

Remembering December 6, 1989

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On the eve of the 20th anniversary of the massacre of 14 students and staff at L'École Polytechnique de Montréal, three women recall the horrific day and how it changed them forever.



Heidi Rathjen

By Heidi Rathjen, as told to Susan McClelland

It was the last hour of classes in the fall term; exams were coming up. That's where everyone's heads were at. A student came into the council room where I was sitting. He was really pale. He closed the door and said, "Someone is out there with a gun." He didn't say another word. Not long after, we heard the sound. It didn't sound like gunshots – what you hear on TV or in the movies – but like big planks of wood falling down.

Women are about eight times more likely than men to be victims of violence.

I was in a state of complete disbelief. I remember lifting the seat off my chair and holding it up to protect myself. At some point there was silence. We waited until the police came and escorted us out. I saw knapsacks and books scattered on the floor. Outside, there were ambulances and lots of people running around. It was chaos. None of us

knew what was going on.

I went to a friend's apartment and watched the [news](#). That's when it sunk in: people had died. I discovered two days later that I knew two of the victims, Anne-Marie Lemay and Barbara Daigneault. After the funerals, I threw myself into the work that needed to be done in response to the massacre: setting up a memorial, visiting and sending flowers to the injured and dealing with the media. This made me feel less helpless. I wanted to go back to [school](#). It was my second home and everyone knew what everyone else was feeling.

"Fighting for gun control legislation wasn't just a job. It was my mission."

When I went back in the new year, a couple of teachers and students started a petition for a law to ban assault and semi-automatic weapons. I got involved, and was soon put in charge. Wendy Cukier, who had founded Canadians for Gun Control earlier in December, called me and sort of became my mentor.

We, the students of L'École Polytechnique, had the sympathy of the country. But Wendy had the research and understood the issue of gun control. She knew what was needed to make a strong law.

At the end of the spring term, Kim Campbell, the federal justice minister at the time, received our petition with 560,000 names on it. It felt like the whole country had supported it. And as far as I was concerned, we had won. I graduated, went to [Europe](#) for the summer and then took a job working for Bell Canada.

A few days after the first anniversary of Dec. 6, Campbell announced that the bill would die. I was so angry. It was such an injustice; a slap in the face to all the victims of the tragedy. But, at the same time, it made me push even harder.

Wendy and I formed the Coalition for Gun Control, with Wendy as president, as she still is today. I was thinking about gun control all the time, so I quit my job at Bell to fight for the legislation full time. Fighting for gun control wasn't just another job. It was my [mission](#). And I saw the whole world through the eyes of that mission. Every day, we made progress that encouraged me to keep going. I felt like we were David versus Goliath. Every time I got a supporter or a politician to meet with me, it was all the encouragement I needed.

On Dec. 5, 2005, Bill C-68 became law and introduced new, stricter gun control legislation, including a ban on assault weapons and mandatory registration of all firearms. During the victory party, the parents of the girls who had died raised glasses of Champagne and spoke to the crowd, thanking us for years of fighting and for this tribute to their daughters.

Heidi Rathjen is cofounder and codirector of the Quebec Coalition of Tobacco Control, and mom to a five-year-old daughter. She was a student at L'École Polytechnique de Montréal on Dec. 6, 1989.

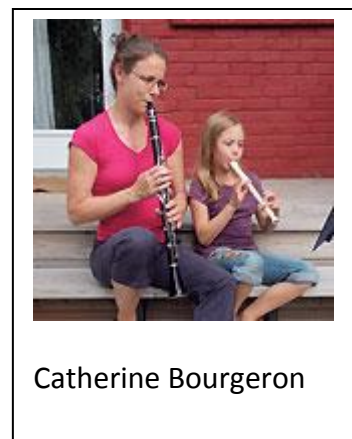
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*More than 1.4 million Canadian women aged 15 or older say they have been stalked.*

**By Catherine Bergeron, as told to Susan McClelland**

My sister, Genevieve, and I were born just 22 months apart. We were very close. We had the same circle of friends and went to school together. We did the same sports, played on the same basketball team in high school, and both played the clarinet.

Genevieve was my idol. I remember practising the clarinet with her. Often we would laugh so much, we couldn't finish. I don't remember what we were laughing about; we were just having fun. I often think about that because I want to remember her in a happy way.



On Dec. 6, 1989, Genevieve was only 21 years old and an engineering student at L'École Polytechnique de Montréal. On every Dec. 6 since that day, it's like time stops.

I still have Genevieve's clarinet and sometimes my [children](#) (Marjolaine, 8, and Clément, 10) will bring me the box and say, "Mommy, please play." Playing the clarinet brings me back to those good moments when Genevieve and I were still together, laughing and singing.

When I became a mom, everything changed about how I viewed Dec. 6, because it was then that I realized what my parents went through when Genevieve died. It's hard for everyone to think about what happened that day. For every Montrealer, for every Quebecer, for every Canadian, it's so hard.

My family is one of the families that created the Dec. 6 Foundation. We raised money and gave it to groups that were taking action to stop [violence](#). I became involved because I wanted to make something good out of what happened. Two years ago, we gave what money was left to the Foundation of Greater Montreal. We needed a break. Our emotions were still running high.

**"I want people to remember who my sister was – not that she was a victim."**

The reaction from some people about Dec. 6 is, "I want to forget." But my family doesn't want to forget. We don't want the girls to have died in vain. We have to remember that 14 women died and there was no doubt about the intention of the man who killed them. Some people say to me, "He was crazy." He probably was not well. I don't want society to forget that he killed 14 women because he thought they were taking his place. I don't know what I will tell my daughter, Marjolaine, about what happened when she grows up.

I want people to remember who my sister was – not that she was a victim. Genevieve was sensitive and that is why she touched so many people. She was so nice and good, and had so much talent. She was there for others. She was there for me. I [remember](#) Genevieve like a little sun. She was the soleil in the life of so many people.

*Catherine Bergeron lives in Montreal. Her sister, Genevieve, was one of the 14 young women killed on Dec. 6, 1989.*

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Every week in Canada, one or two women are murdered by a former or current partner.



Diane Riopel

By Diane Riopel as told to Laurie MacKenzie

L'École Polytechnique de Montréal has been a part of my life for 30 years: First as a student, then as a researcher and later as a professor. What happened on Dec. 6, 1989, changed my life and the lives of everyone at the school. We [lost our innocence](#) that night.

In the final hours of the fall term, students were celebrating and the school was a noisy, jubilant place. I left my office on the third floor at about 5 p.m., before the shooting started in the last classroom on that same floor.

The first I heard about the massacre was when I got home that evening. I had just walked in the door when my aunt called. She was so relieved to hear my voice and then told me what she had learned from the news. Still wearing my winter coat, I turned on the TV and watched the scene in horror. I thought, 'We love our students. We are so proud of them. What did we do to bring this evil into our school?'

"We lost our innocence that night."

By 7:30 p.m. I heard from my fiancé, who is now my husband. He had been teaching in the school and had evacuated his students because of a fire alarm that went off. When he went back inside the school, he saw blood in front of the photocopiers, but at the time he thought the ink cartridge had exploded. He could never have imagined the [tragedy](#) that had unfolded.

When I went back to my office after Dec. 6, one of my students called to tell me he wasn't coming back to school. I thought, God, give me the words to help this student return. He has always enjoyed the school, was proud of it. How can one person who hated our school take all that away?

Dec. 6 was an attack on L'École Polytechnique and all our students. We remember the names of the women who died, but there were many other [victims](#). In January of the new term, for example, one student went to Student Services for a new agenda. When he was asked why he wanted one, he said it was because his had a bullet hole in it.

This tragedy is like any [traumatic](#) event: We have found a way to live with it. But there isn't one week that goes by that I don't think about Dec. 6, 1989. It's like [remembering](#) the Second World War. Whenever the world is disgraced, we want society to evolve to not experience anything like this again.

Diane Riopel is a professor of industrial engineering at L'École Polytechnique de Montréal. For 10 years she has held the position of Marianne- Mareschal chair, which was created in 1998 to promote engineering among women.

How you can show your support

Since 1991, YWCA Canada has been producing Rose Buttons (buttons with an image of a rose on them) to commemorate the young women killed at L'École Polytechnique de Montréal and raise awareness about violence. The buttons are 50 cents each. Funds go to [organizations](#) that work with victims of violence or in violence prevention. Order your button at www.ywcacanada.ca; click on Rose Button Campaign.

– Toni Petter



The 14 women killed at L'École Polytechnique de Montréal

- **Genevieve Bergeron**, 21, scholarship student majoring in mechanical engineering
- **Hélène Colgan**, 23, mechanical engineering student
- **Nathalie Croteau**, 21, mechanical engineering student
- **Barbara Daigneault**, 22, mechanical engineering student and teaching assistant
- **Anne-Marie Edward**, 21, chemical engineering student and member of the university's alpine ski team
- **Maud Haviernick**, 29, metallurgical engineering student
- **Barbara Klucznik-Widajewicz**, 31, nursing sciences student at the University of Montreal
- **Maryse Laganière**, 25, budget clerk in the school's finance department
- **Maryse Leclair**, 23, metallurgical engineering student
- **Anne-Marie Lemay**, 27, mechanical engineering student
- **Sonia Pelletier**, 28, mechanical engineering student
- **Michèle Richard**, 21, metallurgical engineering student
- **Annie St-Arneault**, 23, mechanical engineering student
- **Annie Turcotte**, 21, metallurgical engineering student