

**Women's Sexual Assault Centre of Renfrew County
2016 Annual General Meeting**

**THE POWER OF OUR VOICES
Keynote address**

I am pleased and honoured to be here tonight to honour you for your support of the work of the Women's Sexual Assault Centre and, in so doing, support of victims of crime. We want to celebrate that work by celebrating the power of our voices.

Before I talk about that, though, I need to take a moment to honour the lives of three woman who cannot share their voices with us: Nathalie, Carol and Anastasia, who were killed on September 22 in a dramatic and brutal act of violence against women. Boris Borutski is facing murder charges and, because his case is before the courts, I am not going to spend time discussing details of that situation.

Please, think of Nathalie, Carol and Anastasia tonight as we recognize the importance of all of our voices in ending violence against women.

Language means a lot: This event is taking place as part of Canada's Victims and Survivors of Crime Week which, just last year, was called Victims of Crime Week. From Victims to Victims and Survivors – just two additional words, but they are important words.

The word survivor carries with it such a sense of empowerment and strength. As various dictionaries define it, a survivor:

- carries on despite hardships or trauma
- copes with difficulties in their life
- perseveres

All of us in this room are survivors. Just as there are different dictionary definitions of the word survivor, so each of us has had a different route to becoming a survivor.

Perhaps you have lived through difficult and challenging periods in your life and have been able to make your own way nonetheless.

Perhaps you have been the victim of violence or abuse and have decided not to let that define who you are.

Perhaps you have dealt with or are dealing with physical, emotional or mental challenges and have decided not to let those define who you are.

And you know what? This week would not have the word Survivors in it if it were not for the power of our voices.

Our voices that rise up – sometimes alone, but more often together – to call for justice. Our voices that make change again and again and again. Our voices that refuse to be quiet when we know there is something wrong going on **and** when we know there is something right going on.

But when it comes to sexual violence, there are so many ways in which our voices are silenced. I want us to think about that a bit before we move on to celebrate the many ways in which the power of our voices has made positive change.

Rebecca Solnit has written about the silencing of women. Here is some of what she has to say:

“Not uncommonly, when a woman says something that impugns a man, particularly a powerful one, . . . or an institution, especially if it has to do with sex, the response will be to question not just the facts of her assertion but her capacity to speak and her right to do so. Generations of women have been told they are delusional, confused, manipulative, malicious, conspiratorial, congenitally dishonest, often all at once.”

She goes on to describe sexual assault as being “an attack on a victim’s right to bodily integrity, to self-determination and –expression. It’s annihilatory, silencing.”

And then she describes silence as having three concentric circles, each of which reinforces the other.

“First come the internal inhibitions, self-doubts, repressions, confusions and shame that make it difficult to impossible to speak, along with the fear of being punished or ostracized for doing so. . . Surrounding this circle are the forces who attempt to silence someone who speaks up anyway, whether by humiliating or bullying or outright violence, including violence unto death. Finally, in the outermost ring, when the story has been told and the speaker has not been silenced directly, tale and teller are discredited.”

I think many of us can immediately understand exactly what she is talking about from our own experiences with sexual violence; from the reactions and responses we have

encountered when we have tried to use our voices – the power of our voices – to tell what has happened to us.

Judith Hermann (Trauma and Recovery) has something to say about this too: “Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator’s first line of defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens . . . After each atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: It never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it on herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail.”

The Jhian Gimeshi case has given us yet another opportunity to look at how we hear (or don’t) women’s voices and stories:

As Heather Mallick wrote in the Toronto Star: “[This incident] has revealed the huge spiked metal barriers women still face – even now in times we call modern – when they speak out about the hideous things that have been done to them. . . . When it comes to redress for suffering a sexual assault, Canadian women might as well be in Saudi Arabia. We whisper quietly among friends and quietly trade stories or we shut up for our entire careers. The barriers start with institutional sexism and pile on with the almost impossible burden of proof for acts committed in private, the adulation offered to well-paid and well-connected men When you read the violence, mockery and hate handed out to the unnamed women online who were already too scared to call the police, you might think feminism had never been invented.”

But even in the face of that silencing, the power of women’s voices – especially when we join our voices together -- should never be under-estimated. Just looking at the issue of violence against women alone, think what we have done!

- Charter of Rights and Freedoms
- Creation of sexual assault centres and shelters for women fleeing abuse
- Stalking was criminalized as the offence of criminal harassment
- Amendments to the Criminal Code were passed and later upheld by the Supreme Court that protect the privacy of women’s records in criminal sexual assault proceedings
- Family law was changed so that the test to determine custody and access includes consideration of violence within the family
- Restraining order legislation was reformed to strengthen the enforcement of orders and hold abusers more accountable for their actions

- The law and rules relating to the arbitration of family law matters were changed to protect some of the most vulnerable women in our communities by requiring that arbitration use only the family law of Ontario or Canada
- The provincial government introduced a Domestic Violence Action Plan and a Sexual Violence Action Plan, in which it made serious commitments to moving forward to end violence against women
- Creation of the VAW Roundtable
- Rural realities funding opportunities
- Family Court Support Worker program

None of these things came about because a politician just woke up one morning and thought they should be done. Nope. They happened because of the power of our voices, raised together – activists, frontline workers, politicians, government and institutional players, police, lawyers, doctors, and others. We advocated, found common ground, compromised while also holding strong to our bottom-line principles.

Let's return to the Ghomeshi case. The trial may have left many women feeling that there is no point in speaking up about rape and sexual assault, but I want to encourage all of us to look at it a bit differently. Certainly this case has made clear the many and serious problems in the criminal response to sexual assault, but that does not mean our voices have no power. We can use our voices in other arenas to hold men accountable for their violence towards women. Indeed, already some changes are underway that reflect some of what happened in this trial:

- ILA for survivors of sexual assault
- Talk about specialized sexual assault courts
- Use of social media to hear women's voices and hold men accountable

And there is now a bigger and smarter discussion happening across Canada about sexual violence than has ever happened before – because of the power of our voices in insisting that this conversation take place and not be limited to what was happening in the courtroom in downtown Toronto.

As fellow musician and one-time friend of Joan Ghomeshi, Owen Pallette, wrote: "At no point here will I ever give my friend Jian's version of the truth more credence than the version of the truth offered up by three women. Anonymity does not mean these women do not exist. . . . Let's be clear. Whether the court decides that predatory men are punished or exonerated does not silence the voices of the victims. It does not make victims liars. Whether our culture continues to celebrate the works of predatory men is another issue. It does not silence the voices of the victims."

Even as we remember the lost lives of Nathalie, Carol and Anastasia and the many other women killed each year by men; even as we contemplate the obstacles faced by those who experience sexual violence; even as we think about our own challenges and barriers, let us keep our minds focused on the power of our voices.

And let us celebrate and honour the work each one of you does in support of survivors of violence and of the Women's Sexual Assault Centre of Renfrew County.