

Crowds pay tribute to Montreal victims

Events highlight women who have suffered violence

Mark Brownlee And Jordan Press, Ottawa Citizen

About 100 people braved below-freezing temperatures to gather in Minto Park Tuesday in honour of 14 women killed at École Polytechnique in 1989 and others who have died locally in the years since.

The event is held annually to remember the women killed at the engineering school of the Université de Montréal on Dec. 6, 1989. On that day gunman Marc Lepine separated the men out of the group and then shot many of the women with a semi-automatic rifle before killing himself.

Fourteen other men and women were injured.

This year's event paid tribute to dead women who have been at the centre of a number of more recent high-profile cases in the Ottawa area. Participants held lanterns with candles inside as they read the names of the women.

"It's a long list," Isabelle Miron, the event's master of ceremonies, told the crowd. "Too long."

It included two women - Lise Roy and Jean Rock - who were former spouses of the man who is now accused of killing them. The man is also accused of killing 64-year-old Paula Leclair.

Camille Cléroux, 57, is facing first-degree murder charges in connection with their deaths.

They also read the names of three women whose family members are currently on trial in Kingston in connection with their deaths. Zainab Shafia, her sisters Sahar and Geeti, and their father's first wife Rona Amir Mohammad were all found dead in a submerged black Nissan at the Kingston Mills locks on June 30, 2009.

The daughters' father, mother and older brother have all pleaded not guilty in a trial that is ongoing in Kingston at the moment.

Participants read out the names or familial relationship of those who have either been charged with or connected to their deaths, even though many of them have not been convicted.

They also read the names of other women whose deaths are still being investigated. This includes 18-year-old Valérie LeBlanc, whose body was found beaten and burned behind a wooded area behind the CEGEP de l'Outaouais Gabrielle-Roy campus on Aug. 23.

"Every woman's situation is different, every woman's story varies," said Kristi Fejedelem, one of the event's organizers, in an interview after the event. "But we just need to bring to light the fact that these variances exist and we want the public to be aware, to remember what's happened so they can take a stand against it."

Snow fell while members of the crowd held candles as well as red and white roses they eventually laid at the base of the Women's Monument, which is a series of stones at the centre of the park. Some women held large cards about the size of someone's chest showing the pictures and names of women who had died.

Participants in an event earlier in the day on Parliament Hill used the occasion to press the Conservative government to reverse its plan to destroy a database that forces those who own most rifles and shotguns to register them with the government. A Liberal government created the program in the 1990s as a response to the killings in Montreal in 1989.

Suzanne Laplante-Edward was on the Hill to remember her daughter Anne-Marie Edward who was murdered 22 years ago at École Polytechnique in Montreal as well as to press the government to change its mind on the registry. She said its existence gives her the knowledge her daughter did not die in vain.

The Conservative government introduced legislation to kill the long-**gun registry** on Oct. 25, Anne-Marie Edward's birthday.

Laplante-Edward said this year's memorial took on a more political tone because of the legislation.

"It's very political because it has to be political. Do we have a choice? They are about to destroy the **gun-control** law that we worked 22 years to put in place and it is working very well," Laplante-Edward said. "We had to fight back."

No Conservatives were invited to take part in the event, leaving the crowd dotted with NDP, Liberal and Bloc Québécois politicians.

Government members have long maintained the registry doesn't prevent all violent **gun** crime and that money spent on the registry would be better spent on more effective measures.

Conservative **Kerry-Lynne Findlay** said supporting the end of the registry won't mean an increase in violence against women.

"To equate it with the longgun registry is not fair," she said in an interview. "That is the politicizing of a solemn event."

Organizers at the event in Minto Park also used the occasion to gather support for keeping the **gun registry**. They asked participants to fill out postcards that would be sent to members of Parliament on its behalf.

Earlier in the day, former governor general Michaëlle Jean spoke about ending violence against women, even telling the story of a woman whose husband shot her dead with a hunting rifle on the eve of their divorce proceedings.

"I do believe the time is right and the possibilities are boundless," Jean said. "Every action is important. Every gesture counts."

mbrownlee @ottawacitizen.com

twitter.com/markbrownleeott ILLU: Pat McGrath, The Ottawa Citizen / On Tuesday, former governor general Michaëlle Jean spoke at a conference at the Westin Hotel that was dedicated to ending violence against women.;
