

YWCA Toronto Announces 2023 Women of Distinction Award Recipients

Driven to advance equity

TORONTO, March 8, 2023 – On International Women's Day, YWCA Toronto is delighted to announce the names of seven remarkable women who will be honoured at our 42nd Women of Distinction Awards Gala in June. Women of Distinction are visionaries committed to creating a place at the table for women, girls and gender diverse people.

This year, our extraordinary slate of recipients consists of **Dr. Umut Duygu Uzunel** (Volunteerism), **Agapi Gessesse** (Social Justice), **Dr. Notisha Massaquoi** (Health), **Daphne Taras** (Education), **Charlie Wall-Andrews** (Arts), **Melissa Alexander** (Community Service) and **Manvir Bhangu** (Young Woman of Distinction).

“The International Women’s Day theme this year is imagining a gender equal world – an important focus that underscores the work at YWCA Toronto. Everyday, we work tenaciously to break down barriers that hold women back from achieving equity,” says YWCA Toronto Chief Executive Officer, Heather McGregor. “We also revel in the significant achievements of this year’s Women of Distinction who are driven to advance gender parity, both locally and globally.”

YWCA Toronto's 2023 Women of Distinction Awards Gala will be held on Thursday, June 8th at the Sheraton Centre Toronto Hotel.

The Women of Distinction Awards is YWCA Toronto’s largest annual fundraising event. Proceeds from this event will make it possible for YWCA Toronto to help women, girls and gender diverse people escape violence, move out of poverty, and access safe, affordable housing. We are proud of our 150-year history of creating positive change in our community!

Award recipients are available for exclusive interviews through YWCA Toronto's office.

MEDIA CONTACT: Kim Quashie, Manager of Communications and Marketing, YWCA Toronto
M. 416.660.9493 | KQuashie@ywcatoronto.org

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YWCA Toronto’s 2023 Women of Distinction

Dr. Umut Duygu Uzunel (Volunteerism)

Dr. Uzunel is a lauded ophthalmologist who has dedicated her career to providing free, essential eye care to women and children in underserved communities, both locally and globally. Over the course of her time volunteering, she has examined an astounding 20,000 individuals and performed more than 3,000 operations, with her work often saving a patient’s vision.

Agapi Gessesse (Social Justice)

Agapi Gessesse is an award-winning, influential and fearless changemaker named a 2020 Top Black Woman to watch in Canada. She is the Executive Director of the Careers, Education, Empowerment Centre (CEE) for Young Black Professionals and the founder of Lehizibu Consulting and Strategy group, ensuring hundreds of Black women and girls have the skills and resources needed to succeed as leaders.

Dr. Notisha Massaquoi (Health)

Dr. Massaquoi has been a powerful force in Black women's health for over 30 years. As the Executive Director of Women's Health in Women's Hands Community Health Centre, a centre specializing in providing primary healthcare to Black and racialized women, and as the current Assistant Professor in the Department of Health and Society at the University of Toronto, Scarborough, she played a critical role in shaping community-level healthcare programs, changing the lives of thousands of women in Toronto.

Daphne Taras (Education)

Daphne Taras is a trailblazer for women in male-dominated fields. As Dean of Canada's largest business school, the Ted Rogers School of Management, she formally and informally mentors academics, inspires prospective leaders to apply for decanal positions, and lobbies senior leaders to change taken-for-granted institutional practices that prevent women from achieving equity with their male counterparts.

Charlie Wall-Andrews (Arts)

Charlie Wall-Andrews is committed to ensuring that the music industry in Canada is more inclusive through research, creativity, and leadership. As the Executive Director of the SOCAN Foundation and inaugural Vice-Chair of Music Canada's Advisory Council, as well as a Board member of the Canada Council for the Arts, she is a leading voice for advancing inclusion and the development of greater possibilities for women and girls in Canada's music industry.

Melissa Alexander (Community Service)

Melissa Alexander has made an enormous impact in the lives of incarcerated women. After experiencing incarceration, she set out to ensure women in prison have every opportunity to advance and build a thriving life upon release. Melissa has worked with Walls to Bridges, a program at the University of Laurier that helps incarcerated people obtain a postsecondary education. Melissa has dedicated countless hours to the program as a faculty trainer – training instructors from numerous postsecondary institutions – and as a public workshop facilitator.

Manvir Bhangu (Young Woman of Distinction)

From a young age, Manvir Bhangu wanted to change the conversation on gender in the South Asian community. Today, she is the founder and Executive Director of Laadliyan, Celebrating and Empowering Daughters, a Peel Region nonprofit created to empower South Asian girls and women using education, engagement and awareness. Through Laadliyan, Manvir has directly impacted over 5800 girls and women in the South Asian community. Her drive for creating inclusive spaces and mentorship opportunities for women and girls exemplifies Manvir as an extraordinary changemaker.