



NEWS ARCHIVE:

Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon

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Stolen Sisters Walk held Oct. 4, 2009 to raise awareness about missing and murdered Aboriginal women

By **Andréa Ledding**

Hundreds gathered Oct. 4 in Saskatoon for an annual Stolen Sisters / Sisters in Spirit Awareness Walk honouring missing and murdered Aboriginal women across Canada.

Beginning at Saskatoon Indian and Métis Friendship Centre, police cars and cyclists escorted the men, women, and children through downtown Saskatoon.



The processions paused in front of Jax Nightclub, in memory of Daleen Bosse Muskego, a young mother and education student last seen there before she went missing in 2004. Her body was discovered four years later near Warmen. Her young daughter, and aunt Linda Bignell, were among the many family of missing and murdered aboriginal women in attendance.

“My niece was beautiful, always thinking about other people,” noted Bignell afterwards. “We’ve suffered a lot – so much as a people. As a nation, we’ve suffered. There’s so much we’ve endured.”

When the walk concluded, soup and bannock were served at the centre, while a projector displayed the names of over 520 missing or murdered Aboriginal women from across Canada. More people arrived from an anti-nuclear demonstration held that day on the riverbank, including Winona LaDuke, an Anishanabe woman from the northern United States.

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After the meal, a panel spoke, beginning with a representative from Saskatoon Police Services who said he hoped attendance at the annual event would swell to the thousands in future. He expressed his condolences and frustration that changes that have been made are still not enough.

Many families shared tearful memories of women lost to tragedy and violence.

Erin Wapass's sister was discovered in a shallow grave outside Saskatoon. "Since then it's been a search for justice," she said. "You feel very alone, I can't describe the helplessness, the hurt, and the pain."

Searching for answers only brought more questions – and news of other missing and murdered women, some who'd been gone for decades, across the country.

"First Nations women have been discriminated against for so long," Wapass said, describing the painful legacy of bitterness, hatred, loss, and hurt that can be seen in the high representation of First Nations people in jails, and the foster care system. "Our mothers are dying."

Joanne Ahenakew remembered her two murdered aunties, both taken away from young families in their early twenties. Laura's body was discovered by a cross country skier west of the city, and Bernadette was left naked and strangled in a ditch near Sherwood Park, Alberta. Laura left behind a daughter, and Bernadette, three sons. The killers remain at large.

"These women did not deserve this. I'm so tired of hearing of these beautiful women described as prostitutes, hookers, streetwalkers, addicts," Ahenakew said, as tears flowed in the room. She described her love and admiration for her kind and loving aunts, who were role models and older sisters to her. "I feel robbed. I didn't have a lot growing up, but I had my aunties."

Cynthia Sanderson, a 24-year-old student at Saskatoon Business College, left behind a seven year old son and four year old daughter when she was killed seven years ago. Now 11 and 14, they stood at the front of the room in tears, holding pictures of their mother, while their aunt, Cynthia's sister Linda Pechawis, spoke through her own tears of the family's love and loss for "a bright, beautiful, and clever woman who loved her children more than anything in the world."

One evening while visiting friends in Prince Albert, a man named Anthony Barr drove by in a truck yelling racial slurs at Cynthia and the two friends she was walking with. In the course of a few minutes, he grabbed her from inside his truck, knocked her down, and drove over her, taking her away from her family forever. He received three years jail time for the crime, and has since been released.

"She died because she was a First Nations woman," said Pechawis. "It all stems from racism and violence that should never be inflicted on anyone, regardless of skin colour or gender."

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Myrna LaPlante, the current chair of Iskwewuk E-wichiwitochik (Cree for “Women Walking Together”) and one of the organizers of the event, has been missing her aunt for two years now.

“We were very pleased with the turnout today – it proves the education is working and people are really starting to pay attention to this crisis,” LaPlante noted, adding that she hopes women will look after themselves and continue to practice awareness and self-protection. “It can happen anywhere – at the nightclub, the grocery store, or travelling. We all have to become mindful of potential harm.” Sixty-five walks were held across Canada this year, raising awareness about missing and murdered Aboriginal women, while supporting the grieving family members and communities left behind.