

Kecia Larkin

I'd like to tell you a little bit about a friend of mine. In 1989, I was 18 years old and not very safe. I was living in the downtown east side of Vancouver and had been there for a number of years. I was very vulnerable; I was not in a good place mentally, physically, or emotionally. I had been involved in the sex trade from the age of 17 to about the age of 19—just around the time that I aged out of ministry. During that time, I knew a lot of young women who were in care and where either being lodged in single room occupancy hotels—basically shooting galleries, because they were, I guess they called them hard to house girls, and I was considered at risk, and what that meant was that I would leave my foster home or group home often because, there wasn't anything there to keep me interested or feeling engaged as a young aboriginal woman. And I was being placed in all these non-aboriginal places that I just didn't feel like I fit. And I had already, early on, started experimenting and hanging out in the east side. At the time, I had met a number of young women and men who were in care like myself. I became I guess street friends, you know, you have different pockets of people who do different things and I was sort of on the fringes, I wasn't heavily involved in doing dope or anything, but I was definitely doing drugs. Anyways, my friend Sarah and I were connected through, I'll just say drug connections, and I started hanging out with her and her partner. Her partner was a very abusive male; not very stable, and kind of scary actually. I remember on many occasions, Sarah and I being afraid, and I remember going to the hospital with her, when she was sick and having a hard time. Anyways, Sarah was, at one point, settled down and, by this time I had moved on and become involved in going to school and trying to better myself and definitely involved in community work. By this time, I was in my early 20's and so Sarah would have been in her early 20's as well, she definitely would have been aged out of the system like I was. And I remember the first time that I heard the recording on the television and the voice that was talking to the police, taunting them, saying that they made her squeal like a pig. At this point, there had been a call out from Sarah's friend who wasn't involved in the downtown east side or that lifestyle but was a big support for her, and he was the one who was calling out for her to be found. And it ended up being Sarah Devries. But Sarah Jean Devries was her name, and she was my friend. And I remember her as a beautiful vibrant young woman who was very strong, just a vibrant soul for such a young person, and she was very street wise. And she had already been very traumatized from her experiences, and she really helped me in many ways—because I was newer to the streets so I was sort of taken under her wing in a way.

The first response that I think is one of the best responses, is having a large family system and community that you can reach out to, and definitely looking into the processes that are laid out, not just the by police but, other agencies when it comes to somebody that goes missing. Generally, people start with calling hospitals, calling emergency rooms. And generally, if they call the police often, I've heard people have been told: 'oh you need to wait 48 hours.' Depending on the person that's missing, you are going to get a different response, so approaching a group of people to

support you, and to make these important phone calls, to be able to gather together if you need, to make flyers that need to go out in the community. I know a lot of people are starting to use social media as a way to reach out and some times in the first few hours.

I really encourage people to remain calm, and pool as much information as you can about that person. If you're worried about where they might be or, if they might be with somebody, you know, start writing down as much information as you can, whether you're going to go to the police and they come to you, you're going to have to provide very personal information about that person, they might ask you questions about that person's lifestyle so, it's important to be very honest about how that person is thinking and feeling and possibly what that person might be doing. They might be depressed and need a few days away. They might be newly involved in the sex trade and perhaps be the victim of a pimp, so there's a lot of different scenarios that you go through and you think about when you're first dealing with a person that's missing in those first few hours or perhaps days after you realize that maybe they haven't shown up to their regular routine. And those are some of the things that I've learned from being around the communities who have dealt with other members who have gone missing, or maybe have been harmed, or maybe at risk, or might be dealing with a mental breakdown—schizophrenia is one that often might happen and I've seen people that have been lost in the community. So, a family member might go to the police, and work with the police who have information within the community agency; so they might be working with one of the special court systems that deal with people who have mental health [issues] and need to be taking medications. So, it's really important to find all the resources that are available. In Victoria, there are different organizations that are available and I know that there is a national missing and murdered Indigenous women website and a way to get information out there.

When I think about families who are dealing with the system while they have a missing loved one, a sister, or aunty, or grandmother, I know that the wait is probably the most difficult part because, most of the time, people know that person's routine and are just kind of sitting there in limbo almost in a state of shock, wondering whether this person is going to come home. I really think that it is important for families to find some type of support system—either through community, definitely being able to gather together is something that makes a huge difference, I know in families particularly like mine, when we have a loss or something that's touched our family, like a suicide, we'll come together as a family just so that we can be together. And these are the strengths that we have as aboriginal people, and we have the answers in our communities. We have the ability to easily come together and you know, when times are tough, that's when we ask and we reach out to our people who often say, "I'm there for you" and that's a time when it's really important to really reach out to call on those people to come and just sit with you and be with you and if not, then definitely they might know people who are willing to come and assist in any way they can whether that's handing out fliers, whether that's a business that they might know, so I think that networking,

finding support in the community, and definitely having other people who are willing to step forward as a leader and speak to this issue in the community is very important. And it's not about taking away from what the family is experiencing, I think there are very good ways to bring out the issue of a loved one who is missing or has been found in a way that will touch another family and help them. So I really encourage people just to speak out as best they can, and knowing that you're going to help another person that is in your position, and that is sharing your experience.

I know that right now my heart is filled with a lot of gratitude to be able to stand here and just share a few moments with you. What I do know is that my heart does feel for all of our sisters, and our aunties, our grandmother and our moms who have not been able to make it this far in life with us. I often ask that in my own prayers, for all of the women who are missing that they be found, I try and share as much information when I see somebody who is missing on social media, and I think that's really important to know that we might not be able to hug you but just know that when there is a posting that we are out there sharing it, the community is out there and we do care, we do love you and our prayers are being lifted up with you. And I'd just like to say that when the time comes, I know that you'll get through this and just be strong. Gaila-kessla.