed by her battles as she is unaffected by the accolades she receives for engaging in them." *North of the City*, Winter 2006

Quotes from clients:



“Thank you again for your tremendous contribution to the success of our conference. As you would know, most of the delegates are very busy people leading highly stressed lives, and such an opportunity to be reminded of the potential of youth to change the world helped us all to take a step back, a deep breath, and be grateful for the hope you offered us. ”

- U of W Oshkosh Special Education Conference

“Michelle was a pleasure to work with from the booking stages to the actual conference itself to beyond. We held several conference calls before the event, she consulted with my team so as to incorporate specific elements of the forum into her speech , and she gladly gave out her contact information to participants that were so inspired by her that they wanted to seek her out further.”

- Shantal Hardin, People to People Leadership Forum

“Michelle moved the crowd in a way that few speakers could have. There are few young people in Canada who can speak with the conviction and experience that Michelle has.”

- Brian Wicks, Rotary International, Smith Falls High School

“I wanted to take the time to write and thank you for your inspiring words. Your funny stories, real-life examples, and poignant ideas of how we can help our students, has provided me with a new sense of purpose in my work.

- Jean Kele, Syl Apps Symposium, Images of Success

“You are truly an inspiration to young people everywhere. Let me rephrase that, to PEOPLE everywhere! I am very impressed by your commitment and passion, combined with your humility. Thank you very much for being a star in my eyes.

- Allen Fraser, Judicial Reform Advocate, Guns and Gangs Youth Forum

“Because of you I think I can do it now. I always thought you had to be born with something special, given some sort of advantage. You have showed me that desire, effort and passion is enough to propel you to reach your dreams.”

- Student, Sir John A. McDonald High School

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