

## **Preface 2020**

The following document, A Montreal Massacre Memorial and Legacy, by Wendy C. Gentleman is supplementary material for the article in the CSME bulletin for Dec, 2020. It is intended for educational purposes. We have strived to cite all sources, and this version of the document has removed several graphics in an effort to respect copyright regulations.

## **Preface 2014**

What follows is a document about the Montreal Massacre and some of its legacy, which is based on the presentation given by Dr. Wendy Gentleman at the December 6, 2014 memorial ceremony held by the Dalhousie Undergraduate Engineering Society and the Dalhousie Women in Engineering Society.

Dr. Gentleman is an Associate Professor in Dalhousie's Department of Engineering Mathematics. In 1989, at the time of the massacre, she was in Montreal in the first year of her undergraduate studies in Mechanical Engineering at McGill University.

This was the fourth such ceremony at which Dr. Gentleman spoke about the massacre, her experiences as a woman in engineering, and her views on how we can honour the victims. Dr. Gentleman speaks at December 6 memorial ceremonies because it has personal significance for her, and because she recognizes its broader significance for other engineers, women, and Canadians. Dr. Gentleman also recognizes that many among our younger generations do not know about the Montreal Massacre, let alone why they should care. So another reason that Dr. Gentleman speaks at December 6 ceremonies is to educate people about our relevant history; she wants people to appreciate why the Montreal Massacre matters to them, why they should learn, and why they should never forget.

From her experiences teaching math to engineering students, explaining modeling to biologists, and parenting her children, Dr. Gentleman has realized that lessons are more memorable (i.e., education is more effective) when words are accompanied by images and sounds; when lectures are anecdotal, not abstract; when audiences can relate to the material. It was with this mindset that Dr. Gentleman enhanced her efforts to educate people about the Montreal Massacre this year, when December 6 marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tragedy. Her efforts were mainly focused on enabling younger audiences to "remember" a time before they were born.

Dr. Gentleman designed two posters about the massacre that were on display in Dalhousie Engineering's alumni lounge. The first is titled, "Do you know what happened December 6 1989?", and summarizes the event and its commemorations. It shows pictures of Dalhousie's memorial plaque and tree of hope, the candlelight vigil part of Dalhousie's December 6 ceremony, as well as the inspirational Montreal Massacre survivor, Nathalie Provost, who was a Mechanical Engineering student. The second poster is titled "Montreal Massacre Victims;" it features names, faces, and stories for each of the 14 slain women.

Dr. Gentleman has also arranged for the Dalhousie community to be able to view the film *Polytechnique* in a quiet room on campus at a time of their choosing. The film is a portrayal of what happened based on survivors' accounts, and was released coincident with the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Montreal Massacre. Anyone interested in watching the film should contact the Dalhousie Women in Engineering Society or Dalhousie's Department of Engineering Mathematics. Please consult the Faculty of Engineering administration for contact information.

Additionally, this year Dr. Gentleman revised her December 6 ceremony speech from previous years to incorporate more information and turn it into a multi-media presentation. After speaking with audience members who were moved by the 2014 presentation, and after speaking with others who were disappointed that they had been unable to attend on December 6, Dr. Gentleman decided to expand her reach by providing a version of her December 6, 2014 presentation online. In doing so, the material will be accessible to new and existing Dalhousie engineering students, staff, and faculty, as well as to other individuals and institutions at any time.

*There is no rationale for waiting another full year before again engaging youth, or others, in a discussion about the Montreal Massacre and its legacy.*

To improve the ability of the online version to stand alone, Dr. Gentleman greatly elaborated upon her 2014 ceremony presentation, incorporating details from her posters as well as a wealth of additional information and images that she researched online. It is this elaborated version of the December 6 presentation that follows.

Please note that while most of the text is original writing by Dr. Gentleman, some parts were pieced together from various online sources, and in some places, the text uses phrasing taken verbatim from other articles. Dr. Gentleman wants to emphasize that she is in no way attempting to take credit for others' work. Rather, she highly appreciates how these other authors have expressed ideas and imagery, and she feels that paraphrasing would make the presentation less compelling. Dr. Gentleman has done her utmost to both fact-check and properly reference other works, but she would appreciate being contacted if readers identify any errors or oversights. She desires to be fair and accurate and will gladly make corrections. In a similar vein, some of the images included here are not original, but are widely available online, and her use of these images is intended to increase the educational effectiveness of the material.

*Please share this document with anyone you would like; do not wait until next December 6.*

Wendy C. Gentleman  
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December 11, 2014

# **A Montreal Massacre Memorial and Legacy**

**Do you know what happened on December 6, 1989?  
It's been 25 years.  
It still matters.**

Elaboration of the presentation given by Dr. Wendy Gentleman  
at Dalhousie University's December 6 2014 ceremony\*

[Graphic titled December 6: National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women, showing lit candles, roses, a flag at Canada's Parliament buildings at half mast, and white and purple ribbons]

## **Significance of the Montreal Massacre**

Today is Canada's National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women, when federal buildings fly flags at half-mast and Canadians wear ribbons of commitment to end violence against women. Parliament made this official designation to commemorate the Montreal Massacre that occurred 25 years ago today. On December 6, 1989, a gunman with a legally obtained rifle killed 14 women and wounded 10 other women and 4 men at the École Polytechnique, which is the engineering school of the University of Montreal.<sup>1</sup>

The Montreal Massacre remains Canada's worst mass murder since the killing of Aboriginals at settlement outposts in the late 1800s. It was the first mass school shooting in North America, and it remained the North American school shooting with the most victims shot prior to Columbine in 1999, and with the most victims killed prior to Virginia Tech in 2007. It was the first hate-crime shooting rampage in North America. It remains North America's worst gendercide.<sup>2,3,4,5,6</sup>

The Montreal Massacre renewed interest and commitment to take action to end violence against women, strengthen gun laws, and break down barriers for women in engineering and other male-dominated fields.<sup>7</sup>

Progress was made. For example, grassroots responses to the Montreal Massacre have become the global Purple and White Ribbon Campaigns to stop abuse and violence against women.<sup>8,9</sup> Criticism of the police response to the Montreal Massacre led to changes in their protocols and training. These changes are credited for minimizing the death toll at Montreal's Dawson College shooting in 2006 and have now been implemented by law-enforcement agencies across Canada.<sup>10,11</sup> Survivors and families of victims of the Montreal Massacre became leading advocates for gun control.<sup>12</sup> Their landmark achievement was in 1995, with the passing of Bill C-68, the Firearms Act, which included the long-gun registry

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\*Last updated (Dec 18, 2014)

that was dismantled 2 years ago — except in Quebec.<sup>13</sup> After the Montreal Massacre, government and corporate institutions introduced fellowships and internships and altered hiring practices to improve recruitment and retention of women in engineering.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the 1990s, enrollment of women in engineering increased.<sup>10,15</sup>

Despite such progress, the issues related to the Montreal Massacre — sadly — are still as relevant today as they were 25 years ago.

Gun-related violence is headline news, this year in particular, with the Parliament Hill shooting on October 22, when Corporal Nathan Cirillo was killed, which was, coincidentally the same day that the House of Parliament was set to read the new Common Sense Firearms Act<sup>16,17</sup>; and the Moncton shootings on June 4, when five RCMP officers were shot, three of whom died. This December 14 marks the second anniversary of the heartbreaking Sandy Hook school shooting in the U.S., in which 26 people were shot, 20 of whom were children aged 6 and 7. In 2012, Halifax made headline news, due to its having Canada's highest rate of firearm-related violent crime — nearly double the national average.<sup>18</sup>

On violence against women, North America has been amazed and atwitter after recent shocking sexual assault scandals related to formerly beloved and seemingly benign celebrities Jian Ghomeshi and Bill Cosby. There have been national headlines this year about Rinelle Harper, the 16 year old who was brutally raped, beaten and left for dead in November in Winnipeg; the continuing court cases related to victim Rehtaeh Parsons from Dartmouth and the Halifax Chronicle Herald newspaper's decision to publish her name; and the case of St. Mary's University student Loretta Saunders, who went missing from Halifax in February and whose body was found two weeks later dumped along the Trans-Canada Highway in New Brunswick.

There are also shocking present-day statistics about violence against women that don't typically make news headlines. For example, half of all women in Canada have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16; on average, a woman is killed by her domestic partner every six days; and women reported >460,000 incidents of sexual assault in a single year.<sup>19</sup> Similarly relevant, but generally considered non-newsworthy, are the statistics about the women in engineering. For example, women still represent only 18% of Canadian engineering undergraduate students on average, with numbers as low as 10% in some provinces and sub-disciplines.<sup>20</sup>

With no shortage of current events on which to focus your attention on this Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women, it is fair to ask why we should hold a December 6 ceremony dedicated to the victims of the Montreal Massacre. Why should you still remember these particular victims of an act of violence that occurred a quarter century ago? It's just history right? But it's *your* history, and when you know your history, you can better understand your present and shape your future.

The Montreal Massacre could happen again. We need to remember the Montreal Massacre in order to design a future for which the related issues are no longer issues; we still have a long way to go.<sup>21</sup>

## My objective today

My primary objective today is to convey the relevant historical context of the Montreal Massacre. I want to tell you what happened and to whom in a sufficiently compelling and meaningful way that you will remember. I want you to know why these women and this event matter to you, so that you too will continue to tell the story.

So let me start by taking you from where you are now, at Dalhousie on December 6, 2014, back 25 years, to the École Polytechnique on December 6, 1989.



[Photo of Ecole Polytechnique front doors on Dec 6, 1989 with paramedics wheeling out victim on a stretcher]

## Memorials to the Montreal Massacre

The man, who was enraged by women working in non-traditional jobs, had planned the killing for months, repeatedly visiting École Polytechnique<sup>†</sup> and purchasing weapons and ammunition. Late in the afternoon of December 6, 1989, he put the plan into action. He entered École Polytechnique with his semi-automatic rifle and his knife and he went hunting for female engineers. He hunted women in classrooms, corridors, and the cafeteria, shooting through doors and windows and at point blank range. At the end, after firing at least 65 rounds and stabbing one woman three times in the chest, the man had slaughtered 14 women, wounded 10 other women, and injured 4 men who were seemingly caught in the crossfire. This killer then turned the gun on himself.<sup>22,23,24</sup>

The media will not let you forget the name or face of the killer. There are many kinds of Montreal Massacre memorials dedicated to ensuring that the victims are not forgotten.

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<sup>†</sup> École Polytechnique is the engineering school at the University of Montreal

The arts community has produced films, plays, songs (from folk to heavy metal genres), and poems that tell the story and repeat the murdered victims' names. Some pieces also highlight the Montreal Massacre's other victims — the surviving students, friends, and families — some of whom later committed suicide because they couldn't live with nightmares that they had seen or their feelings of guilt for being alive.<sup>25,26</sup>

[Cover photos of *The Anorak*, *Polytechnique* and *The December Man*, which are plays and films about the Montreal Massacre]

At engineering schools across Canada, there are permanent memorials to the Montreal Massacre. École Polytechnique's memorial monument is a granite block showing the school logo at the top, and listing the 14 slain women's names and the date they died, like a gravestone. But unlike a normal gravestone, it shows 14 silver bullets, powerfully reminding us that these women did not pass peacefully; they were violently killed.



Dalhousie's memorial plaque and tree of hope

[Photo of École Polytechnique's memorial]

Dalhousie's memorial is just outside Engineering's main entrance. Like École Polytechnique, Dalhousie also has a grave-like stone marker, here with a brass plaque that lists the victims' names. Dalhousie has chosen to balance this symbol of death with a living tree of hope.

And today, all across the country, there are December 6 memorial ceremonies for the 14 women slain in the Montreal Massacre.

## **Dalhousie's December 6 memorial ceremony**

Every December 6, Dalhousie holds a memorial ceremony for the Montreal Massacre victims. Dalhousie's Undergraduate Engineering Society and Dalhousie's Women in Engineering Society organize the ceremony with support from Dalhousie faculty and staff. The occasion has often involved the Women's Division of Dalhousie's Alumni Association, who provide purple and white ribbons that are symbols of international campaigns to end violence against women, launched in response to the Montreal Massacre.<sup>27,28</sup> The program also often

includes preliminary speeches by members of the Dalhousie and the broader communities. It was my privilege to have spoken at three ceremonies prior to this one, which marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Montreal Massacre.

While the specific program has varied over the years, the constant ceremony closing is the candle lighting. During this segment, 14 members of the Dalhousie community stand in to represent each of the 14 victims, with every effort made to match representative and victim: engineering students share the same sub-disciplines, the engineering staff member is from an administrative office, and there is one nursing student. As each victim's name is read aloud, her representative receives a candle and a rose. The ceremony then moves outside to Dalhousie's memorial plaque and tree of hope. One by one, each victim's representative blows out her candle to signify the loss of life, and then lays her rose upon the memorial plaque bearing all the victims' names. The group then observes a moment of silence and reflection.



Dalhousie's Dec 6<sup>th</sup> candle light ceremony

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## The 14 women who died in the Montreal Massacre

Today, I want you to remember the faces and stories that go with the names. I also encourage you to see the poster "Montreal Massacre Victims," which [was] in the main entryway to Dalhousie Engineering.<sup>‡</sup>

These are the 14 Montreal Massacre victims who were killed on December 6, 1989.<sup>30,31</sup>

[Photos of the 14 women killed on Dec 6th 1989, as well as a classroom and cafeteria where the shooting occurred]

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<sup>‡</sup> It is WCG's intention to have the Montreal Massacre Victims poster be displayed in the main entryway (near Dalhousie's memorial plaque and tree of hope) for several days leading up to December 6<sup>th</sup> each future year. It is also her intention to have a copy of the "Do You Know?" poster permanently displayed in Dalhousie Engineering. WCG would like to offer digital versions of these posters to anyone else who would like them. Please contact her directly at [wendy.gentleman@dal.ca](mailto:wendy.gentleman@dal.ca)



These are the 14 vibrant young women who got up on December 6, 1989, left their apartments where they lived with friends, family, and partners, and went to school. It was the last day of classes before exams, and there was a buzz about campus. Students were sitting in class, listening to final lectures and giving final presentations. Students were busy photocopying study notes at machines in the school corridors. The school cafeteria was festively decorated with balloons and banners, and was offering free wine to celebrate the end of term and upcoming holidays.<sup>32,33,34</sup>

Six of these women were 4<sup>th</sup> year Mechanical Engineering students, just one term away from graduating. They were planning their holidays, preparing for job interviews, deciding among existing job offers, or planning for graduate school. They were in class listening to a student presentation on heat transfer.<sup>35,36</sup>

Four of these women were students in Metallurgical Engineering (what we now call Materials Engineering). One was in 4<sup>th</sup> year and about to graduate, two were in 2<sup>nd</sup> year, and one in 1<sup>st</sup> year. Three were standing at the front of the classroom shown above, two giving a presentation on metals that they had worked on all term.<sup>37,38</sup>

One woman was a 2<sup>nd</sup> year Civil Engineering student, who was taking a break from working on a project in the computer lab to go to the cafeteria with a friend. One woman was a 1<sup>st</sup> year student in Chemical Engineering; she was also in the cafeteria.<sup>39,40,41</sup>

One woman was working in the financial services office, which is where she first met her new husband — a former engineering student — when he went to pay his tuition.<sup>42</sup>

One woman was a nursing student who had gone to the École Polytechnique cafeteria with her physician husband because it was the cheapest place to eat on campus.<sup>43</sup>

These were 14 intelligent and intriguing young women. Women who had scholarships, worked as TAs, were extending their existing professional training, and who were working hard to fulfill their life's ambitions. These 14 women were not just passionate about technology, but also about the environment, human health, and a variety of extracurricular activities. They were involved in student councils, playing music, singing in choirs, reading literature, writing poems, and cooking. They participated in athletics such as swimming, basketball, horseback riding, and skiing. These were women planning for weddings and women trying to get pregnant.<sup>44,45,46,47</sup>

These are the 14 women who did not go gentle into that December 6 night; they were victims of violence. Killed in their classrooms: shot en masse after being isolated from their male classmates and professors, and trapped in the back corner unable to escape; shot and stabbed on the presentation dais; shot while trying to escape the room; shot while hiding under a desk. Killed in her office: shot through the window of the door she had just locked to protect herself. Killed in the cafeteria: shot at the table where she had been eating before she had a chance to run; shot while holding each other tightly in their arms in the place they tried to hide after gunfire rang out.<sup>48,49</sup>



These are the 14 young women who were beloved daughters, sisters, friends, girlfriends, and wives, and it was their lives, their dreams, and the dreams of their friends and families that ended so violently on December 6, 1989.

There are the women you should remember today.

## **My Montreal Massacre memory**

Looking around, I see that most you can't "remember" these women because you were very young, many not even born, in 1989. Whatever your knowledge of the Montreal Massacre, it has come from someone else's recounting of this tragedy. For you, the Montreal Massacre is a piece of history. For me, however, it is a profoundly powerful personal memory that is inextricably tied to my career. Because in 1989, when the Montreal Massacre happened, I was there in Montreal in the first year of my Mechanical Engineering undergraduate studies at McGill University.

On that December 6 day, 25 years ago, I was doing what many of you have been doing today: studying for final exams. In those days, we didn't have email, let alone texting, Facebook, or Twitter. Most of us didn't even have TVs in our dorm rooms, but we did have radios. That evening, I was trying to make sense of electromagnetism while listening to pop music when the radio announcer interrupted the program to say that there had been a mass shooting at the École Polytechnique. Many women were dead and many more were injured.

The early news reports were confused, stating that police believed there were more gunmen who had escaped into Park Mont Royal right behind my residence. I locked my door, terrified, and spent the rest of the evening glued to the radio and on my (corded) telephone to my friends and family for updates. I remember getting a panicked telephone call from my brother in the U.S., whose local news had reported that the shooting was at the university *in* Montreal (not the University *of* Montreal), and so he had worried that I was among the victims. I will never forget the sound of relief in my brother's voice when he realized I was okay, and I imagined how different it would be for the family and friends of the slain women who had their worst fears confirmed.

## **Immediate Aftermath**

Despite the clarity of my recollections of that radio announcement and my brother's telephone call, I don't remember many of the other events that transpired in the immediate aftermath of the Montreal Massacre. I don't remember talking to my parents on the telephone. I don't remember where I stayed those first days. I don't remember ultimately writing those exams that I had been studying for on the night of the massacre.

My mind is blank because, in the immediate aftermath of the Montreal Massacre, I was in shock. The entire nation was in shock. No mass shootings like this had ever occurred in

Canada. In fact, no school shootings like this had ever occurred anywhere: This was before Sandy Hook, before Virginia Tech, before Columbine. What had previously been unimaginable suddenly became real.

We asked ourselves: What if it had been us? Our sister? Our friend? Our daughter? Our wife? We mourned our loss of innocents and our loss of innocence. We were a shattered nation.

Our profound shock and sorrow united the nation, similar to the way we came together this October over the Parliament Hill shooting. Like we just did for Nathan Cirillo, the nation sought collective solace by publicly sharing our outpouring of grief and paying of respect.

[Photo of Canadian news broadcaster describing funerals, as well as coffins being carried and inside of the Notre Dame basilica]

In the immediate aftermath, the Quebec government declared three days of mourning.<sup>50</sup> Quebecers and others across Canada held impromptu vigils for the slain women.<sup>51</sup>

The University of Montreal set up a Chapel of Rest, laying out eight of the women's coffins (some open, some closed) in the same hallway where the slain women had carried their books and their dreams.<sup>52</sup> It was visited by Quebec's political leaders from all sides, and it was visited by the public in throngs. Quebecers of both genders and both languages, spanning races, ages, and socio-economic divides came by the thousands, waiting hours in the bitter cold to cry before the coffins of strangers, offering flowers, final prayers and farewells to young women they never knew.<sup>53</sup> Engineering students taped hundreds of telegrams from around the world to the hallway walls so mourners could read them as they approached the coffins.<sup>54</sup>

A joint funeral service, offering comfort and official recognition of the tragedy, was held at Montreal's world famous Notre Dame basilica for the nine victims who were Roman Catholic.<sup>55</sup> That funeral was attended by Canada's Governor General, Canada's Prime Minister, Quebec's Premier, Montreal's Mayor, and thousands of other people.<sup>56,57</sup> Much of the rest of Canada — including me — watched the service on TV.

Just as the nation collectively mourned, we also collectively hungered for explanations. We wanted to know what happened, to learn and share the details. We devoured media reports of survivors' accounts and police findings, and the media's grisly images of dead bodies and stories of personal tragedies fed our curiosity and morbid fascination.<sup>58</sup>

[Images of newspapers reporting what happened, and showing the face of death]

We were desperate to know about who did it and why, thirsting for any new information and drinking up everything that emerged about the killer's life before December 6, 1989 and the motives behind his actions.<sup>59</sup>

It was from the media that I learned the most shocking aspect of the story. The shootings were not random. Rather, the killer had been targeting women.

[Clip from CBC archives 1989 news footage describing tragedy, and ending with introduction of Nathalie Provost in her hospital bed. ]

While I said my mind was blank regarding much of what occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Montreal Massacre, I have never forgotten the TV coverage of this woman, Nathalie Provost. She was a student in Mechanical Engineering, just like me. On the day of the massacre, she had been sitting in her final class before exams, watching another student giving a presentation.<sup>60</sup> Hers was the first classroom that the gunman entered.

She was one of the nine women who were in the classroom, the nine women who were isolated after the gunman fired into the ceiling and demanded the students separate, ordering all the "girls" to the back corner of the classroom where there was no possible exit, and ordering all the "guys" (50 or so students and 2 professors) out of the room.<sup>61</sup>

The gunman then asked the women engineering students if they knew why they were there. Nathalie Provost said "no," and the gunman explained, "I am fighting feminism. You are all a bunch of feminists. I hate feminists"<sup>62,63</sup>. Nathalie Provost then attempted to defuse the situation by reasoning with the gunman.

[Clip from CBC archives 1989 news footage of interview with Nathalie Provost from her hospital bed, describing her interaction with the gunman]

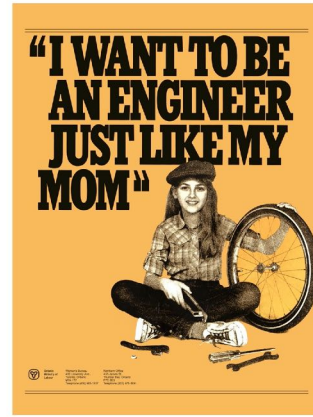
## **Historic barriers to women in engineering**

In 1989 Provost told the gunman "We are not feminists".<sup>64</sup> Years later, she said that back then, she was shocked that women in engineering were seen as symbols of feminism.<sup>65</sup> I certainly shared her view in 1989; I was an engineering student, and I too never thought of myself as a feminist. Our views had partly to do with our perception at the time of feminists being militants who fought with men, or whose fights were for things like a woman's right to vote or to have an abortion; fights that no longer needed fighting.<sup>66,67</sup> Our shared view, that as women studying engineering in 1989, we were not feminists, had mostly to do with our naiveté about what it meant to be a woman in engineering.

Engineering has historically been a male-dominated field, but in 1989 that seemed like irrelevant history. I had been encouraged to study engineering by my parents, teachers, and friends, and I honestly hadn't given my gender a second thought when it came to choosing my undergraduate discipline. In 1989, Nathalie Provost and I, our classmates, and other young women believed all doors were wide open.<sup>68</sup>

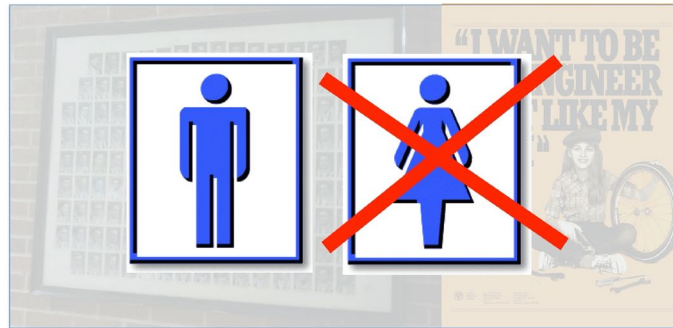


One of many all-male historic class photos displayed in corridors of Dalhousie Engineering



Poster produced by Ontario government in 1970s displayed in my mom's work during my childhood

But the Montreal Massacre was our horrific awakening to the fact that even in 1989 there were still people who felt that women didn't belong in engineering. Sadly, it wasn't just the view of a single madman. There are real barriers for women in engineering.



In 1989, young women thought all doors were open

The Montreal Massacre was our horrific awakening to the barriers for women that still existed

We are a minority. After the Montreal Massacre I couldn't help but acknowledge the gender differences in my undergraduate classes: less than 15% of the students were women, and there weren't any female TAs, let alone professors. There weren't even enough women's bathrooms, because the buildings hadn't been designed to accommodate women. Our textbooks referred to an Engineer as "he" and "him." There was a lack of sensitivity by some of the professors, such as when they put up cartoons of big-breasted women on departmental bulletin boards, or when they made derogatory comments in class, such as how the automatic transmission was invented for women because they couldn't use a clutch with high heels. Certain male TAs and male professors crossed the line of professionalism, turning our help sessions into harassment sessions. Worse, I encountered both professors and practicing engineers that actively discouraged me from continuing my engineering education and becoming an engineer, telling me I was wasting my time, the professors' time, and my scholarship money because women couldn't do engineering.

When faced with such overt and insidious examples of sexism that can serve to alienate and erode confidence, my girlfriends and I took inspiration from Nathalie Provost.

## **Nathalie Provost's inspirational message from her hospital bed**

Despite her horrific experience of witnessing six of her female classmates executed in a bloodbath; of watching the eyes of one of her friends close and knowing that the woman was dead; of being shot 4 times herself (in the forehead, both legs and a foot);<sup>69</sup> *of the extreme terror and pain she and her classmates experienced all because they were women engineering students* — Nathalie Provost had the strength and conviction to leave this inspirational message for the rest of us:

[Clip from CBC archives 1989 news footage interview with Nathalie Provost in her hospital bed: "The last message."]

If Nathalie Provost could remain determined given what she had faced, then my fellow women engineering students and I certainly couldn't let our far less significant challenges deter us. We didn't suffer the sexism in silence; we took action: Wrote letters and met with university administrators, but most importantly, we stayed.

## **Changes for women in engineering**

We did see change. Over the course of my career, in engineering schools and the workforce, I experienced an increasingly welcoming attitude toward women in engineering. For me, these changes are clocked by the time since the Montreal Massacre.

For example, I remember how the first summer following the Montreal Massacre, I got a job at the National Research Council's Institute for Mechanical Engineering, and while the entire division was men, they were all very excited and supportive of having a woman there (They even made me my very own bathroom!). One year later, NRC introduced their Montreal Massacre memorial fellowships that awarded 14 new undergraduate women with full tuition and guaranteed job experience.

Five years after the Montreal Massacre, the only trouble that I and the other women in my graduating class had with respect to getting jobs or acceptance at graduate schools was in choosing among our multiple offers. At my engineering graduate school, several professors were women, and we even had a woman dean. I graduated with my PhD in engineering one decade after the Montreal Massacre.

When I was hired by the Faculty of Engineering at Dalhousie, it was at equal pay with a male counterpart hired at the same time. Fifteen years after the Montreal Massacre, I became the first-ever Dalhousie engineering faculty member to take maternity leave, which I did again two years later. The administration has continued to support my needs as a working mother,

especially in regard to understanding and accommodating my time-constraints. I got tenure in the Faculty of Engineering here two decades after the Montreal Massacre. Twenty-five years after the massacre, I had the honour of being asked to give iron rings to two Dalhousie women graduating in Mechanical Engineering.<sup>§</sup>



Me and my McGill Mechanical Engineering girlfriends getting our Iron Rings (1994)



Me giving Iron Rings to Dalhousie Mechanical Engineering students (2014)

Today, I am one of Dalhousie Engineering's eleven women faculty members who serve as mentors and role models for today's women engineering students.

Another role model for today's women is Nathalie Provost, a surviving victim of the violence of the Montreal Massacre who has continued to inspire others for the last 25 years.

[Photo of Natalie Provost, surviving victim of violence and role model, in front of Parliament buildings]

After she recovered from her gunshot injuries, Nathalie Provost returned to École Polytechnique and finished her undergraduate degree in Mechanical Engineering. She stayed on to complete her Master's degree. She is still in Montreal, now the director of a strategic planning department in the Quebec government. She's the boss.<sup>70</sup> She married another graduate of École Polytechnique, and together they have four children. She has also been active in media for 25 years, reminding Canadians of the significance of the Montreal Massacre and the ongoing need to promote women in engineering and other male-dominated fields, to end violence against women, and to strengthen gun laws. She has written articles and given compelling interviews. Many of these are available online and I strongly suggest that you look them up.

Over the past 25 years, Nathalie Provost has also reflected on her changing perspectives on feminism and her famous quote to the gunman in 1989: "We are not feminists." Prior to the massacre, she had believed that there was no difference between men and women.<sup>71</sup> But five

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<sup>§</sup> The iron ring is given to students graduating engineering in Canada. It is a symbol of the engineers' ethical responsibilities, which is to be worn on the pinky finger of their writing hand to remind them of their professional obligations. A student may only be given an iron ring by someone who already has an iron ring; the graduating student chooses the person who gives them their ring.



years after the massacre, she acknowledged — just as I did — that the most important way the massacre had changed her was by making her realize that she is a woman, that she cannot ignore that fact, and that she must assume what it means.<sup>72</sup> Many years later, she — again like me — realized that in her life and actions, she is a feminist.<sup>73</sup> We know we are feminists by our values, by the way we live, the way we raise our children and mentor our students, and by the ambition we have for all of them.<sup>74</sup>

## **Remembering the women: Appreciating what we lost**

Nathalie Provost and I can identify with the 14 victims of the Montreal Massacre, who were our peers, and who — had their lives not been violently cut short — would be like Nathalie and me today, grayer, more wrinkled, and with 25 more years of life experiences.

When you see the Montreal Massacre victims' photos, contrast them with what you see in Nathalie and me today. See what was lost when the killer extinguished these glowing lives and brilliant futures. See the career accomplishments that never happened: the buildings they didn't design, the machines they didn't create, the products they never imagined<sup>75</sup>, and the youth they didn't mentor. See the friends they didn't laugh with, the vacations they didn't take, the houses they didn't buy, the weddings that never happened, and the children they never got to birth and raise. See all the roles of womanhood that were left vacant. See 14 fewer role models for today's young women.

Today's December 6 ceremony is a memorial to these 14 women who died violently in the Montreal Massacre 25 years ago. The brutal killing of these 14 innocent women was a loss of innocence for Canada. Their deaths were deaths in their own families, deaths in the family of engineers, deaths in the family of women, and deaths in the family of Canadians. Their photographs are photographs in our family albums. Their story is our families' story.

## **Why Remember?**

We should all remember the Montreal Massacre victims for the same reason we visit graveyards and other memorials and monuments. Memorials represent our sadness and our anger, and they provide an occasion for remembrance and reflection on how those losses have shaped our lives.

Here in Halifax, we remember another December 6 tragedy, the Halifax Explosion of 1917, which was when two munitions ships collided in the harbour, causing the world's largest man-made explosion prior to the atomic bomb.<sup>76</sup> Thousands of people lost their lives, and thousands more were wounded.

For the Halifax Explosion, like for the Montreal Massacre, there are memorial ceremonies held on December 6, as well as permanent memorial monuments and works of art (books, movies, etc.), and there are also local museum exhibits.



No one asks why we should still remember the Halifax Explosion. We appreciate its importance because of the vast scope of its devastation. We tell that story, and not just on December 6.

Yet the Halifax explosion, for all its enormity, was an accident, an accident that will likely never happen again. The Montreal Massacre, in contrast, was no accident. It was a hate crime that continues to be perpetrated on hundreds of thousands of women every year. The impact of violence against women is enormous and ongoing. It is a story that needs to be told, and not just on December 6.

The 14 women slain in the Montreal Massacre are icons for violence against women. Memorials to these specific victims acknowledge what we all lost and how that hole was a result of brutal violence. Remembering these 14 women means that the killer didn't succeed in his plan; by remembering these 14 women, we turn them, and others like them, from victims into survivors.

## **Taking action: Creating living memorials**

While gravestone-like memorials that list names and dates of death are powerful symbols, I personally prefer living memorials, like Dalhousie's tree of hope, because they help us to remember that we can find outlets for our sorrow and outrage that achieve positive change. Living memorials symbolize how we can use knowledge of our past to understand our present and shape our future. We need to remember in order to ensure that we achieve what has not yet been achieved.<sup>77</sup>

As I said at the beginning of this presentation, the Canadian Government commemorated the Montreal Massacre by declaring December 6 as the Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against women. By flying federal building flags at half-mast, we remember all women victims of violence; by wearing ribbons, we commit to taking action to eliminate violence against women.

By committing to take action, we are in effect turning ourselves into living memorials. We are living symbols of hope for positive change.

I said that my objective for today's December 6 memorial ceremony was to provide the relevant history, the context by which you can appreciate why you should be sad and angry, why you should remember.

That was only one objective.

I end my part of this December 6 memorial ceremony with my other objective: a call to action. I want to create living memorials to the Montreal Massacre. Not a tree of hope, but a forest of committed people.

## Seeds of change for young women

The first seed I want to plant for this living memorial is directed to the young women in this room.

[Graphic of 3 women trees, embracing and weaving their roots and branches together]

Knowing about these 14 victims can inspire others. That inspiration is particularly poignant for those of you who are undergraduate women in engineering, who can see reflections of yourselves in the victims' portraits because you are at the same point in your engineering career as were the slain female students at École Polytechnique in 1989.

For you young women engineering students, the Montreal Massacre is of particular historical significance. I pray that such a violent history will never be repeated, and that you young women engineers will not face the sexism experienced by your predecessors. Certainly in the decades since the tragedy, the culture of engineering has become more welcoming and accepting. But women engineers are still very much a minority, and you will undoubtedly face gender-related obstacles in your career path; it can be difficult to be a working woman, particularly in a field dominated by men. But you young women will not be facing those challenges alone; you are part of a community that includes women and men for whom the Montreal Massacre is a personal memory and who are dedicated to ensuring that there are resources and opportunities for women in engineering.

The legacy of the 14 women killed in the Montreal Massacre is not restricted to women in engineering alone. That is because the best way to honour the memory of Montreal Massacre victims is for today's young women — engineering students and others, including my own daughter — to fulfill the aborted dreams of those 14 women, their families, and their friends, for you young women to become the victims' living legacy, enabling them to survive through your actions.



[Compilation of 14 pictures of living women/girls images engaged in diverse array of activities]

You young women can be living memorials by engaging in rewarding vocations (i.e., being "employed" at something about which you are passionate), following fulfilling life paths (i.e., engaging in diverse activities that offer you personal satisfaction) and embracing all your roles of womanhood: as yourselves, and as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, friends.

They say that with age comes wisdom; I would say that with age comes a broader perspective. From my 2014 perspective, I now know that being a feminist is not about "fighting to prove you are best of the men" (to quote Nathalie Provost's English version of her response to the gunman 25 years ago). Being a feminist is about wanting to be treated fairly and with respect, and about taking pride in your female gender. My living memorial list of actions is my definition of feminism. Every woman should want to declare that she is a feminist. Young women: take pride in your feminism.

## **Seeds of change for all of us**

The second seed I want to plant for this living memorial is directed to all us — young and old, women and men.

[Graphic of person tree whose roots and branches are other people]

All of us must commit to empowering and encouraging our young women to persevere through life's challenges, and to find their fulfilling life paths.

We also need to celebrate gender differences: Gender does matter, and gender differences do exist. Men and women have different perspectives, ways of thinking, understanding and communicating. But these gender differences—just as our other differences—should be embraced. Humanity is bettered by such differences.

Last, but certainly not least, I believe that the best living memorial to the Montreal Massacre is for all of us to take actions toward ensuring that women, men and children are safe, to making this a more peaceful world.

[Graphic of a person helping boost another to reach top of mountain, graphic of men and women holding hands, and graphic of people making a giant peace symbol with light]

## **One last memorial message**

Before we move onto the candlelight segment of our December 6 memorial ceremony, I want to share my last message.

I'd like to share with you another memorial, a song written by Bev Nicol and Lisa Dorian as a tribute to the Montreal Massacre victims. To me, it is a beautiful commemoration, putting the story and the names to music in a moving and memorable way. Our lives are the

compilation of the memories we carry with us; this song helps to ensure that the victims and the event will not be forgotten, that as the final lyric says "We will survive".

[\[Link to song Montreal Massacre\]](#)

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