

DAGNINO BATTLES STEREOTYPE YOUNG WOMEN NOTHING MORE THAN 'ACCESSORIES'

# Student works to educate hip hop generation

BY ROGER VARLEY  
Staff Writer

Michelle Dagnino says she doesn't want to tell people what to think, she just wants them to think.

Specifically, she wants young women to think about how they are being portrayed in hip hop song lyrics and music videos.

"A lot of women accept the images passively, without realizing the consequences," Miss Dagnino said.

The consequences, she said, can result in young women referring to themselves as "bitches, sluts and hos". Even though it might start out with no denigration intended, it can become internalized to the point they start thinking of themselves and all women in those terms.

She said hip hop music has social influences that are mostly negative.

Although she is only 23, the Woodbridge resident has spent much of the past five years fighting against negative social influences and aiming to improve the prospects of young people.

Because of her work, she will be honoured tonight as the winner of the 2004 YWCA Toronto's Young Woman of Distinction award. The recognition follows hard on the heels of being chosen by Maclean's magazine as one of Canada's 25 best and brightest university students of 2004.

## AWARD HUMBLING

Miss Dagnino said the YWCA award is both inspiring and humbling.

"It's especially close to my heart because of other women who have won it who have been role models," she said. "To be side by side with them is amazing."

She said, however, her work hasn't been to earn awards. "I do it because I have a passion for it."

That passion led to a national scholarship award granted by the Canadian Merit Scholarship Foundation in 1998 for her leadership qualities, community service and academic promise. As a high school student, she started a program called *Aspire*, which paired young women with community leaders, who act as positive role models.

In 2001, she travelled the world as a spokesperson for the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, fighting against the use of child labour and was a delegate at the United Nations special session of the child.

In 2002, she was instrumental in bringing about *Ruckus*, an anti-racism conference for youth.

A graduate of York University, with a masters of arts degree, she has just finished her first year at Osgoode Hall Law School and plans to eventually work in the field of women's health law and labour rights.

Her most recent project, *The Commodification of Women in Hip Hop*, is a training program highlighting the anti-woman images and messages in the popular media, especially in hip hop. She would like to see the program taken into schools to raise the issue in classroom discussions.

She is frustrated with how



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

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women, especially black, Asian and Latino women, are being portrayed by mainstream media.

"In the rock 'n' roll of the 60s, there was a sense of revolution, of wanting to change things for the better," she said. "The hip hop generation wants to conform to the message of accumulating wealth. For women, the message is they're accessories, not contributing anything in any meaningful way. The message is more prevalent among women of colour because the music is born out of black consciousness."

She lays a lot of the blame for the negative messages at the door of the corporate boardroom — "I think it sells records" — but said she has no illusions about changing

how many young people think about hip-hop.

"I just want young people to question the images they're exposed to," Miss Dagnino said.

## FOCUS ON YOUTH

Miss Dagnino concentrates on youth issues because she believes young people feel disenfranchised, apart from their communities.

"These are the people who will run the country but they feel they have no stake in the community," she said. "Gang violence in Toronto is a direct result of youth being left to hang."

Not surprisingly, she said politics might play a role in her future.

"Do I become part of the system and try to change it or do I stand

outside rattling their chains?" she mused, adding municipal politics could be the route she takes. "That's where the real possibility for change lies."

She said she comes by her social activism as a result of her parents' emigration from Uruguay.

"They always instilled in me how lucky I am to be in Canada," she said. "My drive for social activism is a desire for others to have the same opportunities I've had."

She admits, however, that social activism has a price.

"I have long, long days," she said, pointing out she also has a paying job on top of her studies and youth projects. "My social life suffers. I love going dancing and to movies and enjoying pizza and TV but..."

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Michelle Dagnino  
Woman of distinction award winner



SHEELA BASRUR: Ontario's chief medical officer of health also to be honoured tonight.

## Health award for Basrur

Dr. Sheela Basrur, another Woodbridge resident, will join Michelle Dagnino in the spotlight tonight when she is honoured as the 2004 YWCA Woman of Distinction in the health field.

Dr. Basrur first hit the spotlight during last year's SARS crisis when, as Toronto's medical officer of health, she provided calm, clear and accessible information to a nervous population.

Since then, she has been appointed Ontario's chief medical officer of health and assistant deputy minister of the public health division. In her new role, Dr. Basrur will develop more effective health promotion strategies and programs, while maintaining her commitment to the health of women and their children.

But although the SARS outbreak made her more visible, she has been known for her interest in developing policy solutions to community health problems since 1998. She has also been at the forefront of developing women's health programs, as well as multi-lingual health information for women.

Dr. Basrur's expertise is sought internationally, particularly for her skills in investigating and managing communicable disease outbreaks.