

Award winner fought for women's rights

Ruth Bell fought for six decades to ensure women had an equal place in society, in the boardroom and in government. She is one of eight Women of Distinction for 2007.

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Thursday night, some outstanding Ottawa women were honoured at the 14th Annual YMCA-YWCA Women of Distinction Awards at the Ottawa Congress Centre.

The awards are all about recognizing women "who embody the mission of the Y to build strong kids, strong families and strong communities," said Dianne Wing, chairwoman of the event's organizing committee.

Since the awards were introduced in Ottawa in 1994, the accomplishments of 630 women have been celebrated.

Last night, from 52 women nominated, eight received awards.

Ruth Bell received the Scotiabank Lifetime Achievement Award. Now in her 80s, Mrs. Bell has worked for six decades to improve society, and especially the place of women in it.

"I tried over many years to see that women were treated more equally, both in society and in the boardrooms and the offices of government," she once told the Citizen. "Women were competent to take on senior roles, but few were allowed to do so."

Her efforts on behalf of women began with a personal experience. She was



CREDIT:
Ruth Bell



CREDIT:
Samira Ahmed

fired from a job when she wouldn't allow the boss to become too familiar.

"So it began from personal experience, but I soon wanted all women to have the chances they deserve."

She was one of the first members of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, pressed UNESCO to create a Sub-Commission on the Status of Women and served as its first chair, and was a founding member of the Canadian Commission for Learning Opportunities for Women, and of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women.



CREDIT:
Sarah Cook

Three decades ago, the Royal Bank learned how Mrs. Bell could encourage women to combine their individual power. Feeling the bank treated women with condescension, she encouraged friends to buy shares and exercise their voting rights to break the gender bar in the boardroom. Soon, women were not only on the board, but were managing bank branches and heading departments.

She also lobbied for reform of Canada's family property law.

Her motto has been: "Behold the turtle. She makes progress only when she sticks her neck out."

Her other recognitions include the Governor General's Person Award for her work on behalf of women.

The Young Woman of Distinction Award was given to Samira Ahmed. As co-chair of the executive board of Child & Youth Friendly Ottawa, she organized the 2006 annual Child & Youth Friendly Ottawa Golf Tournament, which raised \$20,000. She also helped collect 3,000 schoolbags for disadvantaged children and helped establish the Ottawa Youth Commission, which provides a voice for youth at City Hall.



CREDIT:
Ruth Dunley



CREDIT:
Nancy Edwards

After the Asian tsunami, she organized a fundraising effort which brought in

\$5,000. For five years, she has been a volunteer at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario.

The Rx&D Science, Research and Technology Award went to Nancy Edwards, a professor at the University of Ottawa's School of Nursing. Ms. Edwards has applied her research findings to nursing practice with good results. In China's Yunnan province, her work brought about a more than 30-percent drop in maternal, infant and newborn death rates.



CREDIT:
Peg Herbert

The Healthy and Active Living Award went to Susan Longbottom, who has served for six years as the volunteer president of the board of directors of the Ottawa Race Weekend, Canada's largest running and walking event. During her tenure, participation has jumped to 30,000 people from 10,000, and the weekend has gained prestige internationally.



CREDIT:
Susan Longbottom

The Education, Training and Development Award went to Sarah Cook, whose volunteer programs have brought vigour to reading, science and math programs in area schools. In 1994, she established Volunteers in Education to demonstrate the value volunteers can bring to the school system. Starting with 37 seniors in 15 elementary classrooms, VIE now boasts 1,800 volunteers in 260 schools. Her other programs include OttawaReads and LectureOttawa, which bring corporate and public sector volunteers into classrooms to read aloud to kindergarten and Grade 1 pupils.



CREDIT:
Maria Rigby

The Ottawa Citizen Community Volunteer Award went to Maria Rigby, who helps settle newcomers to Canada. As a member of the Ottawa Mennonite Refugee Association, she meets newcomers at the airport, gives them warm clothing, and helps them find housing. She and her group have even formed a non-profit organization that buys properties to rent to newcomers who may have problems finding housing.

The Business, Professions and the Public Sector Award went to Peg Herbert, who has helped the people of Lesotho, in southern Africa, deal with poverty and HIV. Travelling to that small nation in 2004, she saw a devastated people and decided to make a difference. Back in Canada, she established Help Lesotho, and as executive director, she trained and mentored more than 50 volunteers, raised money and spearheaded an AIDS awareness program so effective it has also been applied in other affected nations.

The Arts and Culture Award was given to the Citizen's Ruth Dunley.

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