

Martha's Monthly

October 2008

A Mother's Loss is our Responsibility



"I did everything I could to protect my son and he is dead. I believe the system is the reason my son is dead. It failed me completely." Meara McIntosh, mother of three-year old Colton who was killed by his father September 28, 2008 in Drumheller, AB. The killer also took his own life. (Reported in a [CBC story](#)).

Martha did not know little Colton, or his parents, but nonetheless she has spent the last week mourning the little 3 year-old boy. His parents were separated for most of his life and, according to court records, the child custody arrangements were so contested the parents were ordered by a court to exchange Colton in the parking lot of the Drumheller RCMP detachment. On Sept. 19, 2007 Meara McIntosh filed an affidavit claiming that Colton's father abused alcohol and illegal drugs and was stalking her. She had obtained a restraining order for some time but eventually it expired. Two days before Colton's body was discovered in his father's home, his mom was ordered to hand over Colton to his father for an unsupervised visit. Meara McIntosh would not see her son alive again. The RCMP has stated that while they had extensive involvement with the couple, they did not know of any threats.

Sadly, this family's tragedy is too familiar in Alberta. In fact, Alberta is "**the most dangerous province in which to be a woman**. We lead the provinces in the number of women who report being stalked; who report being assaulted by their partners, and have **one of the highest rates of murder suicide**. We also have the highest rate of homicides related to domestic violence." This statement, made by Jan Reimer, Provincial Coordinator for the Alberta Association of Women's Shelters, was recorded at a roundtable on preventing domestic violence (see: [YWCA website](#)). Alberta is a dangerous place for some children too.

In 2005, another three-year old boy in Alberta named Alex was killed at the hands of his father when the father was returning the child to his mother after a weekend visit. In that case, the killer also shot Alex's mother Blagica and himself. After that tragedy a coroner's inquest made 15 recommendations to avoid another similar tragedy. Sadly, in the same year that little Alex and his mother were murdered, the RCMP in Alberta investigated 31 "domestic murders" and 18 non-domestic ones. According to Statistics Canada, children across Canada are more likely to be murdered by a member of their family than by a non-family member. Seven out of ten times that family member is the child's father (see: [Stats Can](#)).

Martha, as you know, is oh so sparing with her praise of the Alberta government but the Alberta government has done a few things right when it comes to taking a lead on the tragedy of domestic homicides.

The first thing the Alberta government did right was to create a team to make high-risk threat assessments.

Valerie Campbell was appointed the first Director of the Province of Alberta's Relationship Threat Assessment Unit for High Risk Domestic Violence and Stalking Cases in 2004. Her team trains police, lawyers, and social workers to recognize signs of potential violence and then her team makes threat assessments that lead to victim safety recommendations. "It is a matter of education (of the justice system)," she says, "historically women were not even protected by law." Her team, however, was not asked to provide an assessment of Colton's father by either the RCMP or the courts that kept coming into contact with the couple.

The second thing the Alberta Government did right was to fund five pilot sites for Safe Visitation so that non-custodial parents with a potential for violence can still visit their children but in a supervised and safe setting. Two years ago funding was provided for the three-year pilot project (to learn more see: [safe visitation info](#)). The five sites, located in Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge, Grande Prairie and Red Deer, have served many families with only \$1 Million in funding (see :[government news release](#)).

And this is where we come in, dear Marthas. The funding for the pilot projects needs to be secure and the projects need to expand beyond the five urban sites into smaller communities like Drumheller. The lives of Alex, his mother Blagica, and Colton cannot be restored but we must find ways to end the slaughter of women and children at the hands of their husbands and fathers. The safe visitation program needs our support and the government of Alberta needs to hear that the program is important and worthy of expansion. It is a pat on the back for the premier but a reminder that the Marthas won't let this program be forgotten and underfunded.

Please write a letter (a short version of one is below that you can use as a start but please add your thoughts and stories to it) and [e-mail it](#). Your letter will go to:

premier@gov.ab.ca, banff.cochrane@assembly.ab.ca , calgary.varsity@assembly.ab.ca,
edmonton.strathcona@assembly.ab.ca, marthasmonthly@yahoo.ca

October 8, 2008

Dear Premier Stelmach:

The tragedy of last month's murder-suicide in Drumheller has led me to write to you. It seems that had this family lived in Calgary or Lethbridge there may have been a different outcome because of your government's Safe Visitation program. I am very pleased that your government has seen fit to fund the five pilot sites for three years but I am worried that not all families have access to this critical resource.

I am asking that your government commit to full funding for the Safe Visitation pilot program and expand it across the province so that all children are safe. We need to ensure that families at risk, like the one in Drumheller, are provided with safe places to exchange children and safe places to visit children. Children must know that they can maintain relationships with their non-custodial parents but not be at risk.

Sincerely,

Your Full Name and Address