

## Mother set example of 'giving back' to others

### Refugee honoured for AIDS work in Namibia

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STAFF REPORTER

RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR  
Ayan Hersi has won the 2008 YWCA Young Woman of Distinction award for her work fighting AIDS/HIV among women in Africa.

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Her first memory of Canada was seeing her mother cry. A 4-year-old refugee from Somalia, Ayan Hersi arrived in Ottawa with her mother and older brother in the dead of winter, with no money, no family and little idea of what to expect in their new homeland.

"She would cry all the time when we came. Even being so little I noticed how sad she was to leave her family," says Hersi, now 24. "She would layer us in all these sweaters because we didn't have winter clothes.

"But now thinking back, I am so proud of my mom for taking the chance to come to Canada, to give us a better life."

Using her mother's example, Hersi has also been inclined toward taking risks. In 2007, she spent four months in Africa, and worked in Namibia with women affected by HIV/AIDS. She decided to create a project that would give women aged 15 to 24 a forum to discuss delicate issues, such as sex, HIV, homosexuality and domestic violence, through the arts.

"We used their stories in scripts for performance and then did shows in villages and even in parliament," says Hersi, who studied political science and equity studies at the University of Toronto. She also worked with local lobby groups in Namibia to implement anonymous testing centres, counselling, and treatment and prevention programs.

That work has earned her the YWCA's Young Woman of Distinction award for 2008. Hersi admits she's

still surprised about why she's been chosen since the idea of "giving back" was something her mother ingrained in her as a child.

But it's also an attitude that has come naturally. At the age of 11, her family was dealt another blow, when her stepfather was deported back to Somalia, leaving the young family alone to fend for themselves. But instead of feeling helpless, Hersi became a source of support for her mother, who was expecting twins at the time.

"My mother got depressed, so I encouraged her to go back to school," says Hersi. "I took on extra chores, and responsibilities and really helped to raise my siblings."

"I had to grow up really quick."

Those were hard times, she says, but those were also the times that "made me tough," and made her realize the importance of getting an education and being financially independent.

Recently, as a university student, Hersi was forced to spend time in a shelter, after fleeing from an abusive situation. But instead of feeling victimized, she became a resource for other women in the shelter and began tutoring their children.

"Every experience has made me stronger. I just look at them as obstacles, but nothing that I couldn't overcome. If I didn't have them, I don't think I would be the person I am today," she says.

## YWCA honours 8 women

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The other winners of YWCA Women of Distinction awards are:

Fran Odette Access and Equity

She is program manager at Springtide resources, an agency dedicated to ending violence against women. For the past 20 years, she has been an advocate for women with disabilities and deaf women – working to help achieve social equality for all.

Zahra Dhanani Social Change

The lawyer by day, and DJ by night has been an advocate for social change working with the homeless and disabled, and working to break taboos surrounding body image and sexual abuse in South Asian communities.

Kelly Thornton Arts and Letters

The artistic director of Nightwood theatre, Thornton has produced a number of plays for and about women. She has also worked to address male domination within the theatre world.

Mary Aitken Entrepreneurship

She is the managing director and founder of Verity Women's Club, the fastest growing private club in Toronto. The downtown club regularly opens its doors to women from Regent Park to share its luxuries with them and give them a chance to network.

### Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy Communications

A journalist and documentary filmmaker, she is one of the first Muslim women to be broadcast on mainstream Western media. She has made documentaries that touch upon the lives of women in extraordinary situations, from the refugee camps of Afghanistan, to the plight of aboriginal women in Western Canada.

### Rose Patten Corporate Leadership

Senior vice-president of human resources at BMO, she has helped to attract and retain women at senior levels in her company. In her role as chair of the Governing Council at the University of Toronto, she also helped to create an emergency bursary program for single parents.

### Deepa Mehta President's Award

She is the acclaimed director, producer and screenwriter of films that have dared to talk about the lives of women in unique and often taboo historical situations. Her trilogy *Water*, *Earth* and *Fire* dealt with controversial issues ranging from the treatment of widows in post-colonial India, to lesbian desire in a traditional Indian household. *Water* was also nominated for an Academy Award.