

Notes for Remarks

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***Just Doing It: A Salute to the Women of Excellence
Support and Relief Organization***

Women of Excellence Support and Relief Organization
Golden Gate Banquet Hall, Gala Evening
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It is always humbling to be with people who see what needs to be done and do it – who simply do it. WESRO sees potential, and helps it be fulfilled. You see those who lack power to make their lives real, and you help to provide empowerment and strength. You see those who want better lives, and you help them to rebuild, regenerate. You work to make this community a better place. You increase opportunity when it is lacking. You support women supporting women. You have no authority, and yet when you see something that needs to be done, you simply do it.

I think all of us here owe you our appreciation, our support, our gratitude. By being here together tonight, we recognize each other as allies in a cause. Tomorrow marks the 20th anniversary of the Montreal Massacre. It is a day of remembrance and a call for action on violence against women. Twenty years ago, fourteen women at l'Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal were gunned down because of their gender. Thirteen others were wounded.

The Montreal Massacre was about a man murdering women. It was about murdering intelligent women who were in the process of making much of themselves. Just five years ago, the Native Women's Association of Canada launched the *Sisters in Spirit Campaign* to raise awareness about the hundreds of First Nations, Métis and Inuit women who are missing or who have been murdered in recent years.

Do police have a different standard in handling a call about a missing First Nation woman than they do a suburban housewife? Would Canada react differently if the 500 plus missing women were not aboriginal? These were women living in poverty involved in the sex trade, victims of childhood abuse. They struggled with drugs and alcohol.

Every one of them grew up in a foster home. Every one of them started in life with potential, hopes and dreams. How could this have happened? Why does society permit it to happen? Why do so many disappearances and deaths of Aboriginal women simply go unreported?

In Canada, Aboriginal women continue to be targets of hatred and violence based on a deadly combination: their gender, their race; their socio-economic status. The spectrum of violence against women continues from that which is gratuitous to that born of a pathological hatred of women. Such violence cannot be separated however from issues of racism, classism, homophobia, structural exclusion and systemic discrimination in our society. We must seek change for our children and our grandchildren, we must strive for safer communities.

Surely we want a better world for ourselves and future generations? By being here together, we confirm that we are a community that can dissolve boundaries of gender, sex, culture, age, class, race while at the same time reinforcing who we are.

We are related, all of us members of the same human family, if we respect and give thanks to each other, if we welcome every individual for the special gift which it gives us, we will be better positioned to make change.

If we look for middle ground, if we admit that no one owns the whole truth, if we see that often there are many truths to be reconciled, what power of unity we will be capable of unleashing! We each have our own personal experiences with sexism, racism, unfair treatment.

The overheard remark, discrimination, the stereotyping and racism felt principally by people of colour, the discounting of us as women, the derisive laughter at behaviours that do not constitute “the norm”, not being taken into account because of our youth.

In seeking change, we need to go beyond the discrimination that effects us personally and begin to look at root causes. If we are to change our mindset, we must each find new solutions by joining forces, by collectively seeking to end the continuous assaults - the violence that is all around us.

We must break this senseless cycle of violence – together. We can do this when we celebrate our differences, when we draw strength in our unity, when we work together for a common purpose, when we take leadership, each of us every day - caring, listening and challenging bullies wherever we see them. With a profound respect for each and everyone’s human rights at our core, we can make that difference. We confirm our relationship as members of the same human family, brothers and sisters, aunts and cousins, elders and youth.

By being here together, we confirm that we are a community, that we are not isolated in compartments of gender, sex, culture, age, class, race, ability separating us, robbing us of the gifts each of us have to offer. We remind ourselves of the importance of listening to others, of trying to understand what others have to say, of hearing the righteousness, the truth, in each other’s voices. What power of unity we are capable of unleashing!

I was asked to be here tonight to talk about my work as the first Ombudsman of the City of Toronto, but I feel this is your evening, your celebration, our celebration of your work. I do not want to take away from that. Just let me say that as Ombudsman, I am a place of last resort to help the people of Toronto in their right to be treated by the City and its programs and services fairly, without bias or discrimination.

If anyone knows of anyone who believes he or she has been treated unfairly by City government and has been unable to have the matter dealt with to their satisfaction, tell them to call the Ombudsman. I am independent of the City, an Officer of City Council and if we cannot resolve the matter, we have powers of investigation.

The Ombudsman’s services are offered at no cost and are completely confidential. I leave you with the challenge of continuing to draw strength in our unity of purpose long after this evening is over.

Tonight, tomorrow, next year, forever, wherever you go, in whatever you do – in your conversations with yourself in your conversations with others, initiate and engage in the

dialogue – ask what kind of a city do we want Toronto to be? What kind of environment, what kind of atmosphere do we want in our neighbourhoods, in our families?

And then inspired by the example of WESRO, just make it happen. Just do it.