

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY
Wednesday, May 4, 2011

MR. SPEAKER: The honourable member for Queens. (Applause)

JUSTICE: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COURT - ESTABLISHMENT

MS. VICKI CONRAD: *I stand in my place tonight, Madam Speaker, with a heavy heart but I also stand in my place with an enlightened heart and I would suggest that tonight this is not a debate, but rather this is a continued discussion. It's a discussion to raise awareness and it's a discussion to ask members for their continued commitment to continue the fight to end violence against women.*

Madam Speaker, on Monday, May 2, 2011, I along with hundreds of community members paid respects and said good bye to Laura Lee Robertson. Laura went missing on April 14, 2011, and two weeks later her body was found in a wooded area in Bangs Falls, Queens County. Her fiancé was later charged with her murder. Laura was a daughter, a mother, a grandmother, an aunt and a friend to many.

Laura's death galvanized a community, a community that banded together in support, making posters, putting together a ribbon campaign and Madam Speaker, I'm wearing a ribbon today with both the colours of yellow and purple - yellow symbolizing hope and showing support and faith that Laura would be found, and purple to symbolize the need to end and stop violence against women.

The community held candlelight vigils, they set up Facebook sites with well over 800 members. They staged a protest walk to end violence against women. Laura's family, Amanda and Tim Jones-Robertson and mother Shirley showed amazing strength and courage through this most difficult time. Laura's tragedy and meaningless death was broadcast province-wide and beyond, and Laura's family endured the public airing of some of the most intimate details of Laura's life.

Madam Speaker, it doesn't matter what side of the track one is on, domestic violence touches many. Many women including myself share a common bond, a common thread with woman such as Laura and that thread is one of abuse. A lot of women are able to make change but many more are not able to make change and they remain victims of violence and Laura was one of them.

We know, Madam Speaker, that stats show women are more likely to be a victim of spousal abuse and I'd like to just share a stat from the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women. The rate for spousal violence involving female victims is higher compared to male victims of spousal violence in both Nova Scotia and Canada. According to police reported data of spousal violence in 2007, approximately eight out of 10 incidents of spousal violence involves a female victim both in Nova Scotia and Canada.

Madam Speaker, women who are abused or live for years in abusive situations often suffer from low self-esteem, lack of confidence, depression, some turn to alcohol and other substances to help with and alleviate pain. Women in abusive situations have their health, dignity and security compromised. They have feelings of helplessness, shame and unworthiness.

Violence against woman, Madam Speaker, is unacceptable and it comes in many forms: emotional and physical abuse, workplace violence, criminal harassment, bullying, intimidation, prostitution, pornography, sexual harassment and even human rights violations.

From 2006 to 2011 we have seen the loss and silencing of many women in our communities and I want to give names to some of those faces. January 2006, prominent health care professional Judith Bourgeois, of Mahone Bay, died at the hands of her spouse in a murder-suicide; November 2007, Shelley Marie Smith, of Cape Breton, strangled and her body burned at the hands of her boyfriend; February 2008, 12-year-old Karissa Boudreau, murdered by the hands of her mother; July 2010, Christina Mae Eisnor, of New Germany, was shot and killed at the hands of her husband; March 2011, in Antigonish, Otilia Chareka was found murdered at the hands of her husband; in March 2011, Jason MacRae was charged, finally, for the murder of his wife, Paula Gallant.

Who can forget that it was in March 1982, when Jane Hurshman fatally shot and killed her husband Billy Stafford, ironically in Bangs Falls, Queens County? Jane suffered five years of brutal abuse at the hands of her husband. Jane had almost 10 years of some peace and some freedom. Jane became an advocate, speaking up and speaking out, telling her story, fighting to end the violence against women.

Unfortunately, Jane's voice, like Laura's, became silent, and Jane's life ended in violent tragedy, in a death that is suspected to be suicide. Jane's voice, like Laura's may be silent, but their story and their life history continue to be told and their lives will not be in vain.

I am so proud of the members of our community in Liverpool, Queens, for coming together, raising their voices in support of Laura and her family. They're raising awareness and pushing our community, in Queens, to take the blinders off, to name the issue of violence against women and to make change. I am so proud of my government and the installation of Nova Scotia's first ever Domestic Violence Court Program, which is a part of the province's Domestic Violence Action Plan, which was released in December 2010.

A key part of the plan is developing a specialized Domestic Violence Court Program to increase support for victims and rehabilitation services for their offenders. A Domestic Violence Court, which is a pilot project, will help the justice system work with our community partners to respond more appropriately to crimes linked specifically to violence. The pilot project in Sydney will offer victims and their children much needed services and it will hold offenders accountable for their illegal behaviour and reduce and deter abusive behaviour in relationships.

I want to remind all members that we need to continue to work together with community support groups such as Second Story, Harbour House, Alice Housing just to name a few. We need to work with our partners such as the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, the Departments of Justice, Education, Health, and Community Services. We need to ensure that men who abuse women are held accountable. We need to work together to remove the stigma, shame, take the blinders off of the face of violence against women and we need to offer women in crisis, living in violent situations, courage, support and hope so they can begin to heal and choose change. Thank you. (Applause)