



Letters from the Law Commission of Canada

by Shauna Van Praagh, LCC President

Letter # 6

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On the morning of the 6th of December, I looked up as I crossed Elgin Street in downtown Ottawa. There, projected on the wall of the National Arts Centre, was a list of names, spelled out in huge, brightly lit letters. I began to read the names, initially only vaguely registering them as strangely familiar. Then I realized whom they belonged to. They were the names of the fourteen women murdered at École Polytechnique in Montreal exactly 34 years earlier.

I was 24 years old in late 1989. Many of the students targeted on the 6th of December by an angry, resentful killer in their classrooms and corridors were about the same age. They were studying to become engineers; I had finished law school in the spring of that year. We belonged to the same cohort, the same generation. If they had lived, they would be in their late 50's now. The intervening three decades would have included adventures and discovery, pursuits and people, love and loss. I might have crossed paths with some of them in Montreal as I took the bus, picked up children at primary school, visited the neighbourhood library, or waited in line to buy my groceries. Their names would have been known and referred to for so much more than sad and urgent reminders of violence against girls and women.

Spelled out in brightly lit letters and listed on the side of the National Arts Centre, the names underscore the importance of visibility, memory, and hope. This is a time of year marked by all three. The darkness of the winter solstice calls out for the light and brightness associated with December holidays. Families gather, often remembering past celebrations and individuals whose presence is missed. We wish each other a good new year and express our hope for health and happiness.

An anniversary is an appropriate moment to shine a light, pause to remember, and look to the future. An Arts Centre - home to music, theatre, and dance, all three intertwined with the complexity and capacity of human beings - is an appropriate place for fresh insight, commemoration, and commitment to change. Visibility, memory, and hope are also tied up with law, law reform and the role of a law commission. Law provides a distinctive and important lens for seeing people and problems. Remembering the past offers a significant vantage point for dreaming of and working on reform. An agency that shines a light on law, and ensures we learn from where we come as we move forward, joins hands with others in offering and nourishing collective hope.

The list of women's names also reminds us of the significance of individuals and their uniqueness. Yes, they are tied together as young women, as women associated with engineering, as women at university; they were subjected to horrific and lethal hate aimed at them because of that collective identity. We are right to remember the 6th of December as a moment in the shared narrative of



this country. At the same time, each name is attached to a particular person with a distinctive set of friends, family members, interests, abilities, plans, and dreams. The highly visible list of their names, projected once a year and accompanied by the invitation to read each one in turn, serves as imperative to connect projects and plans to real people.



Snow covered treetops.

It's a compelling message. For anyone working with law, it's a message intertwined with the exercise of power and responsibility that comes with the varied jobs that lawyers or jurists do. The stories and experiences of individuals inform and enrich our understanding and knowledge of communities, institutions, and entire societies; conversely, the rules and regulations by which society is governed, institutions are organized, and communities are sustained, affect people in ways that reflect their remarkable diversity.

Whatever our age or generation - whether close to the students who lost their lives at École Polytechnique 34 years ago, or to the middle-aged women they would be if they were still with us, or to their parents now in their 80's – let us find light to dispel darkness, remember the people who have made a difference to our paths, and share hope with those around us. Warm wishes from the Law Commission of Canada for the holiday season and for 2024.