

Sowing the seeds of equality

March 4, 2008 05:14 PM
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At the newest YWCA residence in North Etobicoke, this year's Women of Distinction planted seeds of hope with the next generation.

Children from the daycare centre at 68 Bergamot got their hands dirty on Tuesday as they planted seeds for a garden that will be located behind the residence's own playground.

The women, all established professionals in their respective fields, didn't hesitate to get their hands dirty with the kids - but then again none of them are strangers to hard work. The women present have all been nominated as Women of Distinction for the work they have done to support and encourage other women.

"Don't be afraid to fall flat on your face," is the message that Annex resident Mary Aitken tries to pass on to the disadvantaged girls who come through doors at Verity. Founded by Aitken, Verity is an upscale networking club for women. Girls in the Regent Park Toronto Community housing complex nearby have been invited in to the club to benefit from mentoring.

Aitken is reaching out to girls because she sees inequities in the business world.

"I've struggled along, but my strength and purpose comes with the passion to empower other women," she said, adding that women miss out on opportunities because they are "so busy."

"I'd like to see an end to tokenism," said Aitken, noting she has often been the only woman sitting on an executive board. Being the only woman, she doesn't feel her voice is always heard. Moreover, she's not sure that the reason she's there is for appearances' sake.

"Maybe they chose me for my business acumen," she said. "But it's only me. That's not a way to run a company." For Aitken, it's not a matter of pitting one sex against another, the mother of six boys has plenty of affection for the male gender.

"It's not a gender thing," she said. "It's about creating balance." She added that she and her boys laugh about her fate in life. "They think it's hysterical," she said. "They say I started the club in self-defense."

Other women on hand also talked about creating balance. Bloor West resident Kelly Thornton strives to make the world of theatre accessible to young women. Working at Canada's pre-eminent women's theatre, The Nightwood, Thornton has found her niche.

"I found I really love helping people," she said.

At Nightwood, there are two programs for young women who aspire to be playwrights: Busting Out, is aimed at girls aged 12 to 16 and brings together a cross-section of girls from the GTA together; Write From the Hip is for novice playwrights aged 18 to 29, and focuses on each individual producing a 15-minute play. Not all go on to be a part of the theatre business, said Thornton. But some do with great success. Lisa Codrington, a graduate of the Write from the Hip program produced the play Cast Iron for which she was presented a Governor General's Award.

Thornton envisions that the Nightwood will be a destination for young women leaving University and starting off their theatre careers, in the same way that Buddies in Bad Times theatre is for the Lesbian and Gay community.

The women who participate in the programs build bonds that they can take with them into the world.

"Often they continue to have friendships outside the program," said Thornton. "I think we all need support and a network."

Thornton said she was honoured to be named a woman of distinction.

"Much like the YWCA, my work is one girl, one woman at a time," she said. "If I can touch one woman, I hope it will have a ripple effect. I want to start a wild fire."

Other 2008 Women of Distinction include: artist, educator, DJ and lawyer Zahra Dhanani; accessibility and social equality advocate Fran Odette; director, producer and screenwriter Deepa Mehta; journalist and documentary filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy.

The Women of Distinction dinner takes place on June 3 at the Metro Convention Centre. The dinner is the YWCA's largest fundraiser and allows the agency to build and operate residences like the one at 68 Bergamot. The YWCA-operated 68-unit affordable housing complex is for women-led families with priority given to women who have been victims of domestic violence.