

Lesson #12

Sisters in Spirit: Spreading the Word about Canada's Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women

There are many problems in our society that need attention, and nobody has the time to try to fix them all, or all by themselves. That's why activists and community organizers often form themselves into groups that deal with just one or two of these problems, and work together to find solutions. In Exercise #11, you read about Peace Alliance, who deal with the issue of war. You also learned about South Osborne Urban Community cooperative, who deal with issues of food production and how what we eat affects us, our neighbours, and the environment.

One issue that Winnipeg activists are very concerned about is the issue of violence against women – especially Aboriginal women. You might be surprised to learn that nearly 600 Aboriginal women have been murdered or have gone missing in Canada in the last 30 years. Some people say that number is actually even higher.

Sisters in Spirit are a national group with local chapters. The Winnipeg chapter of Sisters in Spirit began in 2004 as a campaign by Anglican and United churches to raise awareness in the community and to honour the women who have been killed or who have gone missing.

Winnipeg Sisters in Spirit provides support to the families of missing and murdered women, and organizes a memorial walk every Mother's Day to bring these families' stories into the public eye.

“We chose Mother's Day because a lot of these women are mothers, and all of them have mothers,” explains Mary Lysecki, one of the chairpersons of Winnipeg Sisters in Spirit. “We wanted first and foremost to honour the women we have lost, and to make it clear

that they're not just victims. They are children, mothers, aunties, and nieces. Their families are longing for them, and their deaths have made a huge difference to the rest of their families. We want to keep people from being thought of just as statistics.”

“Another purpose is to give voice to the family,” adds co-chair and fellow Anglican priest Barbara Shoomski. “Having a reporter come and stick a mic in your face just doesn't do it. The family are still distraught; they're not sure what to say. So, when we do our annual walk, we look around to see which families haven't yet spoken out in public, and invite them to tell their stories.”

The Mother's Day walk brings up to 300 people, who carry signs that bear the names of missing and murdered women. It includes food, speeches from organizers and women's families, honour songs, prayers, dancing and mourning. The walk begins at the St. Regis Hotel, where 16-year-old Sunshine Wood went missing in February of 2004. It ends at the Odena Circle at the Forks.

“The assumption is that most of these women were prostitutes,” says Barbara. “But Sunshine Wood's story is like mine. She came to Winnipeg at 16 to educate herself. That's what she was here for, and that's what she was doing, and yet she's not portrayed that way. This upsets me because that could have been me. I could have been that 16-year-old.”

“There's this perception that these women contributed to their deaths or deserved their deaths because of what they did. We're speaking out against that thinking in our walk by saying, we honour these women. We honour them as people who had hopes and dreams for their future, who had parents who loved them and children who are missing them.”

Sisters in Spirit is a grassroots organization that has no sponsors or government funding. When they do make a little money through donations or the sale of their T-shirts, they

often share it with other local organizations who are doing similar work. Other activists and families of missing or murdered women also hold annual events, such as an awareness-raising concert called No Stone Unturned, and a memorial march on Valentine's Day.

Clearly groups like Sisters in Spirit have accomplished a lot in their work. But joining a group is not the only way that you can find solutions to a problem or raise awareness about an issue you care about. Read on to learn about how one Winnipeg woman is helping Aboriginal women using art.



Grandmother Moon is the symbol of the Sisters in Spirit campaign. According to the Native Women's Association of Canada, “Grandmother Moon is a powerful teaching about Aboriginal women’s special connection to our Grandmothers who have passed into the Spirit world. Grandmother Moon provides us direction, strength, knowledge and wisdom in taking our sacred place in our families, communities and beyond. She teaches us about our sacred role as the life-givers and the heart of our nations — for without women our nations cannot go on.”

Art as Activism: The REDress Project

Métis artist Jaime Black was at a Canadian Studies conference in Germany when she came up with the idea for the REDress project. Several experts had given presentations on Aboriginal history and culture, when one woman – the only Aboriginal presenter at the conference – stood up and said, “Did you know there are over 500 missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada?”

As a stunned silence fell over the room, Jaime suddenly had a brainwave. She pictured an art project that would fill the city of Winnipeg with red dresses, each one representing an Indigenous woman who had been killed or had gone missing.

“With dresses everywhere, people wouldn't be able to turn away from the issue,” Jaime says.

She chose red because it has so many meanings: blood, violence, passion and sexuality. She also chose it because of its special significance in Aboriginal culture, and because one Aboriginal woman once told her it was the only colour that spirits can see.

She began collecting dress donations from the community, and put on a huge art exhibit at the University of Winnipeg in the spring of 2011, where she hung 120 red dresses all over the school. She also hung dresses at art galleries and at the Manitoba Legislature. She eventually took her show on the road to Ottawa and Kamloops. She called the project “REDress”, because the word “redress” means “to make right a wrong.”

Jaime hopes that her project will help to “make right a wrong” by bringing attention to an important issue that most people don't think very much about. She says that art is a unique form of activism because it's a different way of getting people's attention.

“We're bombarded with so many problems and troubles and activist issues, we have to put up emotional barriers,” Jamie explains. “So often, if someone hands them a pamphlet about an issue, people will decide 'no' before they even let any of that information in.”

She continues: “But I find that when people encounter this exhibition they first have an emotional reaction to the dresses, before they are even able to decide they aren't interested. They think, 'Oh, this is beautiful', or 'Oh wow, this is ghostly.' I've seen it in people's faces. They feel as though something is there, and then they look, and there's nothing inside that dress. There's no one inside that dress. It's an emotional reminder of these women being gone. And once people emotionally connect, then they want to know more, and at that point I'm able to talk about the issue with them.”

There are so many things that contribute to the problem of violence against Aboriginal women in Canada, Jaime says. She thinks it's important for people to remember that even though many of us think of colonialism as a thing of the past, Canada still mistreats Aboriginal people:

“The reality is, Aboriginal people are still being displaced, being imprisoned, and living in poverty. There are reserves where people don't have clean drinking water. Everybody knows these things, but we turn a blind eye to it and pretend that our country is somehow over its colonial past.”

Jaime says that when women do go missing, their families have little support, and sometimes their disappearances are not taken seriously by police.

“One family told me that when they called to report their daughter missing, the police said, 'We don't do family reunions,’” Jaime recalls. “Basically they're saying, 'Your daughter went out partying and we're not concerned.' A lot of families have to wait a certain amount of time before someone who has gone missing is considered a priority.”

The media also plays a role, she adds. Instead of showing missing and murdered women as mothers, as daughters, and best friends, the media describe them only as prostitutes or drug users. They are more likely to use a woman's former mug shot in a story than a photo of her kissing her baby.

“People see that and think, 'Oh, she's a prostitute, that's why she went missing,’” Jaime says. “But why is someone less human based on what they do? Why is someone less human, ever? The media can make these women seem less human than other women, and that's a problem because in order for violence to happen, the person doing that violence needs to think of the other person as less than human, or that they deserve the violence.”

Jaime's exhibit is about getting people to think about missing and murdered women in a different way, and to think about all the things that might be going wrong in a society where violence against Aboriginal women is so common. In addition to her artwork, she does workshops with schools and community groups. She has also produced a documentary film called *REDress Redress* with the help of Tina Keeper, a well-known Aboriginal actress, activist and politician.

She is proud of her project and the effect it has had on others.

“I didn't want to be an artist only for myself,” Jaime says. “Some people say that art is like holding up a mirror to society, and forcing it to look at what it is. I wanted to make art that would do that.”



Jaime's dresses at both an indoor gallery and outdoor exhibit.

Literacy Tip: Parts of Speech

You could probably go your whole life without learning what a noun is and still be fine. But some people find that learning about the basic building blocks of a sentence – sometimes called “the parts of speech” – helps them to become better writers. We'll talk briefly about three parts of speech: nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

A noun is a word that names a person, place, or thing. This could be a person's name, like Jaime Black. It could be a title, like artist. It could be an object, like a dress, or it could be a thing you can't hold in your hand but that is still real, like passion, violence, or sexuality.

A verb is the “action” word of the sentence. It tells what the main person or thing (noun) in the sentence is being or doing. Here are a couple of examples from the story you just read:

Jaime Black collected dress donations from the community.

She chose red because it has so many meanings.

Jaime is a Métis woman from Winnipeg.

Finally, an adjective is a word that tells us something about a noun. Adjectives include colours, shapes, and words that describe how big something is, how light or dark it is, what it smells like, and more. Words that describe what kind of a person someone is are also adjectives. Examples from the story include a red dress, a stunned silence, and a special significance.

Parts of speech are not just about what a word is, but also how that word is used. For example, the very same word can be both a noun and a verb.

For example, let's look at the word jail. If we talk about jailing a person, then jail is acting as a verb, because it is an action. If we talk about being in a jail, then jail is acting as a noun, because it is a thing.

Exercise #12

Now that you've learned about the parts of speech, go back and read through the story about the REDress Project again. In the spaces below, write down five nouns, five verbs, and five adjectives from the story.

Nouns:

Verbs:

Adjectives:

In the story, Jaime Black states that she believes Canada has not left its dark past of colonialism and poor treatment of Indigenous people behind. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

When talking about violence, Jaime says that the first step in committing a violent act is for the person doing the violence to see their victim as less than human. What do you think about this statement? If you agree, can you think of any examples? If you disagree, can you explain why?
