

Degrees

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**No more
missing
women.**

**Faculty and
students
fight back.**



**UNIVERSITY OF
REGINA**



OUR MISSING MOTHERS, SISTERS AND DAUGHTERS

Gwenda Yuzicappi outside her home on the Standing Buffalo First Nation near Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan.

Each year, scores of women, many Aboriginal or otherwise marginalized, are murdered or go missing in Canada. Compelled by events both close to home and afar, U of R faculty and students have come together with members of the community to try to put some understanding to an issue that is incomprehensible.



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Photos by University of Regina Photography Department.



The missing women's conference in Regina brought together people from across North America to discuss the issues around missing and murdered women especially in Canada and Mexico. Here marchers trek from the Conexus Arts Centre to the University campus in a show of solidarity shouting "Ni una mas" (not one more).

The numbers are staggering: there are more than 500 murdered and missing Aboriginal women in Canada, according to Amnesty International's 2004 report *Stolen Sisters: Discrimination and violence against Indigenous women in Canada*.

Women like Amber Tara-Lynn Redman, who disappeared on July 15, 2005, from the Trapper's Bar in Fort Qu'Appelle, Sask., at the age of 19. Her remains were found May 5, 2008, on the Little Black Bear First Nation.

"I always had the strong hope that she would one day come home," says her mother Gwenda Yuzicappi. "But I'm very fortunate on the other hand that my daughter's remains were located, and I was able to bring her home, and for her to start her journey."

"[Amber] was radiant," Yuzicappi remembers. "She was inspired by her culture." Amber participated as a junior princess when she was 12 years old as well as a girl's fancy dancer. "She took that honour as a priority," says Yuzicappi.

Earlier in her life, Amber had been asked to re-enact the traditional Lakota legend of the White Buffalo Calf Woman. Then, after her daughter's remains were found, two of the buffalo living nearby came right up behind her house. "They just looked at us," Yuzicappi says. She believes it was a sign, "that they were coming to give me strength."

The family visited the area where Amber's remains were found. "We needed that as a family." While there, family members remember hearing unexplained movement in the bushes. "We believe the relatives were coming and letting us know that they were there with her. I believe that Amber was not alone that night. Physically she was, but spiritually she had relatives that were with her. For me as her mother, that gave me so much comfort, in knowing that she was not alone."

"It was the Stolen Sisters report that really blew the lid off of the issue of missing women and brought it out into the public," says Brenda Anderson, a religious studies instructor at Luther College at the University of Regina. But it was Amber Redman, she admits, who really drew her into the issue.

"The real heart of it for me was when we were out camping in Fort Qu'Appelle two and a half years ago and I saw the poster for Amber Redman on a drugstore window. And the thought that just went through my head was, not another one. Not another one. How can this be happening? And there was just the point of ultimate failure that society had let down all these women. That it wasn't safe for them to be on the street because they had brown skin."

Anderson's response was to develop a class in feminist theory, followed by a 300-level course on missing and Indigenous women from a global perspective. That class has been cross-listed with women's studies, police studies and human justice, and has attracted students from political science, international studies and journalism as well.

This past spring, students in an eight-day class travelled to Mexico City. Developed by Anderson and Carla Blakely, Bread of Life Lutheran pastor, the class included visits to Lutheran and Catholic centres to meet with family members and grass roots organizations involved in the human rights struggle for Indigenous women.

"These students picked up the challenge and said, 'What are we going to do about it?'" Anderson says. "It was an important goal for us to partner with the community, in this case the churches, in order to show the broad responsibility our whole society shows for this issue."

Anderson, Blakely and the students also worked together on the international conference Missing Women: Decolonization, Third Wave Feminisms and Indigenous

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U of R psychology student Alexis Johnson ties a pink ribbon on one of the trees between the Conexus Arts Centre and the First Nations University as a way to remember women who have gone missing. In Mexico when a woman goes missing people paint a street pole pink and mark it with a black cross. The art project coincided with the conference *Missing Women: Decolonization, Third Wave Feminisms and Indigenous People of Canada and Mexico*.





Luther College faculty member Brenda Anderson (left) and First Nations University of Canada Academics vice-president Shauneen Pete pose beside *Bison Sentinel*, a memorial to missing and murdered women commissioned by Casino Regina. The creator of the legacy sculpture, artist Adrian Stimson, describes it as a living memorial because of the tree that will grow up through it. The memorial sits in the Healing Gardens near the First Nations University of Canada.

People of Canada and Mexico held in August. The conference goals included raising awareness of violence against Indigenous women, especially in Canada and Mexico.

"The students have been involved right from the start on the core group and on the volunteer positions," Anderson says.

The conference brought people together from a broad spectrum to discuss the issues, including family members, students, academics, activists, government workers and members of faith communities, law enforcement and the media. Special guests and speakers at the conference included activist Marta Perez of San Salvadore, filmmaker Lourdes Portillo and journalist Isabel Arvides of Mexico. "Having family members speak definitely put a face on it," says Kim Karpa, fourth year women's studies student at the U of R. Karpa took the winter and spring classes and helped organize the conference. She says the conference helped open up her awareness.

"Before that I didn't know about this issue. How many other people are really aware of it?"

Now she's writing an honours thesis on the subject. "I definitely feel powerless. That's why I write about it. With numbers comes voice, and hopefully something will be done about it."

The conference forged links between several organizations. A special room was set aside for family members to use, and elders were available to speak with people if they wished. The national Status of Women has asked to see student papers with useful critiques and solutions, and several participants also took part in the Walk for Justice that moved across Canada to Ottawa.

"That's a very grassroots kind of work but I don't want to separate the theoretical [study] from that kind of work," says Anderson. "I think those two things should be in tandem."

Myrna LaPlante was also a conference organizer. LaPlante is a member of *Iskwewuk E-wichi-witochik* (Women Walking Together) in Saskatoon, and took part in the Walk for Justice.

LaPlante's aunt Emily Osmond (LaPlante), 78, disappeared from her acreage north of the Kawacatoose First Nations in the Raymore/Wynyard area. She was last seen on Sept. 9, 2007. Extensive searches of the area and RCMP investigations have not located her.

"Always we have these highs and these lows," says LaPlante. "We think, today is the day they make a break in the case. We hang onto every hope. Whatever form that she comes home in, the main thing is to bring her home. We never waver on that. We pray every day that she will be found."

While her family has had co-operation from media and law enforcement, LaPlante says, that hasn't been the case for some families. "There's a huge impact," she says. Family members may have to take time off work and travel for searches, incurring financial costs, as well as emotional and health issues. She estimates it has cost her family \$30-40,000. In the past, with fewer public memorials and almost no media coverage, families and communities were more isolated in dealing with such a tragedy.

A march at the Regina conference began quietly, she adds, but as they went along the chanting got louder and louder: "Not one more." Recent media coverage has improved for the issue overall, LaPlante says, and especially for Iskwewuk events this fall. "I think the media is listening. People are listening; people are hearing."

Iskwewuk e-wichi-witochik is a Saskatoon-based support group for families of missing Aboriginal women. The group has adopted the symbol of a pink banner with a black cross, "as a symbol of our commitment to raising the awareness and supporting the families." LaPlante says the symbol has been used in Regina and Saskatoon and will hopefully become a national or even international symbol to keep the issue in front of the public.

Paula Flores, a conference "guest mom," had created the symbol when her daughter went missing. Telephone poles in Juarez and Mexico are painted with the symbol every time a woman goes missing. Flores saw the same symbols on trees in Regina during the conference. "She was profoundly moved to



Far left: Gwenda Yuzicappi enjoys a laugh with her sister Erna Whitehead (centre) and niece Maureen Bear, at the Yuzicappi house on Standing Buffalo First Nation.

At left: Marta Pérez, a Zapatista activist speaks at the conference *Missing Women: Decolonization, Third Wave Feminisms and Indigenous People of Canada and Mexico*. Pérez holds a machete, the symbol of the Zapatista's agrarian traditions and way of life.

tears to see people here knowing and caring about the conditions of her country," Anderson says. A call from the conference floor asked for these banners to be used across North America until people pay attention.

LaPlante also spoke during the conference session for families, and she calls it the most emotional of all the presentations and talks about her aunt. She appreciated having a room allocated to allow people to sit and be quiet, and elders available to counsel people. The conference would be a good model for a future conference addressing issues specific to local Aboriginal families, to help them find funding and deal with the impacts.

Yuzicappi was scheduled to speak at the conference as well, but she became ill and was unable to attend. She will be writing her memories of her daughter Amber Redman for Sisters in Spirit. "I continue to talk about Amber every day. It gives me so much strength."

"There's a lot of families that I still pray for, and will continue to pray for, that don't know where their loved ones are," Yuzicappi says. "They're still feeling that emptiness. They're still feeling that loss of those loved ones. I continue to pray for them, and for justice."

"I know as a nation that we need to come together to ensure that justice is served for our loved ones."

The session in which families spoke out about their loved ones affected many people at the conference.

"I heard the pain and the anguish and the anger in their voices," says Shauneen Pete, Academics vice-president of the co-sponsoring First Nations University of Canada. "The voices followed me."

"These stories are more than just stories. They're our sisters, they're our relatives, they're our friends, they're potentially any woman."

"I don't know any First Nations women who haven't experienced childhood sexual abuse or family violence, and violence directed towards them because of their gender," says Pete. "The fact that I'm 43 this year in some ways is almost

miraculous, because of the wide range of forms of oppression that exist."


Pete went to school with the parents of Daleen Bosse Muskego, 27, who went missing from the Onion Lake First Nation in May 2004. Family members were scheduled to speak, but on August 8 Daleen's remains were found outside Saskatoon. (Charges have been laid in her case, and in the case of Amber Redman.)

Results from the conference have included increased networking among activist groups, especially through facilitated affinity groups that met on the final day of the conference to brainstorm solutions and calls for action across all of the areas touched on during proceedings.

"We didn't initiate it, we continued from what had already been in place, and I think we've strengthened that a lot," Anderson says. As well, a documentary DVD, website and print publication of the proceedings will help keep up the momentum generated at the conference.

The conference was a chance to build relationships, says Yuzicappi, who had met some of the women and their translators at another conference in 2007.

As well, Pete says, the broad range of topics presented at the conference helped contextualize women's oppression to help prevent sensationalizing the issue.

"Bringing those messages to the public maybe more helpful, I think, than just looking specifically at the loss of [an individual] woman," adds Pete. "Because really, in a country where brown women are so much the target of violence, is any woman safe?" 

Marie Powell Mendenhall is the Regina-based author of *Dragonflies are Amazing!* (Scholastic, 2007), as well as other published articles, poems, and short stories. She is currently enrolled in the University of British Columbia's Creative Writing MFA program.