

Sisters in Spirit working to end violence against women



By Nate Smelle

With a heavy rain coming down a committed congregation of concerned citizens gathered at Cenotaph Park in downtown Bancroft for the 9th annual Sisters in Spirit Oct. 4 vigil. The event is part of a larger movement organized by the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWCA) that brings people together to raise awareness of the growing number of missing or murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada.

The NWAC has been addressing the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada for many years and remains deeply concerned that this issue is far from being resolved. In 2010 a study conducted through the Sisters In Spirit project by the NWAC documented 582 cases of missing or murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. This number is now believed to have risen to more than 800 in 2014. Stats Canada has found that Aboriginal women are three times more likely to experience violent victimization. Through the NWAC's systematic collection of data on this issue they have been able to identify many of the factors and commonalities that put these women and girls at risk.

Marsha Depotiers was one of the main organizers of the vigil again this year. Working in victim services for the Metis of Ontario she is doing everything she can to bring an end to violence against Aboriginal women. By drawing attention to this issue through events like this annual vigil, she wants to inspire people to demand that the federal government start taking meaningful action to prevent these statistics from climbing any higher.

"Today I stand before you silent. Silent because I look around and see there is still so much violence still within our communities. My hope is that as much as we can help one woman I want to help all of the women whose voices have been taken and some of those women who are not able to speak any more."

Bancroft's Mayor Bernice Jenkins was also in attendance on this soggy day of remembrance. Grateful for the opportunity to add her voice to this international day of action she gave thanks to everyone who came together to make this vigil possible.

"I give thanks this morning to being on the land that we share with the Algonquin people; I give thanks and acknowledgment to all of our relations," Jenkins said.

"Today the Town of Bancroft and social services agencies stand together to acknowledge the many missing or murdered Aboriginal women. We also acknowledge the loss of some of our women of our community. As a community we say no more violence; we say no more harm."

?The violence against Aboriginal women in this country is a national tragedy. It is also our national shame. We must also grieve with them each and every day. As a mother, as a grandmother, as a sister and as a daughter I understand the grieving process you must be experiencing and I think of it so often, and I am sure you do as well.?

Jenkins told the group that although she is always honoured to represent the town at the many functions she attends, this cause weighs heavy on her heart. The Mayor said she firmly believes that Oct. 4 Sisters in Spirit's vigils are a movement for social change, and that she is proud to be a part of it.

?The movement is growing,? she said. Since the first Oct. 4 vigils were held back in 2006, Jenkins explained that the number of events held across the country and internationally has grown from 11 to 216. At the same time as the vigil in Bancroft demonstrators also intending to raise awareness of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada blocked part of Hwy. 6 between Caledonia and Hagersville; and at the Skyway Bridge on Hwy. 49 connecting Tyendinaga Territory and Prince Edward County.

Although the movement is gaining strength, there is more work that needs to be done said the Mayor.

?The fact is that we the women need to speak up. We need the men of our nation, the men of our community and their strength; we need them to step up and not allow this to carry on. It has to come to an end. Shame on us that we have allowed this to go on so long.?

Bill Kilpatrick is a community activist and a candidate for running for councillor in Dungannon in the upcoming municipal election. There are many reasons he decided to stand out in the rain in solidarity with Sisters in Spirit. One reason he said is because as the father of two children he wants them to become liberated and emotionally healthy human beings. Another reason he said is because men need to do more to stop violence against women.

?We as men must strive for our own liberation; and we men need to be speaking out and defending women,? said Kilpatrick.

?We cannot be ashamed to be a man and a feminist. After all feminism is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. Is that such a bad thing?? We as men need to realize that every time we insult another man by calling him feminine names, we are devaluing not only our mothers, our sisters, our daughters, but ourselves.?

By participating in the vigil Kilpatrick hopes to send a message to other men to question all that they have been taught about what it means to be a man.

?This is the only way that we can empower ourselves and empower others to end violence against women,? he said.

?Sadness, compassion, decency, patience, kindness, understanding and caring are not feminine feelings and emotions, they are human emotions. Every time we label them feminine and devalue them we rob ourselves as men of a piece of our humanity. Now I am not saying that all masculine traits are bad and all feminine traits are good, what I am saying is that to be full human beings must have a balance.?