

National Day of Remembrance on Violence Against Women vigil held in Caledon

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Twenty-nine years ago, at L'École Polytechnique de Montréal, Marc Lépine, who watched his father degrade his mother throughout his childhood, walked into a postsecondary classroom with a firearm, divided the room by gender, then asked the men to leave. He then proclaimed, "I hate women!" and shot the nine females in the classroom, six of whom died. He then proceeded to the school's cafeteria and continued to shoot indiscriminately, killing fourteen women and injuring ten men and six other women.

Today, in light of the recent Toronto van attack and the 2014 Isla Vista killings, violence against women has gained momentum. In memory of the fourteen female victims at L'École Polytechnique, the Federal Government instituted a National Day of Remembrance on the anniversary of the massacre.

Caledon Public Library staff, in cooperation with Family Transition Place held a National Day of Remembrance vigil on Dec. 6th. They have done this for the past eight years.

This year, Canada's femicide (the killing of women and girls) list reached a record 48 names.

"Our culture still raises our children to believe men have more value than women, said Norah Kennedy, executive director of Family Transition House. "We are in this world ideally as equal participants. It's too late for the women at L'École Polytechnique, it is too late for the people run down by the van in Toronto, it is too late for the women on that list. But it is not too late for our sons and daughters. A tiny flame when it is held together with other flames produces a much greater light."

At this year's vigil, guest speakers, Mayor Allan Thompson, Steve Bunion from the MENtors (a group of men who are allies in the work to end violence against women), Kennedy, Peel District School Board Chair Stan Cameron, and Kellye Potter, public services manager for Caledon Public Library all contributed their thoughts and sentiments about the almost three decades of work to engender the conversation around violence against women.

"What are we doing wrong?" asked Mayor Allan Thompson. "Here in Canada we're supposed to be a just society and lead by example?we have a lot more work to do." Echoing his sentiments, Peel School Board trustee, Stan Cameron, a father of two grown daughters, said "It is also a time to take action?it starts with creating a culture of respect?how men interact contributes to the observational learning of boys. The best way to elicit a particular behaviour from another human being is to model that behaviour?I ask all men and boys to take this pledge with me."

Potter asked, "Why is it so important to remember these women? These women died for nothing, simply because they were born women, and it happens time and time again. This day serves as a sign of progress. Now more than ever, men and women are having the difficult discussions. Sometimes, simply having the conversation is helping. Remember them not just as symbols?remember their lives as well as their deaths."

On that femicide list, the oldest victim was 88-years-old. The youngest was 13-years-old. "We didn't have the language to even describe this in 1999," remarked Kennedy. Now, there is a term and a subculture that glorifies violence against women.

Incel is derived from involuntary celibate. An online community of these (mostly) men continues to grow, glorifying violence against women. These men feel aggrieved that women have somehow denied them their rights as men, for anything from taking a job to denying sex.

"It's not easy to attend an event, or engage in a discussion, said Kennedy. It's not an easy feat to try and change the world, but you did that all tonight when you decided to leave home and come here, she said, to the crowd of men, women, and girls, all holding

candles and fourteen plaques, each with a name of a victim of L'École Polytechnique. It's easier to forget and not get involved but we all have to choose integrity over comfort. That man learned from his father that women had very little value, and felt that women had usurped his entitlement as a man.?

When Kennedy talks about male entitlement, she is careful to specify that it is aggrieved entitlement, which blames women for personal disappointments and perceived failures, instead of society's definition of masculinity- which is referred to by some as toxic masculinity.

?When we say toxic masculinity, we are not saying all masculinity is toxic, said Kennedy. It is a descriptor, like saying a red house. It's a type of masculinity all about power and control. The violence happens on a continuum, and its often not seen that way. It starts way on the other side by raising boys to think sexist comments are fine and raising girls to think they can't say no. Most men have been on the low end of the continuum because they've been raised to think that that's how men behave. In reality, toxic masculinity benefits neither gender.?

From the perspective of the library staff, their goal is to instigate and encourage conversations in the community by ?having it out in the forefront, and shining a light on it,? said Colleen Lipp, head librarian and CEO. ?What the issue is and what their part is in ending it.?

The effects of these conversations remain to be seen, but there are encouraging signs.

?There are more conversations happening. I think we've seen that over the past year with the #MeToo movement. It's in the public domain now,? said Kennedy, who also added that the vigil held at the Orangeville shelter earlier that day had more men in attendance than ever. What needs to be emphasized is that December 6th is a day not just for remembrance, but for action.?

Steve Bunion and his MENtors feel that their role is to be silent and listen, letting women take the lead.

?We live and work in a very safe community and we've become complacent, said Lipp. But Caledon is not special. Women are being mistreated, and we may not always know when it is happening.?

Kennedy added that the Family Transition Place shelter in Orangeville, an agency which supports women and children who have experienced violence and abuse, is always full and they often have to turn people in need away. Whether this is a positive sign of women increasingly seeking help and escape from abusive situations, or conversely evidence that the problem is getting worse, is up for debate.