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Aboriginal people know the 'missing'

By: Colleen Simard

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Finally, we're seeing some momentum on the issue of missing aboriginal women.

The announcement last month that the Supreme Court had denied serial killer William Pickton's appeal was swiftly followed by an apology from the Vancouver police department, saying they could have done better to catch Pickton sooner.

On Thursday, a draft report confirmed that Vancouver police made several mistakes in their investigations, including bad management and analysis of evidence. But it also pointed a finger at equally sloppy work by RCMP, who had jurisdiction in Coquitlam, where Pickton's farm was located.

A consensus is growing in the media that a public inquiry into the handling of the Pickton investigation is needed. It's common sense that an inquiry is necessary so that the mistakes of the past won't be repeated.

Some say spending another \$30 million -- the estimated price tag of the Air India inquiry -- will serve no one. Already, \$120 million and several years of work have been spent to convict Pickton of brutally murdering six women, while charges of murdering 20 more have been stayed.

Pickton, however, bragged to an undercover officer he'd killed 49 women. I say \$30 million is bargain for an inquest if it's going to improve the way missing persons investigations are done. Women both nationally and internationally can benefit from its conclusions. Women of all colours are often the lowest on the social rung, and often the victims of violence, abuse and murder.

Closer to home, there was a fundraising concert held on Friday at O'odena Circle at The Forks to raise awareness and support the families of missing women.

The "No Stone Unturned" concert is now in its second year. It was spearheaded by Bernadette Smith, the sister of missing woman Claudette Osborne. It's been two years since the 21-year-old mother of four went missing without a trace from Winnipeg's Lincoln Hotel. But her family hasn't given up hope.

Friends and supporters joined Osborne's family in an 800-kilometre trek from Norway House to Winnipeg, which just wrapped up this week. The walk was held to draw attention to the missing and murdered women cause. The walk ended with a candlelight vigil on the legislative grounds.

The family of Hillary Wilson, 18, also organized a memorial walk to The Leg to honour the memory of the murdered teen on Friday, the one-year anniversary of her death. Her case remains unsolved.

Still more action occurred this week when the women of Roseau River First Nation took steps to build awareness by inviting community members to share their personal experiences of having family members go missing. Grassroots activist Jo Seenie of Okijida Kwa organized the event.

Roseau River Chief Terrance Nelson is doing his part, too, by inviting Ronald Hallding, a First Nation member of the Guardian Angels' Minneapolis chapter, up to Winnipeg for a visit. The Guardian Angels are known internationally for peacekeeping by patrolling streets rife with crime and gang activity.

"If the police are unable or unwilling to do their job, they cannot condemn our people for taking over these matters," says Nelson. "These are our women and we must take a stand for them and their families."

Maybe a local chapter of the Guardian Angels patrolling Winnipeg's toughest areas could make a difference. The visit could benefit First Nations, too, by showing them how to organize community patrols of their own.

Sadly, Nelson's former wife, Mildred Flett, 51, went missing this June from Winnipeg. It's a small world.

I met "Millie" a few times over the years. She's my partner's cousin. At 5-foot-10, she's tall, dignified and friendly, and I can't believe anyone would do any harm to such a beautiful woman.

Here's hoping she'll be coming home soon.

Sadly, I think there aren't many aboriginal people who don't know of a friend or a family member who's gone missing. It's a sad reality that needs to change.

Colleen Simard is a Winnipeg writer.