

A written reflection from staff member Kim Thompson

My name is Kim Thompson. I am a program counsellor in the School of Engineering, and I am a professional engineer. When I was asked to reflect on the massacre of 14 women on December 6, 1989 I was, at once, honoured and terrified. How do I say something meaningful without falling apart?

The truth is, I have no actual memory of December 6, 1989, and that is a hard thing to admit. Many people can recount exactly where they were standing and what they were doing when they heard the news on that day. I can't take part in that conversation, but I can reflect.

December 6, 1989 was a Wednesday and I had just turned 23 about a week beforehand. I was completing my final co-op work term at the Bedford Institute of Oceanography in Nova Scotia. I was in my final year of a three-year Engineering Technology Program at the University College of Cape Breton. I was living in a shared apartment in Halifax. We didn't have a television and the internet wasn't a "thing" yet. I was oblivious to anything in the news.

It was my last week of work and I was busy packing up my stuff to move back to Cape Breton. I was also busy getting ready for a three-day road trip with my friend, Danette, before going home. Danette and I had concert tickets to see the Rolling Stones at Olympic Stadium in Montreal.

The details of this trip are irrelevant – we had a lot of fun. I can piece together a timeline because I still have the ticket stub. We left Halifax on an organized bus trip on December 13th, attended the concert on the 14th, arrived back in Halifax late in the evening on the 15th, jumped in my car on the 16th and drove home to Cape Breton. On the morning of Dec 17th, Danette called me, woke me from sleep and said, "did you hear the news"? I remember that moment exactly. Eleven self-absorbed days had passed before it was even on my radar. Female engineering students were gunned down because they were female.

Within days of this, I received my offer of admission to the Environmental Engineering Program at the University of Guelph for the following September. I was excited. I had one academic semester to finish before graduating and moving on to my next endeavour – that sounds familiar.

And then came the questions... Kim, are you still going? Are you worried? Are you afraid?

Looking back, I understand that my response at the time was to bury my feelings about the deliberate, premeditated murder of 14 women (12 of them engineering students), and I didn't reflect at all. Of course, I was affected, but I didn't have the capacity to process what it meant. What it really represented. Nor did I try. My response was to push back and move forward. Why should I have to change my plans? Why shouldn't I be an engineer? If I give up then, he won, right? What I needed at the time was to block it out, to not allow it to change me. That was 31 years ago, and I have changed.

As I was writing this, I noticed my upper abdominal muscles were in a state of near constant contraction. And every time I read it aloud resulted in an uncontrollable flow of tears and an inability to continue speaking. This is the reason you are reading it instead of watching a video. I just couldn't do it. How can it be that I feel such raw emotion today, so much more than I did when it happened? They say time heals but I find myself wondering how much separation from pain and anger is necessary to begin to effectively tackle the monumental task called change.

What does it mean to reflect on the massacre of 14 women? Surely it doesn't mean to try to make sense of it. But we can investigate the why and what to do about it. Many news articles in the weeks, months and even years that followed describe the shocking, tragic actions of a single deranged individual. These accounts reveal just how unprepared collective society was to fully understand this event as a, sadly, predictable outcome of deep-rooted, systemic and centuries-old misogyny. What is it, exactly, that needs to change? How can we – how can “I” affect change? What have I done in the past 31 years?

Change of this magnitude requires a hard look at ourselves, of our personal mindsets and behaviours, and that does not come quickly nor easily. The idea that the norms and values we learned as children by observing the behaviours of our elders, and carried forward into our adult lives, might be a contributing factor is not comfortable territory. It becomes personal, maybe even complicit. I can certainly remember as a child growing up being witness to behaviours and language that didn't seem quite right but were clearly acceptable to the adults in the room. When a child in the room goes quiet and is watching, it's the perfect time to reflect and adjust behaviour, because it's the next generation that will either prolong the mindsets that lead to inequity and injustice or correct it. We can respond individually by setting the right example, and collectively, by supporting each other to the same.

The Collin's English Dictionary describes a generation as “the period of time, usually considered to be about thirty years, that it takes for children to grow up and become adults and have children of their own.” Thirty-one years, a generation, has passed since December 6, 1989. Women are still under-represented; the wage gap still exists and violence against women continues. But change is evident. I see it all around me. The babies born in the intervening years are teaching us a lot. Behaviours can change mindset.

The systemic, under-the-radar, behaviours that have served to suppress, control and silence women, whether it be in the boardroom or the bedroom, are being exposed. With much courage, personal stories are being told, they are being heard – and they are believed, because we all know deep, down they are true. Calls to action are gaining momentum and excuses are no longer being tolerated.

When I started to write this reflection, I wanted to be careful not to make it about me. But it is about me, as much as it is about you. We all have a place in the conversation. Each time we remember and reflect upon the 14 women who lost their lives on December 6, 1989, whether it be individually or collectively, we learn a little more about how to respond. We owe it to them. We owe to the young girls and boys who follow us. Our individual behaviours set the stage for the next generation and we all have more work to do.

Thirty-one years from now I'll be 85 years old – a long way from 23. Between now and then I will continue to check and correct my behaviour and try to set the right example for the babies being born today.

About a year ago, I sat in a meeting of about five or six people, where actionable decisions regarding University business were made. Every person in the room was a woman and most held leadership positions. That moment wasn't lost on me.

Thank you for your time.

Kim