

Role models are lauded for their tireless work

By **CARRIE BRUNET**
Staff Writer

It takes a village to raise a Woman of Distinction.

Eight women were honoured Tuesday night as part of the YWCA's 25th anniversary of the Women of Distinction Awards, and each one of them credited other people in their lives for "inspiring" them to greatness. The women were awarded their respective honours in the fields of corporate leadership, social justice, theology and education, urban activism, philanthropy, arts and entertainment and mentorship.

"My mother gave me a sense of a bigger world," said Sylvia Chrominska, honoured for corporate leadership. The first female executive vice president of Scotiabank, Chrominska was instrumental in implementing sensitivity training, and establishing maternity benefits in her company. Chrominska has also thrown herself headlong into various charities including Sheena's Place — a resource centre for individuals with eating disorders.

"None of what I've done has come about simply because of me," said

Chrominska.

"I've worked with great people and have been given great opportunities. I never imagined I would be recognized as a role model."

Another woman who didn't think she was a role model was Tonika Morgan, this year's Young Woman of Distinction.

Morgan said that it was through the help of other women that she was able to surmount her difficulties as a homeless teen and go on to start her own magazine (Medina). "The fact that I didn't have to (live in homelessness) was something that was shown to me."

Morgan actively became involved in the Toronto Youth Cabinet and took part in the Toronto City Summit Alliance. Mayor David Miller, who was in attendance, called Morgan "a great leader."

"It gives me great confidence to know there are strong women leaders in the next generation," said Miller.

She is now attending Ryerson University, pursuing a career in social marketing.

"My friends refer to me as the comeback kid," she said.

Many of Morgan's fellow recipients have surmounted various struggles to achieve

their goals.

Dr. Ellen Leonard, of the Sisters of St. Joseph, was lauded for her trailblazing in the fields of theology and education, making it possible and acceptable for women to study theology in a Catholic setting.

"She has the power to quietly let people know what they can do and be," said Brigid O'Reilly, Leonard's nominator. The founder of the Catholic Network for Women's Equality, she was a pioneer in the ongoing fight to have women ordained as priests in the Catholic Church.

A professor at the University of Toronto, she has been a mentor to many women who have chosen to pursue education in theology.

"This has been an occasion for me to reflect on my life," said Leonard, upon receiving her award. "It has affirmed the work I have been privileged to do."

Life without risk isn't worth living, is the message that Dianne Schwalm, the award winner for mentorship set out that evening.

"You must take risks," she said. "There is nothing worse than a life lived safely," she said.

As Schwalm celebrates her 25th anniversary with Warner Bros., she can look back on a career that embraced other women trying to make their way into the film industry.

She credited the Sisters of St. Joseph, for "pushing her to go for the brass ring."

"It all comes down to training skills, prayer and blind faith," Schwalm said.

Ebonnie Rowe couldn't agree more.

"Leap and the net will appear," said Rowe, the arts and entertainment recipient for this year. Rowe who was lauded for her efforts in promoting women performing artists in the music industry, through her own company PhemPhat productions. She puts on an annual all-woman showcase called Honey Jam and has coordinated a mentorship program called Each One Teach One. She has broken down barriers in the male-dominated hip-hop and R&B genre.

Indeed, the vibe at the 25th annual women of distinction awards was more than different. It was awe-inspiring. Alumnae from the past quarter century of the awards history attended, wearing a white corsage to symbolize

their membership in the sisterhood of greatness.

It was former Women of Distinction that inspired former Lieutenant-Governor of New Brunswick Margaret McCain to volunteer her time and give financial support to many charities. This year's recipient for philanthropy, McCain said that her time with the various charities has given her more than she has given them.

Instrumental in the establishment of Beatrice House (a shelter for single mothers and their young children), McCain was also a founding member of the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Foundation in New Brunswick, established to help eliminate family violence through public education and

research. She is a Canada Red Cross Humanitarian Award recipient and continues to be active in various charities in Toronto. Jordan has made her life helping women get out of situations. The recipient of social justice, Jordan so focused and expanded Assaulted Women's Help at a time when social services were being cut back.

A posthumous award also presented to Diane Martin, who died in 2004. Martin was instrumental in having laws changed to protect women from violence.

She pushed to have reforms put in place that changed terms like "rape" and "indecent assault" and created the new term "sexual assault".