



IN THE COMMUNITY

News and Views For NASA Members



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National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women

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It's just a winter day like any other. It's chilly and maybe there's some light snow falling – nothing really out of the ordinary for early December on campus. Halls and classes are abuzz with students coming and going, but overall things are calm. Students gather in common areas to study. Many are preparing for their final exams while eagerly awaiting the start of a well-deserved the winter break. And then, suddenly, you hear something shatters the calm. You pause for a moment. Perhaps some students are watching videos and forgot to turn down the volume? Or maybe the maintenance workers dropped something loud and heavy? The noise repeats, and before you can fully wrap your head around what's going on you hear screaming as people begin to panic and run. What would you think? How would you feel? And what would you do?

It was a cold and largely unremarkable day on December 6, 1989. No one could have guessed what was about to happen; a young man brandishing a semi-automatic rifle burst into a college classroom in at the École Polytechnique de Montréal. At first, nobody was quite sure what was happening or how to react. The gunman ordered the male students to leave the room, and when they had left he opened fire on the women. Six female students were killed instantly and three more were left injured.

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As the gunman roamed the corridors and classrooms he specifically targeted women. When it was all over 14 women were dead, 10 more were injured, and four men had been hurt in the crossfire. He then turned the gun on himself. Professor Janice Williamson was teaching a course at the University of Alberta when then news broke about what had happened that day, “I was teaching a women's studies popular culture course at the very moment when we learned of these misogynist anti-feminist crimes in 1989. I remember the utter disbelief and horror that everyone experienced ... we all wept together.”

Initially there was controversy about the motivation behind the killings. Many resisted the analysis that feminism was at the heart of this incident, and some commentators argued, erroneously, that he was just a mad man, and that the women just happened to be in his way. But as more information came to light, the truth became obvious – the issue of women’s equality was at the forefront of the killer’s motivations. He left behind a note that included a list of prominent Canadian feminists whom he planned to kill, and it was clear that these women engineering students had symbolized something greater than themselves: the progress of women’s equality. The police initially refused to go public with the killer’s suicide note, saying that they were worried that it might inspire copycats. It was not until his suicide note was leaked to the media that full truth about the very political nature of this massacre came to light.

Afterwards a number of feminist faculty members in universities across Canada received death threats.

Williamson recalls vividly the death threats she received that referenced the massacre, and she was not the only one. “It was very traumatic and I ended up moving houses because I had phone calls at home as well threats in



the workplace,” though she also noted that the university administration was very supportive of those who were targeted at the time. While there was negative backlash, the massacre also spurred a number of campaigns to end violence against women, and in 1991 NDP MP Dawn Black introduced a private member’s bill to honour December 6th as the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women.

Members participate in the 2016 National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women at the SUB Stage on Campus

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Despite coming up against a degree of resistance in the House of Commons that many would find surprising, the bill eventually passed.

While a lot has changed since 1989, and arguably for the better in most cases, there remains a lot of work to be done. Some might be inclined to write this tragedy off as just another piece of history – something we’ve moved past; something that could never happen again, but recent political developments have demonstrated that, in spite of all our progress towards more equality, tolerance and acceptance, many of the hard-won rights we tend to take for granted today can all too easily be eroded. Posters advertising for “*men’s rights*” groups and “*white pride*” meetings have sadly become a more common site across campus, and Williamson points to recent racist incidents against the Faculty of Native Studies as further evidence of the work that remains to be done, noting that indigenous women are statistically more likely to be assaulted in Canada.

On Wednesday, December 6th, 2017 representatives from across the University community will join together to mark The National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women; to reflect on the lives lost at the École Polytechnique in 1989, and on the many other women whose lives have been cut short or harmed as a result of violence. The memorial event will begin at about 11:30am on December 6th with 14 Women in Black, representing the 14 women who were murdered, beginning their processions from various locations across campus – each procession will make its way to the SUB Stage in the Students’ Union Building for 12pm. At noon on December 6th representatives from across the University community will host a memorial ceremony at the SUB Stage in the Students’ Union Building. We hope that you will join us in renewing a commitment to end all forms of violence against women.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITY

December 6 Memorial Procession

We are seeking volunteers or teams of volunteers to participate in the processions from various locations across campus. Each team will consist of a Woman in Black, a bell ringer (to ring a small hand bell as they walk) and two or three outgoing helpers who can hand out information (postcards and buttons) and discuss the event and its significance with interested bystanders as they walk.

To sign up as a volunteer or if you have questions please contact nasa@ualberta.ca

In Memoriam

Geneviève Bergeron, Nathalie Croteau. Anne-Marie Edward, Maryse Laganière,
Anne-Marie Lemay, Michèle Richard, Annie Turcotte, Hélène Colgan, Barbara Daigneault,
Maud Haviernick, Maryse Leclair, Sonia Pelletier, Annie St-Arneault, Barbara Klucznik-Widajewicz

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