

YWCA/WOMEN OF DISTINCTION

WOMEN OF DISTINCTION AWARDS

Lifelong defender of the underdog

The awards recognize the work of pioneering women, such as Deborah Sinclair, a veteran in the fight against domestic violence

BY MARJO JOHNE

At 20 pages, Deborah Sinclair's curriculum vitae is a mere snapshot of how much she has contributed to the ongoing fight to end domestic violence in the country.

Ms. Sinclair, who is currently combining her work as a social worker, community organizer and counsellor with PhD studies at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, was part of the collective push in the 1980s to make spousal assault a crime in this country, with abusers subject to mandatory arrest and charges.

In a social work career that spans more than three decades, Ms. Sinclair has trained hundreds of health-care professionals, community workers and police officers, and spoken at countless workshops, seminars and conferences.

On top of all this, Ms. Sinclair runs a private therapy practice in her home office, where she counsels abused women and their families, sometimes including the abusive partners.

Ms. Sinclair's work has been recognized with the award that will be conferred to her and eight other women on May 12 at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre: the YWCA Women of Distinction Award. Now in its 30th year, the award recognizes women who are leaders in their field and exemplary in their efforts to help women and girls.

"It's a tremendous honour and a particular privilege to be associated with the YWCA," says Ms. Sinclair, who lives in Toronto with her husband. "I've been allied with the YWCA for years - they do tremendous work in the area of domestic violence but also in so many other areas."

Ms. Sinclair's work in domestic violence began shortly after she landed her first job with the Family Services Association of Metropolitan Toronto, a United Way agency. It was here that Ms. Sinclair co-founded the Domestic Violence Project, a groundbreaking community intervention model.

"It was 1978 and there was nothing written about the whole issue of domestic violence," recalls Ms. Sinclair. "Many of the women who came to the Family Services Association were coming from situations of abuse so I became part of this team assigned to help women who had been battered by their partners and we developed this intervention model, which I actually still use today."

The Domestic Violence Project laid the groundwork for Ms. Sinclair's book, *Understanding Wife Assault: A Training Manual for Counsellors and Advocates*, which was published in 1985 to help front-line counsellors and social workers understand and respond appropriately to domestic abuse situations.

Ms. Sinclair says that, despite



Deborah Sinclair: social worker, community organizer and counsellor. FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

greater public awareness of domestic violence, many people today still can't grasp what it's like to be abused by a partner and often find it hard to believe that someone they know might be living with abuse.

"It's often tough for the public to understand domestic abuse because some facets of it can't be seen," she says. "You can see the broken arm but you can't see the broken heart from the constant belit-

ting and lack of kindness, being told you can't get along without him, or, if you're an immigrant, being threatened that he could have you deported.

"These are the kinds of things women live with in abusive relationships - just one hurt upon another upon another."

As part of her life's work to end domestic violence, Ms. Sinclair leads and supports nu-

merous women's groups and projects, including the Step It Up! Campaign and the Woman Abuse Council of Toronto. In 2000, she co-founded Luke's Place, a resource centre in Oshawa, Ont., that helps abused women and their children deal with custody and access issues within the Ontario family court system.

Ms. Sinclair also works with organizations that seek to improve the lot of marginalized populations, such as Aboriginal communities, immigrants and low-income families.

"For me the whole issue of violence against women is one piece of a big puzzle, related to other issues like poverty, racism and social justice," she says. "Women who are abused often work in underpaid jobs, are part of racialized groups, or are poor elderly women, so anything we can do to improve the welfare of the community as a whole will also help these women."

Another way the public can help abused women? "Listen to her, believe her and stop blaming her," says Ms. Sinclair. "It's critical that family and community members support her and challenge her abuser to get help."

Governments also need to step up, says Ms. Sinclair, by ensuring women's organizations get secure funding.

"So many of these services for women and children work on a shoestring budget," she says. "They know what they need to do but they need to be supported."

» Special to The Globe and Mail

WINNER PROFILES

CLAUDINE LABELLE

Claudine Labelle founded FitSpirit in 2006 to help teenage girls gain greater self-esteem and confidence through participation in sport.

HELEN BURSTYN

Through her leadership in organizations such as the Ontario Trillium Foundation, Equal Voice and the Canadian Club, Helen Burstyn opens doors for women and makes sure their voices are heard in politics, business and in their communities.

RONA ABRAMOVITCH

Rona Abramovitch has led many programs to help young people and adults attain the post-secondary education they might otherwise not be able to pursue. She is adviser on outreach and access at Ryerson University.

MARY ANNE CHAMBERS

Mary Anne Chambers, whose roles have included Ontario Minister of Children and Youth Services and vice-chair of the University of Toronto's governing council, has helped marginalized people improve their lives through education.

NOELLA MILNE

A senior partner at the Toronto law firm Borden Ladner Gervais LLP, Noella Milne has mentored hundreds of female law students and young lawyers, and has lobbied persistently for fair wages for female lawyers and better maternity leave policies.

JANE ALLEN

As Chief Diversity Officer at Deloitte, Jane Allen works to remove career barriers faced by women as well as by employees who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. Her efforts go beyond Deloitte; Ms. Allen also speaks about workplace equity at events across the country.

JUNE DWYER

A Sister of St. Joseph, June Dwyer is a public health nurse and advocate who helps vulnerable women and children, especially as executive director of Nazareth House, a transitional home where women dealing with addiction and abuse can live with their children while working on their recovery.

» Marjo Johne



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INSPIRATION

Cassels Brock is proud to support the YWCA Women of Distinction Awards.

We congratulate this year's award recipients, each of whom is an inspiring example of achievement, growth and mentorship and has worked tirelessly to improve the lives of women and girls in our communities.



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A TURNING POINT FOR WOMEN

