

The Rosemary Brown Annual Memorial Conference: A Review

By Tania Arora, Volunteer Blogger

“Because I am a woman, I must make unusual efforts to succeed. If I fail, no one will say, ‘She doesn’t have what it takes.’ They will say, ‘Women don’t have what it takes.’”– Clare Boothe Luce

On September 23rd, the United Nations Association of Canada – Vancouver Branch, SFU Department of Gender, Sexuality & Women’s Studies and Rosemary Brown Award for Women Committee hosted the fourth annual Rosemary Brown Memorial Conference at the SFU Centre for Dialogue.

Each year the Rosemary Brown Award for Women recognizes and honors a BC-based woman or organization that promotes the values and ideals which Rosemary Brown championed during her lifetime. Established in 2004, the award is given to those who exemplify the spirit of Rosemary Brown, who was a politician, mother, grandmother and activist committed to the fight against sexism and racism.

The award ceremony featured panelists who discussed the theme of Gender, Sexuality and Disability Justice. This year’s award recipient and the keynote speaker was Dr. Dana Brynelsen, a life-long disability rights activist and former Provincial Advisor for the Infant Development Program (IDP) (1975-2009). In her role as Provincial Advisor, she supported the development of 53 IDPs in communities across BC and encouraged the development of a parallel network of Aboriginal IDPs. Dr. Brynelsen accepted the award on behalf of the families and staff she has worked with over many years, those who have created and improved services for children with developmental disabilities.

Dana attributed the success of the work to their ability to cross boundaries that had, in the past, rarely been crossed. Key to this was the driving advocacy of parents whose sons and daughters were, for the most part, completely excluded from normal community life and activity. Dr. Brynelsen expressed her gratitude by saying, “This award has special meaning for me. I knew Rosemary, initially as most others in BC knew her, as a brilliant orator, politician, and passionate champion of human rights.” She concluded with a few words about the pressing concerns facing us today, “It is true that we have made great gains over the past decades, in terms of services and support in the area of disability... but how quickly gains are eroded and lost when our values and attitudes about what is important shift.”

The Rosemary Brown Undergraduate Awards in Social Justice were presented by Willeen Keough and Lara Campbell of Simon Fraser University to recipients Maisaloon- Al-Ashkar and Shilpa Narayan. Shilpa is an undergraduate student majoring in Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies who has been involved with Youth for a Change (Surrey),

Lookout Emergency Aid Society, and the Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre at the BC Children's Hospital.

Shilpa has also worked on programming for refugee youth, mental health, queer youth, and elder abuse and has given keynote speeches on mental wellness. She also runs a drop-in center for people diagnosed with HIV. Shilpa's dedication to her studies at Simon Fraser University and her social justice work exemplify the highest standards of community engagement and academic achievement.

Maisaloon is completing a double major in First Nations Studies and Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University. She works as a Women Center Coordinator in Vancouver and has been involved with The Simon Fraser Public Interest Research Group (SFPIRG) throughout her studies. Wise and sassy, she is a 20-year-old Muslim woman and displaced Palestinian who unapologetically speaks her truth.

Congratulations to all the recipients!