

Viewpoint

A young woman of distinction to buoy the soul



Jennifer Wells

The midday bustle, happy-seeming and upbeat, thrumbles through a Starbucks on Bloor St. Michelle Dagnino sips at her juice; picks apart the blue plastic bottle cap. She looks all of 18. But she's so much older than that.

She wears a blue blouse sprinkled with a café au lait paisley pattern under a fashionably trim denim jacket. On the jacket's lapel sits a tiny, but sparkly bright, gold shovel, a gift from the then striking Inco workers at the Sudbury steel mill.

This miner's shovel is not a typical youth-culture fashion accoutrement, but at the grandly advanced age of 23, Michelle Dagnino is not typically of her age. And it is in recognition of her many accomplishments that the YWCA will, round about noon tomorrow, intro-

duce Dagnino as this year's recipient of the Young Woman of Distinction award for 2004.

Mayor David Miller is scheduled to officiate. Seven women will be announced as recipients, including Dr. Sheela Basrur, the city's chief medical officer. Dagnino laughs a beguiling, raspy laugh. "All the women will stand around the men who will proclaim it International Women's Day."

She is, she says, surprised to find herself honoured in this way. And slightly embarrassed. The award recognizes work Dagnino is steering on hip hop culture, and how women are commodified within that culture. "I hear young women calling themselves on the street. They say, 'What's up bitch?' I really find that problematic, and I don't think they see anything wrong with that."

It's a textured and complicated issue. Derogatory images. Misogynistic lyrics. Women as baubles. Women as "hos." "What is it that women find so appealing about that?" wonders Dagnino. "That's part of the work we're interested in with

this project."

The project will be run through the Youth Action Network, where Dagnino spends much of her time, when she isn't, that is, attending to her first-year law courses at Osgoode. I once lived with two first-year law students. I don't recall them having much time for anything beyond torts.

Dagnino shrugs off her 14-hour workday. She says as many as half a dozen working groups will be formed as part of the hip hop study, drawing young women from high schools and community groups. The end result, she hopes, will be an education manual on how to combat negative images of women. "They're trying to get a message out," she says of hip hop's cultural drive. "(The question is) do you know what that message is and do you agree with that message?"

She appears to possess the wisdom of the ages. "I think part of the problem has been this phenomenon that we have, the *American Idol* phenomenon," she says. "Young people nowadays feel that they're just as likely to become pop stars as they

are workers — by workers, I mean having to get a real job."

In hip hop culture that same phenomenon becomes realized in seemingly come-from-nothing performers transformed into giga-millionaires. From a social movement was born a commercial product. Dagnino craves a recalibration. "I would like to see more idealism among young people. Not idealism about becoming movie stars. Idealism about changing the world. I don't know how, at 15, 17, 18 you can not be interested."

These are words to buoy the soul. Dagnino already has a deep resumé in this regard. Three years ago she was hired by the Brussels-based International Confederation of Free Trade Unions as its first child labour campaign co-ordinator. The ICFTU, which represents trade unions around the world, shipped her off on a tour of duty that took her from Thailand to Venezuela. She met with local community organizations. With trade unions. With businesses. And had her eyes opened by poor-as-dirt families using one side of a mansion-guarding

fence as a fourth wall to the family shack.

"Child labour is a scourge," she says. "It's a disgrace and it exists in the world today." She's heard the drill about "cultural relativism," but spends little time in that territory. "Why do these children have to go to work? Because their parents aren't making a living wage."

Nor does child labour exist in a bubble. "Here in the north we're allowing that to happen," she laments. "We may say we don't want things made from child labour. But at the same time we're not willing to pay the extra 10 cents on a product."

Dagnino's work with the ICFTU was, again, a double-track endeavour, as she worked to complete an undergraduate degree at York University, and then a master's, with a thesis focused on workers' rights.

More than 30 years ago, Dagnino's parents emigrated from Uruguay, settling first in Toronto, then Victoria, then back in Toronto. In high school, Dagnino received the Weston Award, a scholarship granted by the Canadian Merit Scholarship Foun-

dation which recognizes those students who possess that intoxicating mixture of character, commitment and leadership skills. In 2002 she launched Ruckus, an anti-racism conference for youth of colour.

The hip hop project arose from an AIDS and adolescents workshop. Dagnino started wondering how kids listen to the music, whether they "problematize" what they're listening to. She wondered about young women in the suburbs, possibly coming from a place of privilege, absorbing the characteristically degrading images, seeing them as part of life. It could, believes Dagnino, become a huge systemic problem. "If we allow derogatory images of women to go on, we're saying it's fine."

It isn't fine. It's a backwards step. A backwards leap. At the end of the interview Dagnino wraps a soft green scarf around her neck and makes her exit on to Bloor St. She positively glows.

Jennifer Wells' column appears Saturday in the Life section and Sunday in the A section. E-mail her at jwells@thestar.ca.