

**Speaker #2 – Michelle Schryer**  
**Community Response & Advocacy from the Ground Up: Experiences of Women Organizing after the Workplace Deaths of Theresa Vince and Lori Dupont**

Just one comment further to the point that Joy raised in relation to Sears' workplace harassment policy and the responsibility that they seemed to feel was Theresa's given that she was after-all, a manager in human resources... As Joy mentioned, Sears had a very good sexual harassment policy in place at the time that Theresa was killed and I just need to say that it is entirely possible, if not probable, that Theresa knew that policy perfectly well. If she did, then it is safe to assume that Theresa knew her that her allegations would be taken seriously and that they would be investigated! The policy said so! The policy clearly stated that reports of sexual harassment would be investigated and so it follows that Theresa reported the ongoing sexual harassment against her believing that her complaint would be investigated. It wasn't!

It is my firm belief that the truth and reality about Theresa's experience of sexual harassment on the job, the circumstances under which it was allowed to continue and escalate, and the desperate measures that Theresa took in a valiant attempt to protect and remove herself from the harassment, and from the harasser himself, would not have been told had it not been for *Community Response and Advocacy from the Ground Up* and the partnership that formed between community advocates and Theresa's family.

It is true that we all pressed together for a public inquest into Theresa's workplace murder but it was during the inquest process itself that the real work, and the very real challenges to uncover the truth began. I say this because as the first inquest unfolded (You may or may not know that there were actually two inquests and one judicial review in this matter!)... As the first inquest unfolded it became abundantly clear that many of the workplace aspects of Theresa's experience, her murder and aftermath that were so important to her family and to the Coalition that represented the public interest, were not so important to other parties, including apparently, the province. Through determination, tenacity and absolute commitment, with our very skilled and forthright Counsel Geri Sanson, and in partnership with the Vince family (Leslie Reaume acting as their Counsel), Theresa's horrific experience of gendered workplace harassment was uncovered. And it was revealed that her workplace murder was the final and direct result of the sexual harassment she had endured at the hands of her direct supervisor.

Joy has eloquently shared the collective *response and advocacy* that occurred in Chatham-Kent following Theresa's murder and there is no need for me to reiterate what has already been said. Instead I will move ahead to the month of November 2005 one week after Nurse Lori Dupont was killed on the job by a physician with whom she worked and with whom she had previously ended an intimate relationship. I was listening to CBC Radio 1 out of Windsor when I heard an interview with Dr. Thomas Wilson who was representing the Coroner's office. Dr. Wilson indicated that the Domestic Violence Death Review Committee would be charged with the examination / investigation of Lori's murder. Now I want to be clear that I certainly respect the work of the DVDRC and I acknowledge the Committee's expertise in the area of "Domestic Violence" but when I heard that they would be entrusted with this case I became very concerned. Yes the DVDRC could effectively examine and make recommendations related to the "domestic violence" aspects of Lori's murder, but I didn't feel the same confidence in their expertise and ability to critically examine all of the workplace aspects of Lori's experience and her murder. Over time I would come to learn that a number of DVDRC members agreed.

With the full support of Lori's family and as part of a larger Coalition Against Gendered Workplace Harassment & Violence, a petition calling for a public inquest into Lori's murder was officially launched on December 6, 2005 – Canada's *National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women*. The petition drive was purposefully planned to end on Valentine's Day February 14, 2006.

Less than nine years earlier in Chatham-Kent we had lobbied for an inquest into the workplace murder of Theresa Vince, and now here we were again, fighting for Lori Dupont to somehow have a voice and to somehow find much needed answers. Truth be known past experience had shaken my faith in the inquest process and for my part, I moved forward with great trepidation, but there was no other process to turn to.

Jim Vince and I had attended Lori's funeral together. At the cemetery I don't think either of us uttered a word but somehow, as we stood in silent witness, desperately wanting Lori's family to feel our support, we both knew that Theresa and Lori would be forever connected in our hearts.

More than 10,000 signatures calling for an inquest into Lori's murder were collected in fairly short order. Chatham-Kent-Essex M.P.P. Pat Hoy presented the petitions to the Ontario Legislature and the rest as we know, is herstory. Pat Noonan will actually talk about the inquest a bit more so I will leave that for her.

As for *community response and advocacy* I think it is important to mention the significant role that media can play in this regard. Media can help or hinder. They can sensationalize or exercise accuracy in reporting. Needless to say, the media absolutely needs to maintain neutrality or they would lose credibility but through their editorial messaging they can either help to advance investigation and truth-telling or not. For example, when Theresa Vince was killed in Chatham-Kent the media did nothing to help encourage a public inquest but their reporting of the inquest proceedings was very good. It may not always have been favourable for one side or another but it was, for the most part, an accurate account of the facts that were presented. Once the inquest was finally over and there could be no more denying what had happened to Theresa, some media did in fact state editorial opinions that workplace harassment was a matter of Occupational Health and Safety and should be addressed accordingly in legislation.

When Lori was killed the Windsor Star came out of the starting gate in support of a public inquiry and I think that was helpful on a number of levels. It kept the issue in the public eye and on the public mind. It sent a clear message to anyone listening, including decision-makers, that media was paying serious attention to this matter. It also offered some ray of hope to Lori's family and others that maybe, just maybe answers to so very many troubling questions would be found. And reporting of the inquest on a day-to-day basis was also very good... again, not always favourable to one side or another, but accurate.

At the inquest into Theresa's murder and at the inquest into Lori's murder one of the really important things we did in terms of *community response and advocacy* was make ourselves available to the media. That was so important. It may have been a matter of providing some analysis of testimony, or articulating an opposing position or voicing objection to a ruling made. Whatever the reason, it was up to the media to provide objectivity and balance. It was up to us to give voice to Theresa's experience, and to Lori's, and make important connections in order to advance womyn's workplace protection and safety.

Of course *community response and advocacy* doesn't begin or end with inquests after a woman is killed. The work to advance women's workplace safety and protection from gendered violence and harassment is ongoing. Education and awareness campaigns are ongoing. Annual remembrances and campaigns are held. Partnerships are made. Collaborative initiatives are taken. Response is given to calls or public consultation, etc. All of these things help to keep this issue in the public eye and on the political agenda and I think that Joy Hamilton will actually talk more about this.

It should be noted that we have seen some forward movement. Major reform in Human Rights has occurred and hopefully there will be an improved response in that system. Bill 168, an amendment to the Occupational Health and Safety Act has been introduced by a sitting Minister in the Ontario Legislature. There is a very long way still to go but I do firmly believe that without *community response and advocacy from the ground-up* there would be little, if any positive action taken to improve women's workplace protection and safety.