



Tuesday March 8th, 2016

OAITH and METRAC mark 20 years since the murder of Arlene May: Women's equality groups continue to advocate for an end to violence against women.

The Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) and the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC) are marking the 20th Anniversary of the tragic murder of Arlene May.

Arlene May, 39 years old and a mother of 5 children, was murdered on March 8th, 1996, at her home in Craighleith Ontario. Arlene was murdered by her estranged boyfriend, Randy Iles, who then killed himself. Arlene's death came after a lengthy abusive relationship. In February 1998, a Coroner's Inquest into their deaths began. On July 2 1998, the Jury released its verdict along with [213 recommendations](#) intended to improve the system's response to the needs of women and children experiencing domestic violence¹.

In the last twenty years, since the tragedy that took Arlene's life, and the recommendations that followed, a number of anti-violence organizations, women's equality groups, researchers and policy makers have worked towards increasing women and children's safety through; advocacy for procedural reforms to the court system, legislative changes, program development and support services, changes to the criminal and family law, prevention education, training and public awareness -- all examples of the work that has been done to respond to the systematic failures to address domestic violence. Vivien Green, a Member of the Joint Committee on Domestic Violence formed to implement the Inquest Recommendations in 1998 reflects back:

"It's hard to believe that 20 years have passed, and for many of us working with women who are experiencing intimate partner abuse, her name will always be remembered as an incredibly strong woman who died as a result of community institutions that lacked accountability and attention to women's safety. Her death resulted in the first Ontario provincial inquest into 'domestic violence' a very important milestone in this province. One of the huge frustrations is that we now do know what needs to be changed, in large part by listening to women like Arlene May, however, we are still very far from implementing these changes in a systematic and sustainable way. This takes leadership, sustained action and commitment to protecting women's safety and holding abusers accountable".

Sadly, we haven't come anywhere close to perfecting these systems or outcomes for women and their children experiencing violence. One unfulfilled recommendation from the Inquest that would still have impact today is the establishment of an Independent Women's Advocate. Such an office, with staff, could provide support to women who've experienced abuse from before she

gets involved with the legal system, right through the process, including full legal representation of a woman's advocate in court.

We know there is much more to do, and we have the guidance to do so from what we learned on this day twenty years ago. As we continue to work on improving systemic responses to address violence against women, we need to work just as hard at ways of preventing violence from happening in the first place. Alison Fitzgerald, Executive Director of My Friend's House in Collingwood, Ontario remind us:

“Arlene May left a legacy. Her murder forced every system that touches the life of an abused woman to change for the better but we are not done. Women and children continue to be murdered and those murders are preventable”.

On March 8th, 2016 we ask community members, those working in our legal system and all levels of government, to take a moment to recognize that women's equality won't be achieved until all women are safe; in their homes, communities, on the streets and in their workplaces. We ask that you remember Arlene May and the devastating number of women and children who've lost their lives to gender-based violence in Ontario, in Canada and around the world. We ask that you start or continue taking action to end this most pervasive form of violence in our society.

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¹ Joint Committee on Domestic Violence. (1999). Working Towards A Seamless Community and Justice Response to Domestic Violence: A Five Year Plan For Ontario. Toronto.