

Activists march to help end violence against women

By Nate Smelle

Since 1991, Dec. 6 has been known as the National Day of Remembrance and Action to End Violence Against Women in Canada. The date was chosen to honour the 14 women who were gunned down at l'École Polytechnique de Montréal in 1989. They were murdered because they were women.

More than 50 activists assembled in Millennium Park in Bancroft on Dec. 6 to raise their voices as one and call for an end to gender-based violence. The demonstration began with a series of speeches given by community members from Maggie's Resource Centre and other organizations working to put a stop to violence against women.

Reminding everyone why they had gathered in the cold to take their message to the streets, social worker with the Métis Nation of Ontario, and co-organizer of the demonstration, Marsha Depotier said she once believed she would be able to work herself out of a job. Having worked in the field for many years, she said, unfortunately she now understands that she will likely be working to end violence against women for the rest of her life.

"As a community, it's a time that we come together as one because we know what that good life is that we want for everybody," said Depotier.

"We want everybody to feel that safety and security, and to know that they're loved, honoured and respected. Here in our Indigenous community, women are upheld at the highest and we always have been. We are the life givers, life carriers and life sustain-ers, but we see violence as well, just like we see in the rest of the world. Violence exists and it's going to take the whole community, the whole village to end violence."

As the sun went down behind the clouds, the activists marched south on Hastings Street North waving signs and shouting out for change. Following the march, the group reassembled in the rear parking lot of the Village Playhouse to keep warm beside a fire tended by Algonquin negotiations representative Stephen Hunter.

After dinner, the crowd went inside the Playhouse to watch a screening of the documentary film, "A Better Man," and to take part in a panel focused on ending violence against women.

A Bancroft woman was among the speakers facilitating the panel discussion. She said she felt compelled to share her story having survived a vicious assault late one evening in June 2016. She explained she was repeatedly and brutally physically, emotionally and sexually assaulted by a man who had been her partner for more than a year and a half. As a single mother, she said she had no choice but to confront her fear and begin to move past it, so she could continue to work and take care of her family.

"I had a choice as to whether I was going to let all that anger, resentment, hatred and guilt sit heavy on me, or if I was going to turn them around, push them out and not allow them to overwhelm me," she said. "It could have. It would have if I had chosen to let it. What was done that night was meant to kill me. Physically, mentally, emotionally, it was all meant to destroy me. It's all personal, everybody deals with it in their own time and in their own space."

On Nov. 14 of this year "505 days after the assault took place" the man who committed the crime was found guilty and sentenced to 546 days in jail. In court, the woman was given the opportunity to present a victim impact statement, outlining the emotional, physical and economic impact the assault had on her personally.

"My fear for my security is absolute and continuing," she told the judge in her statement. "It is my belief that given the opportunity, the accused will bring physical and emotional harm to myself and my family. From that day, and for the rest of my life, I will always be vigilant of my surroundings and in effect will always be looking over my shoulder, or around the next corner in fear."

While writing her victim impact statement, she learned that only one in 10 survivors of sexual assault give their statement to the judge. Out of this 10 per cent, she said only 25 per cent actually present their statement to the judge in person. If sharing her story helps even one person heal, or gain the courage needed to share their story, she said it will have been worth recounting the horrific experience.

"When I found out those stats, I thought to myself there's got to be a way to help give these women and men a voice," she said. "I would like to help these women find the courage and the confidence to go in and present the stories, because they need to be heard."

She explained that it is common among survivors of sexual assault to be afraid to speak their statement in front of the individual who assaulted them. Though there are many ways to present a victim impact statement "for example by video or having the Crown attorney read the statement" she believes it is most effective when it is presented by the victim themselves. She recalled how freeing it was. She felt the weight lift from her shoulders as she read her statement. As painful and difficult as it was for her to do this, she encouraged other survivors to share their story for their own benefit, and for the benefit of the judge.

?We had the opportunity to watch a mother present a victim impact statement, and she was very angry at the person who had committed the crime,? she said.

?We also watched one that was just read in by the Crown attorney and it just didn't have the same impact. The Crown attorney can't bring the same emotion to what they're saying, because they are just reading words. When the judge realizes what has happened to a person and they are able to identify with them, it can make a difference in the sentencing.?

Prior to the allegations of sexual assault and sexual misconduct against U.S. President Donald Trump by 20 different women; and the seemingly ever-growing list of celebrities facing similar accusations, she said there was a common misbelief that these types of issues were primarily a problem for people in lower socioeconomic circles. With more high-profile survivors speaking out every day, she said it has become clear how pervasive this crisis has become.

?These assaults do not discriminate socioeconomically,? she said.

?People seem to think that doctors and lawyers and people like this don't do these sorts of things because they are supposed to be upstanding citizens. This violence is running rampant and it needs to stop. It's just out of control and hopefully the courts will start to see that.?