

# Twenty Years after the Montreal Massacre

By **Nathalie Provost (B.Eng., M.Sc.A.)**, **Heidi Rathjen (B.Eng., Dr.h.c., LLD, M.S.C.)** and **Alain Perreault (B.Eng. MBA)**

*All three authors graduated from l'École Polytechnique in 1990. On December 6<sup>th</sup> 1989, **Nathalie Provost** was injured and from her hospital bed encouraged girls to become engineers. **Alain Perreault** was president of the Polytechnique Student Association and later presented the student's 560 000-signature gun control petition to Justice Minister Kim Campbell. **Heidi Rathjen** devoted the next six years of her life to fighting for gun control until the law's adoption in December of 1995.*

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It is nearly twenty years to the day that a man with a legally acquired rifle entered our school and shot 23 people, including me, Nathalie Provost. Several of our close friends were among the 14 young women who died on December 6<sup>th</sup> 1989 at l'École Polytechnique. Our crime? We were women and we wanted to become engineers. And an angry man was able to easily get access to a lethal weapon.

Twenty years after that fateful day we would like to reflect, as survivors and former students, on how far we have come and how far we have yet to go. The murders sparked renewed interest and commitment to promote women in engineering and technology, to end violence against women and to strengthen Canada's gun laws. In each case, we have made progress but there is much left to do.

First, following the Montreal massacre the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers issued its groundbreaking report "More than Just Numbers" which documented the barriers that young women face when entering the engineering profession, including the chilly climate in many engineering faculties. This sparked a number of initiatives aimed at encouraging women in engineering and through the 1990's the numbers steadily climbed. However since 2001, the trend has reversed and the percentage of women enrolling in these programs has declined. And while considerable progress has been made with many women breaking through the glass ceiling and many engineering associations addressing harassment and discrimination, recent research suggests that women in technology continue to face barriers and in some companies the chilly climate persists. These barriers need to be addressed head on if we want young women to have equal opportunities while pursuing this great profession.

Second, the tragedy focused national attention on the problems of violence against women and the range of crimes where women are victimized because they are women. December 6<sup>th</sup> is a national day of mourning for women killed by gender violence. While progress has been made through greater awareness and more support for victims, the problem persists. Every year in Canada, more than 75 women are killed by their intimate partner, the very person they should be able to trust and depend on. A renewed commitment to ending violence against women remains as important today as it was twenty years ago.

Finally, the terrible events of December 6<sup>th</sup> awakened Canadians to the gaps in our gun laws. The students of Polytechnique, the families of the victims, police, health care professionals, labour organizations, teachers and others banded together in the Coalition for Gun Control, and together fought for a ban on assault weapons, for possession permits for all gun owners and for the registration of all firearms. Suzanne Laplante Edward, whose daughter Anne-Marie died that day, called the 1995 legislation, "A monument to the memory of the victims of the Polytechnique tragedy". The legislation has proven its effectiveness: It is used thousands of times every day by police across the country, firearm deaths have declined substantially, and murders of women with guns have plummeted.

However just weeks before the twentieth anniversary of the Montreal massacre, the Conservative government, with the help of a number of Liberals and NDP Members of Parliament, voted in favour of legislation to eliminate the registration of rifles and shotguns — including the Ruger Mini 14, the gun used on that terrible day in 1989. How could this happen? Because the gun lobby is highly motivated and active in every electoral riding while the supporters of gun control do little or nothing.

But it is not too late. The final vote will not take place until early in the New Year. We are therefore urging citizens from across the country to contact their Member of Parliament and demand they put public safety before the narrow interests of the gun lobby.

Help us ensure that our classmates did not die in vain.