

Clear Vision: An Interview with Michelle Dagnino
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When I was in Grade 12, I overheard a fellow student telling her friend that she couldn't wait until she was 25. She explained that it was the perfect age, "Because you're still young, but you're old enough to get some respect in this world."

I recently sat down for an interview with a 25-year-old activist and feminist. Her name is Michelle Dagnino and she is well-respected. Although you may be surprised by all that she's accomplished at 25, people like me consider her a role model and respect her, not for her age, but for her genuine kindness, eloquent nature, and passion for what she does.

Dagnino realized early on that she wanted to make her mark in the world by affecting change. When she was in Grade 10, she created a mentorship program called *Aspire*. This program featured weekly talks by women who served as role models. It showcased leadership and the potential of women, while encouraging the young women in the program to build strong self-esteem. Many people can agree that this is quite an accomplishment.

For Dagnino, this experience laid the foundation for her future work.

"*Aspire* signalled the moment that volunteerism went beyond helping others," she says. "It was the moment I began to define myself as a leader."

Dagnino began to wrap her mind around bigger issues.

"We often times don't ask, 'Why do we need a homeless shelter?,' 'Why do we need a food bank?,' 'Why are people going hungry?,'" she says. "That's what made me

realize it wasn't enough for me to volunteer for a campaign if I was going to affect change.”

Dagnino wanted to make a difference in a way that was meaningful to her. She believes that different people have different visions of the world that they want to create. “For me the vision is about helping people see their potential, helping people see that they can do more with themselves, that they can be better, and that we can create a better world for us.”

It is this determination that led Dagnino to become an advocate for social justice. Her work focuses on empowering youth and women.

While most university students prepare to enter the professional work-world, Dagnino's fight for justice and equality would put her on a broader platform, more specifically, on an international scale. She spent a year abroad as the Child Labour Campaign Coordinator for the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, which was based in Brussels, Belgium. She travelled to different countries, working with local community leaders, and people from local businesses and organizations, in an effort to tackle this problem at its roots.

After one year, Dagnino returned home to Toronto. Part of the reason why she came back from working internationally is that she wanted to be able to say that she's done everything she can to make her own community a better place.

“I really believe in acting locally,” she says. “I felt that I wasn't being true to my own beliefs as an activist to go as this Westerner to poor developing countries and say, ‘Here is my expertise that I'm bringing in to your local community.’ That's just not a sincere form of affecting change and often times I think that's what happens on an

international scale. I want to devote my time and my effort to helping where I'm most needed and that's right in my own backyard."

Dagnino remains true to her word, but devoting her time and effort may be an understatement. She is so committed to the social justice causes that her work permeates many facets of her life. While many people would cringe at the thought of work overlapping with personal time, Dagnino willingly puts in the extra effort. As she explains, "It is work, and I'm constantly busy, but I love it and I don't feel burdened by it."

Working hard is nothing new to Dagnino. In 1998, her leadership skills and dedication to the community were recognized by the Canadian Merit Scholarship Foundation, which granted her the national Garfield Weston Scholarship. It paid \$10,000 annually for four years.

Dagnino recently completed her third degree, a law degree, from Osgoode Hall Law School. She also received her BA (Specialized Honours) in political science from York University in 2002 and her MA in 2003.

She is now completing a ten-month internship at a law firm in Toronto where she works full-time as a junior lawyer, practicing human rights and labour law. In addition to this, Dagnino commits her time to several other organizations and events.

In the two and a half weeks prior to this interview, she attended conferences in New Zealand, Halifax, and Montreal. Upcoming events that were scheduled around her work hours included a wine and cheese fundraiser, which she co-chaired for the Canadian Merit Scholarship Foundation, a board meeting for the Law Society of Upper Canada, and the two days that she devotes weekly to the Youth Action Network, where she is the

executive director, which is a volunteer position on the board of directors, overseeing the entire organization.

On the topic of the Youth Action Network, a national organization dedicated to youth activism and empowerment, I asked Dagnino why she feels it is important for youth to become active in their communities.

“I think we have to care what happens in the world around us, and young people are in a position in which they can be much more radical and more critical of what’s taking place in the world,” she says.

“I often think if young people don’t think big, if they don’t think that they can change the world, then who else will? We need to encourage young people to think big and not just to focus on figuring out your career path when you’re sixteen. Figure out how you want to make your impact in the world, and that should be grandiose.”

Dagnino gives examples of thinking big by wanting to end poverty or finding the cure for aids.

“We need to think really big when we’re young because when else are we going to do it?”

One of the things that had Dagnino thinking big when she stepped into this type of work is women’s equality.

“I want the notion of feminism to be reintroduced to young women who think that feminism is passé or that they don’t need it anymore.

“We really need to acknowledge that the glass ceiling is still there; it hasn’t been shattered. Women are still marginalized in the workplace and in the family, and we need to talk about feminism as something that is incredibly relevant to today’s young women.

Women's equality is still not something that has been accomplished. It is still a fight that needs to be taken up."

Dagnino credits her mother and her grandmother as being strong feminists who taught her that she could do whatever she wanted to do. Other people that inspire her are June Callwood and Michelle Landsberg.

"I think June Callwood is a fantastic role model for any young activist. She has always done what she thought is right and what is just. And to live a life like that is incredibly difficult, but to know that she's actually respected for being an advocate is also inspiring for me because sometimes you get a bit depressed about always having to fight and always having to struggle.

"Michelle Landsberg is another woman who I've always looked up to. The written word is very powerful and she used that to advance the cause of women. And not enough people who have that forum use it to do something good, to do something positive."

Another forum that is not always used to send out positive messages is hip hop music. This area also concerns Dagnino. She is releasing a book in early 2007 called *Hip Hop from A to Z: A Fresh Look at the Music, the Culture, And the Message*.

One of the things that Dagnino does is give talks across the country about pop culture. She also produced *Where is the Love? The Commodification of Gender in Hip Hop*, an 80-page educational manual designed to encourage classroom discussions about how women, especially black women, are treated as accessories in hip hop videos and music.

I asked Dagnino how she feels about hip hop artists who use their power to send out a negative message. She replied, “It’s terrifying because they have the ear of millions and how many people get that opportunity in their lives?”

With her background in this area, Dagnino says, “It’s funny. I talk about hip hop both as something that I’m a fan of, and something that I’m sad to see where it’s headed.” She is referring to the consumerist based, bling hip hop.

“I think that it’s [hip hop is] misguided in the sense that it places the individual above the collective, which is never what hip hop was supposed to be about,” she says. “Hip hop was about the community and joining people together in solidarity. Now it’s about buying stuff.”

Dagnino believes that in terms of sending out a positive message, “Part of it is just about being good people. Artists can create socially conscious hip hop.” Dagnino points out hip hop artist Nas as an example.

“He does his mainstream videos and then he does his social justice oriented ones. They don’t sell as many records, but who cares? He’s made enough money with the other ones that he can do that, and they should all be doing that. I’m not saying that you have to give up the game, but be responsible about it.”

Dagnino knows first-hand about the responsibilities that come with working toward the betterment of society. Her efforts made her the recipient of the 2004 YWCA Young Woman of Distinction Award.

“The YWCA Award is significant for me because it was celebrating specifically the accomplishments of women, and it was intergenerational,” she says. “It was saying that the accomplishments of all women are significant and women need to be celebrated.”

This is just one of many achievements that Dagnino has received. Although she has travelled the world, won several prestigious awards, and met people from all walks of life, she continues to work on making her impact.

When asked where she sees herself in five years, she laughs and says, “Hopefully on vacation.”

Then she sits back and thinks for a while.

“I see myself still wanting to make an impact, but moving beyond the youth focus and into a broader community focus. I think the theme running through my work is accessibility, so moving into the focus of who has access to what and why don’t they?”

Dagnino plans on using the law as a tool for change. “I want to turn the spotlight into processes and governance,” she says. “Now I can come into my work as a lawyer. I can start working from the inside. I’ve often been an activist from the outside-in and now that I’m aware how governments and processes take place, I can try and start affecting change from that way.”

Dagnino talked about using the law as a vehicle for change, so I asked her what she would say to those who believe that she has been a vehicle for change in our city. She had never thought about that until now.

“I think we all can be,” she says. Dagnino didn’t come from a privileged background that set her apart from anyone else.

“I haven’t been given anything. I don’t have any sort of special last name. I didn’t know any lawyers, I didn’t know any doctors, I didn’t know professionals,” she says. “I think the hardest part about leadership is being told that you have to have some sort of special skill or that you have to be born into being a leader. You don’t. You just have to care and you have to want to work hard and you have to have some sort of vision.”

Dagnino is working toward hers one step at a time.

“Whatever your vision is, do it, do something about it,” she says. “Most of the times we do jobs where other people tell us what to do, how to do it, what to think, and when to think,” she says.

“I’ve been able to choose jobs or fields in which I get to define issues that are important to me, and then get to work on them. It’s very self-empowering work.”