

**14th Annual Strawberry Ceremony for
Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Trans and Two Spirit People
and those who have died Violent Deaths**

WHAT: Gathering at Toronto Police Headquarters

WHEN: Thursday, February 14th, 2019, at 12:30 pm

WHERE: 50 College Street

Toronto's first February 14th event honouring missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls took place 14 years ago. At that time, members of a recently founded grassroots advocacy group, No More Silence, called on Toronto's Indigenous community and their allies to join them at police headquarters to gather in ceremony. It was the year that Vancouver's Downtown Eastside community was bracing itself for the beginning of the Robert Picton trial -- their annual Memorial March for missing and murdered women had already been taking place since 1991. In Toronto, we organized to show solidarity with our relations on the West Coast, but also to demonstrate that this phenomenon was country-wide and not limited to the aberration of a serial killer but rather of a systemic nature. No More Silence identified impunity as a central component of violence against Indigenous women in Canada. We choose to gather at police headquarters in order to underline the complicity of the state and its institutions. 14 years later, police continue to under-protect and over-police Indigenous people. Not infrequently, the violence stems from the institution itself as evidenced in the recent homicides of Greg Ritchie, shot last month by an Ottawa police officer who was known to harm vulnerable community members, and Robyn Garlow, shot multiple times by Hamilton police in October. Last year's not guilty verdicts in two high profile murder trials reinforced once again that the loved ones of young Indigenous people like Tina Fontaine and Colten Boushie will not find justice within the legal system.

We also understand a driving force of the violence to be cis-heterosexism and patriarchy -- therefore it is no surprise that our trans and Two Spirit community members experience the highest rates of violence, along with community members who are sex workers. Honouring their experiences is a priority for us.

The Toronto gathering has grown from a small group of 150 people in 2006 to being attended by over 1000 people in 2018. The event is endorsed by dozens of community groups, agencies, unions and churches. Expenses are covered by donations from these same groups and individuals. No government funding is solicited or received. A feast following the outdoor ceremony, served by the residents of Na-Me-Res Men's shelter, feeds between 150 and 200 people. Similar gatherings now take place every year in over 20 cities across the country.

Decades of pressure by families and community advocates led government to call a public inquiry into the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women. After holding hearings across the country for the past two years, it is set to complete its work early this summer. One of the recommendations of its interim report, an endowment fund to commemorate the missing and murdered, was announced by the federal government in early February. \$10 million will go to Indigenous organizations over two years to this end.

As No More Silence and other members of the February 14th Organizing Committee have noted in past years, while the increase in public attention by media and government has been important to the bereaved -- whose grief was compounded by societal indifference for years -- it does little to stop the violence. In fact, 10 names were added to our community database in 2018 alone.

These millions of dollars would be better invested in resources for survivors of intimate violence, and on- and off-reserve housing: in Toronto there is only one shelter for Indigenous women fleeing violence, and it is always at capacity. The homeless population continues to grow and die on Toronto streets while the mayor attributes the crisis to mental health, despite the lack of shelter beds and affordable housing.

Instead of buying a pipeline, the federal government could have saved Greyhound: we know that lack of public transportation in rural communities is one reason why Indigenous people are killed. Across Canada, we have seen a marked increase in white supremacist sentiment and hate crimes. In Ontario, the provincial government has slashed funds from education and social assistance, increasing the vulnerability of a dispossessed population that has been identified by hundreds of reports preceding the inquiry. The removal of curricula related to gender identity and Indigenous history will foster cis-heterosexism and racism. The government is endangering lives with this move. We are, however, heartened by the responses of young people who came out in the thousands to protest this travesty.

While we gather on February 14th primarily in ceremony and to share our love and grief, we will continue to name these specific forms of state violence. We understand that gender-based violence is a fundamental feature of settler colonialism, a political structure that is driven by cis-heteropatriarchy, racism, and violence to uphold ongoing occupation of Indigenous lands. When police and government fail to act when it comes to instances of violence against Indigenous women -- focusing instead on victim-blaming, and failing to implement the hundreds of recommendations brought forth by families -- the existing systemic conditions of gender-based violence are maintained. We stand in defense of our lives and to demonstrate against the complicity of the state in the ongoing genocide of Indigenous women and the impunity of state institutions and actors (such as police, RCMP, coroners' offices, the courts, and an indifferent federal government) that prevents justice for all Indigenous peoples.

“We reject the notion that any top-down, state-led approach to ending violence against Indigenous women and girls will be effective. Generations and legacies of experience have shown us how government-led inquiries are ultimately ineffective in bringing transformative change and will be, by their very nature, influenced by colonial power dynamics.” says Krysta Williams of the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, one of the members of the planning committee. “Many families and communities have worked tirelessly over decades and we acknowledge that it is those affected by the violence-- families, communities and Indigenous Nations--who have the answers”.

Close to 120 names will adorn signs and be printed on brochures handed out at the event this year: Indigenous women, girls, trans and Two Spirit people from Ontario who have died violent deaths primarily over the last 30 years. No More Silence is also releasing a report on the research it has conducted with its community database as part of the #ItStartsWithUs initiative. It can be downloaded here: <http://itstartswithus-mmiw.com/community-led-database-report-on-research-conducted-between-2014-2016/>

“We do not look to the state for solutions but rather to strengthening our community’s capacity to take care of itself.” says co-founder Audrey Huntley. “It makes sense to us to take direction from family members and to work inter-generationally as we have done in partnership with Ottawa based Families of Sisters In Spirit and the Native Youth Sexual Health Network.” The database, which is independent of government funding, fills a gap left by the funding cuts and subsequent shutdown of the Native Women’s Association of Canada’s Sisters In Spirit program. For more information please visit www.itstartswithus-mmiw.com

Marches will also be held in at least 20 other cities including Vancouver, Montreal, Sudbury, Thunder Bay, Edmonton and Calgary. <https://womensmemorialmarch.wordpress.com/national/>

February 14th Organizing Committee (No More Silence, Native Youth Sexual Health Network, Sistering, Maggie’s Toronto)

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