

Education, government support key to tackling domestic violence: Shelter



Friday marked the 30th anniversary of the Montreal Massacre, which saw 14 women killed simply due to their gender.

Much has changed in the country over those intervening three decades, but the statistics are still sobering, according to Yellow Brick House, the Aurora-based shelter for battered women and their children.

The anniversary, National Day of Remembrance & Action on Violence Against Women, which was marked here in Aurora with a special flag raising at Town Hall, was an opportunity to not only raise awareness but underscore how far societies – including governments – need to go to make a substantive difference in the fight against domestic violence.

“We know that 30 years ago 14 women were killed at Ecole Polytechnique because they were women,” says Lorris Herenda, Executive Director of Yellow Brick House. “Here we are, 30 years later, and we’re still dealing with the same issues where a woman is killed every second day in Canada simply because she is a woman. Women are dying because of their gender and we, as a society, need to take some serious proactive actions to change that, to change our attitudes.”

Such proactive measures, she says, include the investment in programs to support both victims of violence and foster prevention. Working in tandem with these initiatives is educating the young generation of the impact of “violence, respect, equity and fair treatment with each other.”

“I think it’s down to education and information, starting

with the earliest at elementary schools and talking about healthy relationships, about equity, and [challenging stereotypical gender roles],? says Ms. Herenda. ?We should all have access to equal opportunities to be the best that can be on our individual basis and not stigmatize girls and women to be less important or less of, or not capable of doing certain occupations, for example, that have traditionally been driven by a male workforce. The stigma still exists starting from our childhoods when we're given specific choices that are aligned with our identified gender, to being in school where girls are not encouraged to answer certain sciences or maths or engineering or technology for that matter. It really is about having those conversations about what it means to be equitable and equal. Continuing those conversations in elementary school and high school and post-secondary education ? there has to be continuous emphasis on this matter.?

2019 has been an important year in making these inroads for Yellow Brick House.

In addition to their education officers taking their message into the schools, the organization has forged important new relationships with educational institutions, including St. Andrew's College.

Earlier this fall, St. Andrew's College hosted Yellow Brick House's annual Walk A Mile In Her Shoes fundraising and awareness event which saw scores of individuals from the community ? including students ? don high heels for a hike around campus to show just how far we, as a society, need to go in order to reach gender equality. Elsewhere, Yellow Brick House is focused on challenging systemic issues which work to perpetuate the problem.

These systemic issues, says Ms. Herenda, include biases against victims of sexual and domestic violence.

?Usually women are put in the position where their behaviour is questioned that it is assumed to have led to that attack,? she explains. ?Women are asked what she wore and did she have anything to drink? Why did she find herself at such and such place at such and such time of the day or night? The question should be different: it should really be emphasizing why do men feel that they have the right to take advantage of another human being?

As a society, we're still not there. Our legal system is not there. Over 91 per cent of the sexual abuse cases are not reported to the police because women do not want to go through the legal system where they were victimized. We need to start changing that. When it comes to workplaces, there has been an increase of women in executive positions at workplaces and it is still not an equal percentage ? women are still fighting for pay equity in this day and age. We're in 2019 and we're still talking about not giving Canadian [women] the same dollar value our male counterpart is.?

Over the early weeks of December, Ms. Herenda and the

Yellow Brick House team have raised the flag in just about every municipality in York Region. Their message, as it was in Aurora, is invariably clear: "We need a community, us individuals, corporations, community leaders who are elected, to advocate for ending violence against women and children."

"One way to do that is [to] support the sustainability of the existing infrastructures that deal with victims of violence on the one hand and, on the other hand, there has to be an investment in public education," says Ms. Herenda. "Currently there is no investment ? it is done currently by agencies such as Yellow Brick House who fundraise dollars to support our public education coordinators going to school or going into the community to talk about this issue. There has to be an actual financial investment from our government and a commitment to address this issue and to address this systemically at all levels, starting from a young age and going all the way through senior adulthood."

"We have a new government, two-years-young government that we have been making aware of some of our system challenges and I am hopeful that we have their listening ear and I am hoping that they are going to take some measures in this upcoming budget for Year 2020 to invest in the violence against women sector."

For more information about Yellow Brick House and how you can become involved, visit www.yellowbrickhouse.org.

By Brock Weir