

Thirty years later, generations of women remember the Montreal Massacre

Sarah Cornett can still vividly recall the massacre at the École Polytechnique in Montréal 30 years ago, when a gunman murdered 14 female engineering students.

It's a constant reminder of the value of her work today – helping women escape violence through the Lurana Shelter, a refuge for abused women and children.

“I still have a very vivid and clear memory of that day,” said Cornett, executive director of the Edmonton shelter founded by the Franciscan Sisters of Atonement. “I actually had graduated with an engineering degree only a few years earlier, so I can remember how heavy it hit me, and how it made me feel.

“It's an event and a conversation that is still very timely today, because there are so many ways we haven't come very far in protecting the women of our society.”



Dec. 6 marked the 30th anniversary of the Montreal mass shooting, when 25-year-old Marc Lépine shot and killed 14 female students and injured 14 others, in

what he saw as an attack against feminism.

The date has become the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women. Several events were held in Edmonton, and across Canada, to honour the victims of the Polytechnique shooting and all women who face violence and abuse.

U of A engineering student Cai Lin Yang said the anniversary of the Montreal Massacre is especially hard to bear. In another life, she could have been one of those 14 students who were killed in 1989.

“I think it’s so important that, now a generation later, young women and young engineering students remember this event,” said Yang. “These young women in science and engineering lost their lives, and they could very much be role models for us female students today. By being advocates or role models for gender equality, we can commemorate these 14 young women and ourselves.”



Violence against women remains a serious issue across Canada, one that current shelters struggle to deal with. A 2019 report by Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters released this week shows that 23, 247 women were turned away by shelters due to a lack of capacity or resources – a 40 per cent increase over last year.

In the past year, the Lurana Shelter provided shelter for 398 women and 267

children, offered counselling to 53 children, and offered outreach housing advocacy for 214 people. In total, there are approximately 10,000 women, children and seniors living in shelters for abused women.

According to Cornett, the Lurana shelter alone had to turn away as many as 2,000 women last year.

“Unlike the Polytechnique massacre, which was a very large and publicly acknowledged event, domestic violence itself is something that’s often totally hidden,” Cornett said. “There’s still that stigma and isolation around it. One thing we hope is accomplished by releasing these statistics is it brings this issue out of the shadows and into the public realm. People need to be aware of how widespread this issue is, the stigmas around it and the work that needs to be done.”



A plaque at the University of Alberta honours the 14 women who were killed at Ecole Polytechnique. Kyle Greenham, Grandin Media

The scope of violence against women is also seen at Edmonton’s Wings of Providence shelter, which has Catholic origins with the Sisters of Providence. Last year Wings of Providence helped 104 families achieve affordable housing and served 55 families at their second-stage shelter for women who face life-threatening danger from domestic abuse.

“Still, there were more than 262 people we had to turn away,” said executive director Pat Garrett. “It’s important we bring this out in the forefront, especially with this memorial event, because often this is a hidden problem.

Women need the support to break this cycle.”

According to Engineers Canada, female enrolment at engineering schools sits around 18.9 per cent, still lagging behind male enrolment.

Yang feels there is still more work to be done to help combat the stigmas women face in male-dominated fields like engineering. So she serves as vice-president of Diversity in Engineering, a group focused on making steps to encourage female enrolment in the ‘STEM’ (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) professions.

“As we move into the next decade I hope we can come together as a society and create a world where all individuals can flourish in their chosen field,” Yang said. “Today serves as a powerful reminder to see how far we’ve come as a society, but also that this fear of gender-based violence is still something we live with.”



Angela Merkosky

For U of A student Angela Merkosky, the Montreal Massacre anniversary was a reminder to pray, as well as a time to remember and offer support to women not only offered who have faced domestic violence and abuse.

“For me, it’s hard to know or imagine what women who have suffered domestic abuse have gone through, but I think one of the best ways you can be supportive is through praying for people who have been victimized in this way” said Merkosky, a Catholic and an education student at the U of A.

“Some people may not think it means much, but I believe prayer is a powerful tool with helping anyone.”