

15 ways to remember: Marking a massacre with push for change [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A gunman has gone crazy in Montreal. Can you go? It was slim pickings that night 15 years ago in the Toronto newsroom where I worked. My French was awful then, and I was a junior reporter, just 24, not the steely and seasoned stuff that a major newsroom would want to send to a major event. I was also female. My male editors would later wonder if I and another female colleague would be too biased to cover what was unfolding as a hate crime against young women.

But there were no men in the newsroom that night who could say more than bonjour.

I arrived four hours later to chaos. The killing was done by then. The cab dropped me and a photographer off at the L'Ecole Polytechnique, amid fire trucks, police cars, yellow tape wrapping the campus and students gripping each other in numbed disbelief and innocence jarringly lost. In newspapers across the country the next day, there would be a picture of a young engineering student slumped backward over a chair in the cafeteria. I saw that scene with my own eyes. At least I think I did. It's the photograph that I remember better while the reality, glimpsed through a dirty cafeteria window cleaned with hot breath and the smudge of a cold hand, has been pushed down deep, rarely revisited.

The other day, I dug up the stories I wrote 15 years ago, like the one written the day the bodies of eight of the 14 women who were murdered were laid out for public view. ...

This year, the Canadian Labour Congress and its affiliates are upping the ante, launching a more aggressive campaign to end violence against women. "15 days/15 ways" is a booklet of postcards, each one addressed to Prime Minister Paul Martin. Counting 15 days from the launch date -- this Monday, Nov. 22 -- lands you on Dec. 6.

Postcard one: Women need affordable, safe housing for women. Postcard three: Mr. Martin, welfare should help women get back on their feet, but rates are below poverty levels. Postcard five: Women need a national child care program. Postcard six: We need higher wages and federal proactive pay equity legislation. Postcard 10: Women need to know they have protection from the justice system because restraining orders only work if enforced. The postcards are being handed out by unions, women's groups and in work places.

Peggy Nash calls from the Toronto area. She is a top executive with the Canadian Autoworkers Union and one of the women who designed the CLC campaign.

"This year, we wanted to show the interconnectedness of the inequalities women face and how these inequalities contribute to greater vulnerability to violence and abuse for women and children," she says.

Nash says the CLC believes there is momentum to make change, the same conditions that existed when Medicare was brought in almost four decades ago. We have a minority government elected on promises like a national day care plan. "We think we might have some leverage."

I wonder. I've always felt uncomfortable when people's deaths are misappropriated, used for something other than they stood for. Is this what the 14 women would have wanted, to be remembered for how they died and not for how they lived? They were not just victims, but pioneers in a field that back then was owned by men. On December 6, I always think of them that way, not as victims but as trailblazers. But it's also true that no one would want to have died in vain. Their legacy could be the forging of an easier way ahead.

So mail a postcard on each of the 15 days and swamp the Prime Minister's office.

- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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