



Photo by Annie Sakkab

Eleanor Hands is comforted by Doreen Guimont while talking about the murder of her 32-year-old daughter Nicole who was killed 13 years ago. Her daughter had three children: 13 months, three years and six years old.

Vigil raises awareness for missing women

Over 120 people gathered for ceremony to bring attention to issue

By Thomas Surian

Sisters in Spirit held their 6th annual vigil in Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory this Saturday, to raise awareness for the overwhelming number of murdered and missing aboriginal woman across Canada.

According to the RCMP, a total of 1,181 aboriginal woman and girls have gone missing or been murdered between 1980

and 2012.

Over 120 supporters gathered at the Karonhyak'tatye sports complex on York Road Saturday afternoon, joining the 84 similar ceremonies that took place in communities across the country.

Betty Carr-Braint an Elder-in-residence at the Four Directions Aboriginal Student Centre at Queen's University, played a large part in organizing the ceremony.

"The vigil is to bring honor and respect to the missing and murdered aboriginal women, and to educate and bring awareness to the broader community about these tragedies," said Carr-Braint

The ceremony was originally set to

take place in a field but because of the pour weather conditions it was moved to a sheltered lacrosse box. The native women's association constructed a wall of 1,181 handmade felt dolls as a visual representation of each of the missing and murdered native woman. This acted as a backdrop for the speakers and performers.

Linda Lafort learned all too quickly the effects a murder can have on a family, when her step daughter was brutally murdered. She shared her story in the hope that her first-hand experience will help increase awareness surrounding the issue.

"I think the more that people get to

hear the real-life stories and what's going on, they are more than just statistics in a newspaper. I think the more it touches the hearts of the other people to say yeah, let's push the government to do something; to make changes," said Lafort.

"This is not just an aboriginal issue. It's a issue for all Canadians across Canada," said Carr-Braint.

During the time of the vigil a small protest also took place on Hwy 49 blocking Skyway Bridge, connecting Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory to Prince Edward County. The protesters were primarily men with a few women, while the vigil was primarily attended by women.

"Our vigil is here. we've been doing it for many years and we chose to do it in this way, and other people chose to do it in a different way," said Carr-Braint.

"We're actually very separate, but you know, everybody is trying to do their part to get the message out there," said Carr-Braint.

She stressed the importance of having men involved in these types of events, although the number of men is small, it is growing slowly, as awareness increases.

"I think it's really important for men to be engaged and have their voices heard just to say this is not ok," said Carr-Braint.

Bridge blockade brings attention to issue

By Andrew Johnson

Dark clouds crept in from Prince Edward County, threatening rain on an already cool and gloomy Saturday afternoon over a nearly vacant Skyway Bridge on Highway 49. With it came a biting wind and, almost instinctively, a large, burly man wearing shades and a forest leaf ball cap emblazoned with the words *Mohawk*, donning the apparently ubiquitous hunting camouflage, threw another log on the fire.

He was one of nearly a dozen or so people gathered around the flames burning on the shoulder on the north side of the bridge. They sat or wandered between the empty bridge and a gathering of Tyendinaga Police squad cars, whose drivers were idly directing traffic to the nearest detour. One female, the rest male, all proud Tyendinaga First Nation people, crept closer to the warmth, casually sipping from their Tim Horton's coffee cups, taking breaks to crack a joke or two, relief from the serious discussion going on seconds earlier.

That discussion, indeed the entire reason for their being there and for shutting down the bridge - much to the dismay of drivers trying to get home or otherwise - concerned their anger and frustration over the staggering number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. In May, 2014 the RCMP estimated that some 1,181 indigenous women and girls were murdered or went missing since 1980, with Amnesty International estimating the numbers to be much higher due to gaps in police reporting. They also report that an Aboriginal woman in Canada is four-times more likely to be murdered than a non-Aboriginal. Violence against these women and girls is just as likely to come from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal men, on reserves and in cities alike, in what they claim is nothing short of a "national human rights crisis".

While none of the members of this small yet divisive protest would give me their names, for fear of reprisal or incrimination from authorities, they all had plenty to say:

"Our women are sacred in our culture and in our communities, they are the birth-givers; but there are 1,200 families missing a loved one and we're here because we're trying to protect our women," said one man, his face hidden behind dark



Photo by Andrew Johnson

Protesters from the Tyendinaga First Nation, who requested to be identified only as "The Mohawk Men," discuss their intentions with Ron Maracle, centre, chief of the Tyendinaga Police last Saturday. Nearly a dozen demonstrators closed down the Skyway Bridge on Highway 49 to protest against Stephen Harper's refusal to call a federal inquiry into the disproportionate number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. The Native Women's Association of Canada has organized vigils across Canada every Oct. 4th since 2011 to bring awareness to violence against Aboriginal women.

sunglasses and the shade of his ball-cap.

In reference to why they chose to close down the Skyway Bridge he replied:

"We're not here because we want to be, we're here because we have to be; Harper needs to listen and he needs to call an inquiry. We've petitioned, we've marched on the capital, and all we get are empty promises."

While some would argue that there are other ways to get the Prime Minister's attention that's exactly what was going on across the country, as the Sisters in Spirit, an offshoot of the Native Women's Association of Canada, organized vigils and marches in cities and small communities

'Our women are sacred in our culture and in our communities, they are the birth-givers; but there are 1,200 families missing a loved one and we're here because we're trying to protect our women.'

Commented one protester

across Canada to draw attention to the issue.

Harper, for his part, has stuck to his byline that these matters should be considered a criminal issue, not a sociological phenomenon, and should be dealt with by law enforcement, not the government.

That's precisely what angers these protesters. To them, their missing and murdered women have seen very little justice done to them under the auspices of law enforcement. To classify these cases as simply criminal episodes is, to them, akin to saying they're "just another native" killed or missing. One of the female protesters told me:

"We need closure, we need healing, and we can't start the healing until we find out why this is happening to our girls."

As the sun began to set, the remaining Tyendinaga police officers conducted their third shift change of the day. One thing was certain from talking to the demonstrators: while their group was small, they made clear they were willing to go to lengths to have their voices heard. How far those lengths will stretch remains to be seen.

The fire began to die and I began to wonder: will Prime Minister Harper, or anyone after him, ever agree to shine a light on these missing and murdered women?