

Hanes: Dec. 6 remains a painful anniversary

We may not have known the 14 women killed at École Polytechnique ourselves, but somehow the coldblooded hatred of the man who shot them 32 years ago feels personal.

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Every year on this day, we remember 14 women few of us knew in life but all of us mourn in death.

We know their names: Geneviève Bergeron, Hélène Colgan, Nathalie Croteau, Barbara Daigneault, Anne-Marie Edward, Maud Haviernick, Barbara-Maria Klucznik-Widajewicz, Maryse Laganière, Maryse Leclair, Anne-Marie Lemay, Sonia Pelletier, Michèle Richard, Annie St-Arneault and Annie Turcotte.

We recall the unspeakable way in which they died 32 years ago today, when a gunman entered École Polytechnique, hunted them like prey, and killed them because they were women. We now recognize — finally, belatedly — [this heinous act as femicide](#) .

Although our collective pain can never match the private grief their families have borne with such resilience and dignity over the decades, we decry their loss as a society. We light candles and shed tears. We beam 14 rays of light from the top of Mount Royal to the heavens to express our anguish.

We pay tribute to what each of these 14 women achieved before their murders as trailblazers training in a male-dominated profession. We put their names on parks, monuments and public buildings. We honour what they could have, would have, should have accomplished if their lives hadn't been cruelly cut short by misogyny. We [award scholarships to promising young women](#) who follow in their footsteps.

And we celebrate who they were as human beings. [Their herstories have been collected in a book](#) to share their individual brilliance, keep their vitality from fading as time marches on and remind people that they were much more than victims of a notorious crime.

The commemorations have ebbed and flowed over the decades between quiet vigils and large ceremonies. But Montreal will always be marked by this massacre. It was the first mass shooting to shock this city and for a long time it was the country's deadliest killing spree.

We may not have known les filles de Poly ourselves, but somehow their deaths and the coldblooded hatred of the man who shot them feel personal.

Maybe it's because many of us see ourselves in the fallen. The feeling that 'it could have been me' haunts both old and young. Whether we remember where we were when we heard the horrifying news or how we first learned about this dark day in history, the anniversary prompts us to revisit every sexist slight we've experienced, every barrier we've had to overcome, every time we've felt vulnerable because we are women.

Perhaps we feel the loss so deeply because we see our own sisters, daughters, granddaughters and friends in the 14 dead. It breaks our hearts all over again for the loved ones of the women who were murdered, and it makes us hold our own girls a little closer.

We ask ourselves why — how — someone could harbour such loathing toward perfect strangers, simply because they were women. It's a chilling reminder of the inequality that persists and how we must not take the progress made on women's rights for granted.

The clarion call to be the kind of women that the gunman sought to destroy, as Andrea Dworkin once urged, is loud on Dec. 6. We are compelled to defy the assailant's monstrous mission and reclaim the word feminism. Men and women must be allies in this effort.

Maybe we are affected because we see echoes of unfathomable events of 1989 in the [alarming surge in intimate partner violence](#) in Quebec this year, [with 15 femicides so far](#). At least we're calling it out for what it is now. We see the rise in gun violence on Montreal streets. Despite the heroic battle of the survivors of Polytechnique and the families of the victims who fought for gun control in this country, the struggle continues.

Handguns are claiming the lives of innocent children and terrorizing the public at large. Gun culture is taking hold among the city's youth, some of whom have become desensitized to violence and its devastating consequences. This is the opposite of what we should have learned 32 years ago.

And, of course, we see the tragedy of Dec. 6 is reflected in all-too-frequent mass killings elsewhere, from the crude van attack carried out by a misogynist in Toronto in 2018 to the carnage in Nova Scotia in 2020 to the bloodshed at a Michigan high school just last week.

Montreal will never get over the gunning down of 14 women on a wintry night 32 years ago. On this day we not only lament the loss of these promising young lives but denounce a crime against women that was a crime against us all.