



# Good News Toronto

## OUR EVERYDAY HEROES

# Diana Alli: A Heart for Community

By NICOLE GEORGES-BENNETT

It's 7 a.m. on a Saturday morning, but instead of sleeping in on her only day to do so, Diana Alli is at the University of Toronto's Medical School making coffee, hot chocolate, and tea for 220 people. These are special people to her; they are the volunteer co-directors, mentors/tutors, and kids who participate in the University of Toronto Medical Faculty's Saturday Tutoring program.

The program is one of 20 community projects that Diana has helped develop. At 10 a.m., Diana checks over the simmering jugs. When the kids and their tutors come in, they'll be greeted with hot drinks and Diana's warm smile. Anybody who needs a hug only has to ask.

Diana's passion for

obvious during her thirty-four years at the University of Toronto. Until recently, she was the Student Affairs Coordinator, but was appointed the impressive sounding post of Senior Officer of Service Learning Opportunities and Partnership and Student Life Enrichment in the Faculty of Medicine. Diana accepts the new title with little fanfare; her innate sense of humility can't abide too much of the spotlight being on her.

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Her small office serves as a haven for students seeking everything from academic counselling to a friendly hug, as they

intensely challenging program. Diana puts the heart into the medical faculty; she is an iconic figure to medical students and her reputation has won her countless allies in her projects for youth. In 2005, she received the Order of Ontario, the province's highest honour. Her office overflows with awards of distinction and cards from grateful students.

Medical student Michelle Ryan personally experienced Diana's generosity. "She'd known me for about two months, when I delivered my baby prematurely and had to travel a long distance between home and the hospital. She gave us the key to her condo and let us stay there. She brings a richness and a homey feel to the faculty,



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like you have a second mom."

Michelle's sentiments are echoed by Dr. Sean Wharton, coordinator for the Canadian Bariatric Clinic treatment of obesity and cardiovascular disease. "As a medical student, I've worked with her on multiple organizations, including the Black Medical Student Association that she helped start. She is this kind-hearted person who manages to transcend race; she's there to help guide people onto the right path."

Diana concedes the recognition is heart warming; however, her desire is not for accolades,

but to change lives for the better. She has faced many challenges: her mother suffered from a mental ailment, her beloved father and brother died in tragic accidents, economic constraints forced her to give up her dream of becoming a doctor, and she endured a severely abusive marriage for fourteen years. But Diana feels her experiences had purpose. "I learned, out of these tragedies, to understand the suffering of others. I always had God as my pillar and strength."

Diana co-founded seventeen of the Medical Faculty's community outreach programs, mobilizing the energy and humanitarian impulses of

the medical students she oversees. These initiatives — The Saturday Parkdale and Woodgreen Tutoring Programs, Woodgreen Homeward Bound Programs, and Out of the Cold, amongst others, which range from tutoring for children of all ages to assistance for isolated seniors and new immigrants — offer support to marginalized people in Toronto's communities. Funding for these initiatives come from annual donations from final year medical students and faculty.

Alongside her supervisor, Professor Ann Jarvis, Diana has fostered several initiatives within the university. She co-founded the Summer Mentorship

Program (SMP) with Dr. Miriam Rossi. She has also started several major fundraiser events for global health care initiatives, such as Earth Tones, and Rhythm and Dance.

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A petite woman with a brilliant smile, Diana admits that her obsession with social causes may be a by-product of empty nest syndrome. Her daughter, Alexandria Haji, laughingly agrees. "Yes! She has too many projects,

but it's good she's really busy because her three children are all grown up. It's wonderful so many students appreciate what she does."

Diana says her future programs will focus on social accountability. "We're aiming to start a hassle-free clinic for the homeless, street youth, etc. I hope to start a mentoring centre for less fortunate youth to be more focused on their personal, academic, and spiritual development."

When asked about retirement plans, she smiles. "One never knows. I'm enjoying life so much at the university, and these are all passions that keep me motivated and fulfilled."