

WE HAVE TO START SOMEWHERE

By Patrick Quinn, PhD (Hon.), P.Eng., FEC

From Montreal 1989, a personal reflection

- Geneviève Bergeron (born 1968), civil engineering student
- Hélène Colgan (born 1966), mechanical engineering student
- Nathalie Croteau (born 1966), mechanical engineering student
- Barbara Daigneault (born 1967), mechanical engineering student
- Anne-Marie Edward (born 1968), chemical engineering student
- Maud Haviernick (born 1960), materials engineering student
- Barbara Klucznik-Widajewicz (born 1958), nursing student
- Maryse Laganière (born 1964), budget clerk in l'École Polytechnique's finance department
- Maryse Leclair (born 1966), materials engineering student
- Anne-Marie Lemay (born 1967), mechanical engineering student
- Sonia Pelletier (born 1961), mechanical engineering student
- Michèle Richard (born 1968), materials engineering student
- Annie St-Arneault (born 1966), mechanical engineering student
- Annie Turcotte (born 1969), materials engineering student

It was before the age of cell phones, emails, Twitter and tweets. On the morning of December 7, 1989, I was dropped off at the Vancouver airport for a flight back to Toronto. A newspaper informed me there had been a shooting rampage the day before at l'École Polytechnique in which women engineering students were targeted and 14 women had been killed.

I had worked and was active in the engineering community in Montreal for a number of years, and had a daughter in university. On the flight back, I grappled with the horror and pain that must have been engulfing the victims' families. I could feel their heartbreak in a personal way and the long flight home became an intense retrospection on violence against women and the ambience of engineering.

By the time I landed, I was quite definite about where I stood; if there was something I could do to change both, I was committed.

The following week, our office bought advertising space in *The Globe and Mail* that said, in part, that we pledged, as engineers, to make more public our support for women in, or wishing to join, our profession. We also expressed our dedicated opposition to events or practices that offend women's dignity or roles, or impede their progress to genuine equality.

It brought a torrent of letters from women associated with engineers and engineering. They poured out their emotional responses in many touching words.

Then came an incident of abuse of a woman on campus by engineering students, which I responded to by a letter to the university, and to my colleague consultants in Toronto. In the letter, I suggested we treat graduates from universities where such incidents occurred differently when it comes to employment. It was through this letter that my 15 minutes of fame arose. A CBC reporter got wind of the letter and interviewed me for national radio, which led to all kinds of national and local exposure. The arguments and debates raged for a while and then drifted away.

Looking back over 25 years, there have been amazing changes in society, particularly in the information technology areas, which have made communications instant and powerful, and similar progress in the process of practising engineering. In areas like violence against women, or the concerns about progress around the multi-faceted issues about women and engineering, there has been little progress and, even more disheartening, a clear ambivalence toward finding the answers so clearly needed.

The issue of violence against women screams for individual, public and government reactions. Women disappear from our streets by the dozens before it is even a public issue; Aboriginal people take to dragging a river for their lost girls and women; a former US president (Jimmy Carter) titles his book *A Call to Action* in which the basic premise is "...the world's discrimination and violence against women and girls is the most serious, pervasive and ignored violation of basic human rights."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's response to a call for a public inquiry on violence against Aboriginal women is the same as was received to pleas for a public inquiry after the Montreal murders—it is not going to happen.

In engineering, we continue to have anti-women incidents bubble to the surface on university campuses. I recently wrote in *Engineering Dimensions* that even universities with progressive attitudes toward women are dealing with a resurgence of offensive and insensitive behaviours. As such, something needs to be done by those who speak for our profession. I also

wrote that violence against women must be more of a real concern, and anything associated with our profession perceived in any way to promote or condone it needs to be eradicated.

When I wrote similarly 25 years ago, there were a few defenders of the engineering environment who came forward to minimize or laugh off the stupid (to them) behaviour of students. They did this while acknowledging that offensive and insensitive events reinforced the public perception of engineering as a male-dominated profession and its students as rough-acting boors indulged by their faculties.

Today, it is seen as smart crisis management to stay away from debate and recognize a public attention span that will quickly move on to more immediate issues. And engineering does not have leaders or leadership committed to the eradication of what I wrote was a stain on our profession.

In his book, President Carter decried the rape statistics of American universities. The CBC, in a special documentary, sets out what it suggests is a rape culture at Canadian universities. When anything bad is attributed to students, the first response of many of those who remember their undergraduate experiences on campus is to associate it with engineers.

In the CBC piece, a young, prominent lawyer (I note “young” because generational gaps are important in perceptions of values and morals) found it scary when a female university chancellor condemned locker room language. He asked if we are going to reprogram all males between the ages of 18 and 22 who want to talk about women in the locker room, and opined that this was taking political correctness too far. Really! He needs to try to understand the world through a woman’s eyes.

Violence against women is a social issue, not only in universities, but also in society at large. Locker room language is part of a continuum. A shining light in the CBC piece was the president of Lakehead University, Brian Stevenson, PhD, who acknowledged this reality explicitly. When told that educating people on the laws around sexual assault was easy but asking students to change their behaviours and opinions is a tough nut to crack, his simple answer was profound: “We have to start somewhere.”

For me, that somewhere was 25 years ago and I find progress since unacceptable. As an engineering community, our voices are PEO and the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers and, while these have been fairly successful in supporting those working to remove the obstacles that once made a woman’s entry to our profession difficult, their voices and actions in the fight against violence against women, or a rape culture at universities, are mostly silent. They may think it is not their role but, as Stevenson said, we have to start somewhere—and actually everywhere—and that has to include doing something about a male-dominated major profession not making progress in the basic area of diversity and inclusiveness.

I still wonder today about Montreal and what might have changed the outcome of December 6, 1989. Engineering attracts males who are influenced by and become the explorers of our planet and of space, who take huge risks in everyday life by building incredible structures. Their bravery is taken for granted by society. In mass calamities, we frequently hear of individual, even life-sacrificing, gallantry. In Montreal, the men were told to leave and they left. There were no stories of anyone remonstrating or actually taking some frontal, brave action to even slow down the killer. To this day, we don’t seem to want to know why. Articles exploring these topics are not welcomed by publications. It is almost as though we have accepted shame and don’t want to talk about it.

We could learn a lot more by facing our fears, by having the discussions, by having public inquiries such as those sought by indigenous people on why their women are victims of violence unacceptable in any civilized country. Somewhere, a start can and must be made.

What can be done by the engineering community? Here are my suggestions:

- PEO meets regularly with the Council of Ontario Deans of Engineering. A permanent item on the agenda should be an open and frank discussion on the culture and climate at universities, including experiences of concern and finding a uniform approach to handling them;
- Universities should be encouraged to establish a code of conduct, to teach this code and encourage its acceptance, and make sure students are held accountable for their actions;
- PEO, through its influence on the Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board, should promote a national position on consent in sexual assault cases, such as that recently enacted in law in California, which clearly defines acceptable joint consent in sexual interplay; and
- Character is one of the criteria for entering a profession. Students should be informed on criteria for judging this and on the risks of being excluded from professional registration for not living up to these standards. Σ

Patrick Quinn, PhD (Hon.), P.Eng., FEC, is a two-time PEO president.