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YWCA honours Deepa Mehta

Rafael Brusilow/for Metro News
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Courage, dedication and the drive to make the lives of women around the world better — all are qualities possessed and demonstrated by filmmaker Deepa Mehta and seven other Canadian Women of Distinction.

The world-renowned filmmaker, famous for her soul-wrenching films documenting oppression of women and political turmoil in her native land of India, was the recipient of the recent President's Award at the 28th annual YWCA Women of Distinction Awards in Toronto.

Draped in an elegant, traditional gown that billowed playfully in the artificial breeze of the Metro Toronto Convention Centre, Mehta called the award "a great honour" and praised the city that has become her adopted home for the past 30 years.

"I've spent half my life in Toronto — I feel that it is my city," Mehta said.

Sitting on the floor outside a convention hall, Mehta said what drives her is to help women understand they don't have to be powerless in their own lives.

"What's important for me is for women to realize they have a voice — for all women to realize they have validity," Mehta said.

The YWCA is Canada's oldest women's organization, providing services and programs to improve the status of women in Canada. Sheela Basrur, the resourceful head of Toronto's Medical Office for Health who recently passed away, was a 2004 Woman of Distinction Award recipient.

Also honoured at the ceremony were seven other outstanding Canadian women, including journalist and documentary filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, who received the Communications Award for her courage in bringing to light social oppression around the world. She cited Mehta as an influence on her own work.

"Deepa Mehta is someone I look up to. She's paved the way for filmmakers of my generation to break boundaries, to speak to things and bring out work that poses big questions that other people would like to see forgotten," Obaid-Chinoy said.

Amanda Dale, a director at the YWCA, called all eight award recipients tireless pillars of the community.

"It's an award that recognizes the accomplishments of women who are outstanding in their field and who, more importantly, make a great difference in the lives of women and girls everywhere. These women have all achieved a sense of community and a sense of belonging that inspire other women," Dale said.

Other honourees included 24-year-old Ayan Hersi for her work in conducting research and spreading awareness about AIDS in Africa and Fran Odette for championing the rights of deaf women and women with disabilities.

Obaid-Chinoy says the award strengthens her resolve to continue working to uncover the truth of human circumstances.

"The truth is important because we really need to stop believing that the outside world doesn't matter. What happens in one part of the world will affect other parts," Obaid-Chinoy said.



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Canadian filmmakers Deepa Mehta, left, and Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy at the YWCA 2008 Women of Distinction Awards.