

Faceless Dolls Project

A voice for silent victims

By [Kyle Gennings](#), [Kyle Gennings](#), The Daily Press (Timmins)

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Heather Murray's features stood apart next to the faceless dolls on display at the Timmins Native Friendship Centre on Friday afternoon. Each doll represents one of 600 missing Aboriginal women across Canada.

TIMMINS - There is a doll. It is comprised of various fabrics, held together by glue and it sits faceless amongst the rest.

Six hundred in total, these dolls, fixed side by side, hands touching, their voices would be raised in protest, if they had them.

So it is up to those who can speak, to herald their cry, a cry that could be heard at the Timmins Native Friendship Centre on Friday as the facility hosted a tea to commemorate lost women.

"Sisters in Spirit started about eight years ago with the Ontario Native Women's Association," said Aboriginal healing and wellness co-ordinator Heather Murray.

"Each year on Oct. 4, different communities do different activities to commemorate the 600 native woman currently missing in this country."

Each faceless doll represents a First Nations missing women — a life, a story and a struggle forgotten by most and remembered by few.

“We will be having a tea to help remember these women,” said Murray. “One in the afternoon and another this evening. During the tea we will have a minute of silence, to give these women and their struggle a moment to be thought of and remembered.”

Women like Amber Redman, who would have turned 27 in January of this year.

Amber was born a member of the Standing Buffalo Dakota Nation at Regina General Hospital. She was an intelligent child, who enjoyed watching the Flintstones with her favourite teddy bear.

She was a girl who grew into a spiritually connected woman and valued her cultural traditions.

Amber went missing on July 15, 2005 and it would be three years before her remains were finally discovered.

“We so often choose to focus on the negative aspect of these subjects,” said Murray. “We wanted to hold a tea and a minute of silence and welcome both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women together to give thought for these women and cultivate hope that answers will be found for both them and their families.”

The scale of the problem far exceeds what most believe.

According to statistics cultivated over a five-year period by the Native Women’s Association of Canada, 80% of missing Native women cases are murder cases, making Ontario considerably higher than the national average of 67%.

“Each doll represents one of the women that is currently missing in Canada,” said Murray.

“They are faceless because we won’t know all of their stories. We have women missing from this community and that has had an impact on us.

“So we can only imagine the broader impact and though we don’t know each and every one of these women, they are part of our community.”

It is a national community, from St. John to Whitehorse and each faceless doll harbours a story.

Nina Courtepatte was born in October of 1991 and was an inquisitive child who grew into an outspoken young woman. A talented artist and a gifted writer, she was cherished by her family and friends.

On April 3, 2005, Nina was brutally raped and murdered on a golf course outside of Edmonton.

“These are women and children and they are all missing from around Canada,” said Murray. “It could be your sister, your mother, your niece and that is why we wanted people to come and see these faceless dolls, to see their numbers and to know how importantly and how widespread this issue is.”

Row after row, the empty spaces where faces should be stare blankly for all to see, in the hopes that change will happen.

“We know that the justice system is there,” said Murray. “But often, for whatever reason, when it comes to Aboriginal people, it falls short, a whole bunch of things have to happen before something is done. Our jail system is full of Aboriginal men, that is a fact.

“That fact applies directly to the situation that we face here today, with these missing women.”

Murray and her fellow organizers hope that the community, the country and the world will recognize the plight of these women and raise their voices.

“We are asking people to sign a petition dressed to the honourable Bernard Valcourt,” said Murray. “We are hoping that the United Nations will adopt principals and declare on the rights of indigenous people and affirm the rights of self determination.

“We believe that the faceless dolls project will get them to hear us, because we are only one of 175 communities with faceless women.”