

Algonquin launches Canada's first victimology program

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EMC News - Algonquin College felt that National Victims of Crime Awareness Week would be a good time to announce their newest graduate certificate program, one that they hope will become commonplace in Canada.

Wednesday, Apr. 21 marked the launch of the college's Victimology program, the country's first college program to focus specifically on victims of crime and their needs, which aims to educate a new generation of citizens in how to address and understand the needs of those who have directly or indirectly been victims of crime.

The launch, emceed by CTV news anchor Kimothy Walker, who herself is a rape survivor, brought together staff and guest speakers whose lives were changed dramatically as a result of crimes and the lack of support and understanding they received in the aftermath.

In a videotaped greeting, Chris Bentley, Attorney General of Ontario, congratulated the school on their unique program.

"I'm excited at the fact that you are offering this first-in-Canada program," said Mr. Bentley. "I look forward to the results of the study (guests were handed a crime questionnaire) and working with graduates of this program."

Victimology program coordinator Ruth Campbell explained to the audience the many different feelings and resulting needs of those who have lost a loved one to violent crime as opposed to a disease like cancer.

"Often people can't finish mourning until the investigation is complete," said Ms. Campbell, who has worked with victims of crime for 20 years and felt there needed to be a program in place to train people to help victims and their families to deal with the aftermath of crime.

"Victims of crime expressed frustration (at the justice system), and there was an obvious need for specific training...I talked to the executive dean a year and a half ago and said we had to do something. She said 'let's do it'. We've now recognized that void and we're here to address it."

The one-year program will provide students with specialized skills in the provision of victim services. As part of their education, the students will gain an understanding of victims' rights, sudden and traumatic loss, victim populations, as well as knowledge of the history and theory of victimization. The program spans the range of violent acts, and doesn't discriminate. Crime against men, women, children, and ethnic minorities will all be included in the curriculum.

Following the completion of the program, graduates will work with government and community service agencies to help individuals, families and groups who have been victims of crime.

Given the nature of the new program, the launch featured a number of guest speakers who are involved in anti-violence groups and organizations.

Audette Shephard, who lost her son Justin to murder and subsequently co-founded United Mothers Opposing Violence Everywhere (UMOVE), described how her life was instantly shattered and irreversibly changed when she received the news of her son's murder.

"You can't imagine the devastation...that child is so much a part of you - when a child dies, a part of you dies, too. I was so alone, so devastated...But out of my soul comes much resolve. I wanted to make sure no other mother goes through this."

Ron Jette, co-chair of the Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Network, said he knew nothing but violence growing up in the foster homes of two pedophiles. He met more than his fair share of police officers and social workers, and walked away with the impression that they all could have used this program.

"These were well-meaning individuals...but they were working within the boundaries of their professional training," said Mr. Jette. "All of these people meant well, but they went into these situations blind - they couldn't realize or understand the impact of violence on a child. I believe this course can make a difference with everyone who works in the system. Congratulations Algonquin College - I have great hopes that this is just the beginning and we'll see programs like this roll out across the country."

Steve Sullivan, National Victims of Crime Ombudsman, mentioned the complex needs that victims have that aren't solved by slogans, and aren't addressed properly by those in the system.

"The justice system is a nasty place for victims of crime," said Mr. Sullivan. "You need to ensure that they're not traumatized even more in the aftermath of a crime...This program will help ensure victims of crime will be interacting with people who can meet their needs."

"These people deserve the best we can offer, and this program is a giant step forward to making that happen."

The Victimology program will be up and running come fall, 2010.