

Earning honours with distinction

Women recognized for hard work, vision

May 13, 2009

NOOR JAVED
STAFF REPORTER

Angela Robertson still remembers the morning vividly.

As a high school student then, Robertson had woken up early to catch the first bus of the day to a nursing home, where she had just started volunteering. At the bus stop, she was surprised to see she had company. Dozens of women, mostly of colour, mostly middle class, stood alongside her to get to work, hours before the sun came up. She could sense their exhaustion.

"I knew that they weren't going to work in a place where they were getting great compensation," says Robertson, now the executive director of Sistering — A Woman's Place, an organization that helps marginalized women in Toronto. "These were long hours, hardworking jobs, for minimum wage."

Years later, Robertson has made helping these women her cause, and her life's work.

Robertson is one of seven women who will receive the 2009 YWCA Women of Distinction Award today. And like Robertson, these are women with vision. Women inspired to improve the world around them. Behind every successful woman is often another woman. We asked these inspirational women to tell us about the women of distinction in their lives.

| **Beverley Wybrow**

Community Leadership

A lifelong worker for the advancement of women, Wybrow is the president of the Canadian Women's Foundation. The organization raises money and gives grants to move women out of poverty, end violence and build resilience in girls. Under Wybrow's watch, the organization has raised \$31

million and supported 825 programs across the country.

The woman of distinction in her life? "I am inspired by the women I work with – and the women I work for. We see women in very trying circumstances and I am always inspired by their determination to make their life better and to make their children's lives better. That's really inspiring to me, and that's why I do what I do every day."

| **Ilana Landsberg-Lewis**

International Development

A human rights activist since childhood, Landsberg-Lewis is the executive director of the Stephen Lewis Foundation, where she is helping to address the AIDS crisis in Africa. The grassroots nature of the organization and its strong leadership has helped raise more than \$30 million and supported more than 300 community-based programs in 15 African countries. Lewis was also the brains behind the successful Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign to support grandparents caring for AIDS orphans.

The woman of distinction in her life? "Without question, the first woman who comes to mind is my mother because she breastfed me on feminism and gender equality and nurtured that throughout my life. The other women ... are the grandmothers of Africa, who are living on the front lines of the AIDS crisis in sub-Saharan Africa and who are keeping their families, communities and even countries together by looking after their orphaned grandchildren."

| **Angela Robertson**

Social Change

The executive director of Sistering – A Woman's Place, an organization that offers practical and emotional support to home- less and low-income women in Toronto. More than 2,000 marginalized women use the organization's services every year.

The woman of distinction in her life? "My inspiration is my grandmother Violet Harris, a.k.a. Aunt Kitty. She is a woman who has worked since the age of 13. She tied cane, cut cane. She's been a washer woman in Jamaica and a cook in a public school.

`` Throughout her work life, she has always fought for her rights and the rights of the workers around her. She is fiercely independent and has always instructed the women in our family that we need to secure our own independence."



Peggy Nash

Labour

A trailblazer in the world of politics and in the labour movement, Nash is a senior representative in the Canadian Auto Workers union. She has long been an advocate for nationalized child care. In 2006, she was elected to be an MP for Parkdale-High Park and introduced a bill calling for a national minimum wage of \$10/hour.

The woman of distinction in her life? "The first person that comes to mind is my mother. My mother grew up in an era when women didn't have a lot of choices. She's very smart and very determined, competitive, but there weren't a lot of opportunities open to her. She always encouraged me to do things."



Amy Go

Access and Opportunity

Opening doors has always been the goal for Go, now the executive director of Yee Hong Centre for Geriatric Care in Markham. In 2001, she created an organization called CARE, helping women to pass their registration exams to work in their profession. Since it began, it has helped more than 1,000 women from 70 countries get licensed and gain employment in the health care field.

The women of distinction in her life? Two pioneers of social justice in the Chinese Canadian community: Winnie Ng and Julia Tao.

"They are leaders in the women's movement. I have seen them working as organizers for unions, and working with workers who are oppressed, exploited, and right the wrong. They don't look for fame or recognition. They don't want that. They don't need that. They are just completely devoted to work. They truly are very selfless. They remind you that there are good things beyond yourself."



Hilary Weston

President's Award

The former lieutenant-governor of Ontario, Weston worked tirelessly to make the position more relevant to people. She created programs to

honour "unsung heroes" in the community groups she visited, and set up a program to recognize outstanding student volunteers in each Ontario secondary school. She is the patron of numerous organizations including the Yonge Street Mission and the Ontario March of Dimes. She has been inducted into the Order of Canada and Order of Ontario in recognition of her work.

The woman of distinction in her life? "First and foremost, I think most women would agree that our mothers and grandmothers are the women who shape us," she says. "My mother was a remarkable woman who continued to be strong after my father's passing, even though she was ill with multiple sclerosis. She often reminded me of her deep-felt belief that, from those who have been given much, much is expected."

| **Jessica Yee**

Young Woman of Distinction

Yee is the founder of the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, a North America-wide organization working on issues of healthy sexuality and youth empowerment.

An author and playwright, Yee has written skits on teen pregnancies and edited the book *Sex Ed and Youth: Colonization, Communities of Colour, and Sexuality*.

The woman of distinction in her life? "My sister is a huge support for me, in more ways than just one," she says. "We're only 14 months apart so we grew up doing many things together, but fighting a lot, too. When we moved out of our parents' house, we moved in together and had to get over our squabbles. She is one of my best friends, as well as our artist-in-residence at my organization, and a constant vindication to come back home and be true to where I've come from. She's seen it all, and is my 'keep it real' factor with everything."

