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Teen blazes trails with her passion

Student advocates for Etobicoke youth
 Among 20 feted for their leadership

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Chelsea Takalo has spent most of her life committed to good causes and making her community a better place to live.

It's in her genes. Her mother Jasmin Dooh, a community relations worker in south Etobicoke, has been doing it for years. The apple hasn't fallen far from the tree.

When she was 10, Takalo painted happy faces on the kids attending the block parties her mom organized.

At 12, she was vice-president of the junior board of directors at the Lakeshore co-op where they live.

By 14, Takalo had co-founded the trailblazing South Etobicoke Youth Assembly (SEYA) and was front and centre advocating for young people at city hall. More importantly, she was giving at-risk youth and kids from low-income families the confidence and information they needed to speak out about issues important to them and be heard.

But never did the ebullient York University student, now 19, imagine her grassroots youth advocacy work would earn her a prestigious national award.

Takalo is one of Youth in Motion's Top 20 Under 20 for 2005 ? an award and mentoring program that celebrates outstanding young Canadians for their leadership, innovation and achievements.

Youth in Motion is a not-for-profit organization that aims to help youth by providing access to career information, increasing their awareness of opportunities and motivating them to be contributing citizens.

This year's award winners ? inventors, environmentalists, entrepreneurs, crusaders against child exploitation and poverty and even a 10-year-old best-selling author ? were selected from among hundreds of candidates from across the country.

Representing British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador, they were honoured yesterday at the second annual awards ceremony that kicked off a four-day leadership summit in Toronto.

Seven of the 20 winners live in the GTA.

"I never thought it would lead to this ... You don't work for the recognition, but it's so rewarding when you get it," Takalo said of her achievements with SEYA.

That youth-run volunteer organization was established after a 1999 forum that brought Toronto's politicians face-to-face with young people who spoke their minds about burning issues in their neighbourhood ? including racial profiling and lack of recreational programs, social services and affordable housing for young people in south Etobicoke.

Politicians were awestruck by what they heard from the floor, Takalo recalled yesterday.

"Young people had never raised these issues before."

The forum was a springboard for SEYA and over the years that group has brought south Etobicoke back to the attention of council. According to Takalo, her community had fallen off the radar screen at city hall. Although it desperately needed youth programs and services, council was plowing money into communities like Rexdale, Thistletown and Jamestown in the north end of Etobicoke, she said.

That's changed in the past six years thanks to SEYA. Today, its 150 members, who range from 13 to 26 years old, are a force to be reckoned with and are helping make a difference in their community. Members sit on a number of youth committees, even providing input on the city's budget. They also run a variety of key youth workshops in areas such as anti-oppression training, employment skills and leadership.

The group is self-sufficient, raising money for its programs, she said with pride.

As for the future, Takalo says she plans to follow in her mother's footsteps.



Chelsea Takalo, 19, honoured for her work in youth advocacy.

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"No one goes into social services for the money," she said with a laugh. "You go in for the love of the work."

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