

PEOPLE

Youth forum creator celebrated

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Special to The Mirror

YWCA Young Woman of Distinction Award recipient Tonika Morgan, a new force in the world combating social injustice, got her start in the Jane-Finch Community and Family Centre where she helped create a youth forum celebrating young people's contribution to their community.

"That project was my first real big challenge in volunteering and mobilizing communities," she said of the Peace By Peace summit she organized with more than 1,000 young people.

"I was given a lot more responsibility to empower young people from the Jane and Finch neighbourhood that are known to be marginalized."

The 22-year-old was the highlight of the 25th Annual YWCA

Women of Distinction Awards at the Toronto Metro Convention Centre Tuesday.

The fundraising event that honoured eight women for their contribution to the lives of women and girls in a variety of fields including social service, academia and business, raised more than \$500,000.

Morgan, whose charm and flare for comedy came through in her acceptance speech, said she was overwhelmed to be in the company of such "incredible women who are selflessly giving themselves to their community."

"I would just like to clarify something. I am not an aspiring urban artist.

"Just because I'm a woman of colour with big hair doesn't mean I sing," she said at the ceremony attended by almost 1,400 people.

When Mayor David Miller took the podium he first praised Morgan

for showing true leadership and making "great contribution to the young female leaders of the next generation."

But growing up, Morgan's life was a world away from martinis and gala evenings.

Born to teenage parents, she was kicked out of the house at 14 for the first time.

HOMELESS FOR YEARS

The high school dropout was homeless for five years, sleeping in friends' basements, until she came to the YWCA's Stop 86 shelter where the stability of the environment allowed her to focus on getting her life back on track.

She began volunteering with the Toronto Youth Cabinet, which advises City Hall on issues affecting young people, and started speaking at YWCA events about housing for marginalized women.

In 2003, Morgan founded the Medina Collective, an organization for young women of colour who participate in the urban arts community.

She also helped launch the organization's *Medina Magazine*, Toronto's only woman-centred urban arts magazine.

In September, Morgan will go into the second year of Ryerson's Arts and Contemporary Studies, hoping to pursue a career in social marketing.

"She is a tremendous community organizer with a lot of savvy," recalls Lisa Randall, the centre's manager of the community mental health focus program, who worked with Morgan.

"Tonika is a real mover and a shaker who is able to connect with a broader community for benefit of local youth."