

Shining a light on the suicide crisis in Quebec's Inuit and aboriginal communities



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Beatrice Deer, an Inuit singer, at her office in Montreal, May 26, 2016. Deer will be singing at a fundraiser "Eat & Do Good against Indigenous Suicide" next week. *CHRISTINNE MUSCHI / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

When Beatrice Deer starts to talk about suicide, her voice carries a weight that hadn't been there just moments earlier.

Deer's sister Janice killed herself 27 years ago and she struggled to cope with that loss for years.

"There's nothing more permanent than death," says Deer, after a long pause. "You just feel helpless and don't know what to do."

Because she knows what it is to live with that pain, it's all the more difficult for Deer to hear the staggering news from back home. There have been 10 suicides in Quebec's remote Nunavik region in less than five months.

Deer, 33, grew up in the Inuit village of Quaqaq and says that after Janice died, she lost countless other loved ones to suicide.

The latest news left her speechless and it broke her heart to think of what the victim's family is going through but, Deer says, what is perhaps most tragic about these deaths is that they are preventable.

To that end, Deer was recently approached by a like-minded Montrealer and asked to help with the suicide crisis in Quebec's Inuit and aboriginal communities. Deer, an award-winning songwriter, will perform at a [fundraiser Monday \(https://www.eventbrite.ca/e/wedosomething-maimay-eatdo-good-to-fight-indigenous-suicide-tickets-25366105705\)](https://www.eventbrite.ca/e/wedosomething-maimay-eatdo-good-to-fight-indigenous-suicide-tickets-25366105705) that aims to provide vulnerable youth with much-needed mental health resources.

The owners of Lawrence, a hip Mile-End eatery, agreed to host the dinner, donating the use of their restaurant and their employees' time to the cause.

The event is the brainchild of Montrealer Sophie Tarnowska, whose [WeDoSomething \(https://www.facebook.com/wedosomethingMontreal/\)](https://www.facebook.com/wedosomethingMontreal/) charity has also raised money for the Native Women's Shelter and Syrian refugees.

Tarnowska created the charity last year by hosting a dinner at a friend's apartment, selling tickets to the night out and raising \$4,000 for Doctors Without Borders. Soon she began enlisting the help of restaurants, grocery stores and creating more elaborate festivities aimed at making the philanthropy fun and accessible to middle and working-class people.

Around Christmas, Tarnowska and her friends rented a commercial kitchen at a grocery store and baked nearly 300 desserts for Syrian refugees living at the YMCA.

For her latest event, Tarnowska partnered with Dialogue for Life, a non-profit organization that stages an annual suicide prevention conference, which combines the tenets of frontline social work with traditional aboriginal healing methods. The money raised next Monday will go toward flying youth from northern communities and housing them while they attend the Montreal conference next November. Some 700 people from First Nations across the province attend the conference every year.

“It just got to the point where I saw one too many headlines about suicide in an aboriginal community,” said Tarnowska, who also works as a freelance journalist and writer. “In recent months, the issue bubbled to the surface in a way that’s unavoidable, it’s inescapable. It’s too much.”

News of the deaths in Quebec’s north comes just one month after 11 children attempted suicide in the same day on the Attawapiskat Cree territory in Ontario. That followed a rash of suicides in Cross Lake, Manitoba last winter—one that saw four indigenous teenagers die in less than three months.

Suicide rates among aboriginal youth are between five and six times higher than the national average, according to Health Canada. As alarming as those statistics are, several studies suggest that they are on the rise.

Deer’s own experience, however, speaks to the possibility of a better path forward.

“We have all these reasons to be broken,” said Deer, who performs pop songs but also traditional Inuit throat singing. “I had a very difficult life and I decided that I no longer want to live a life in hardship. So I did something about it.”

Deer quit drinking five years ago, she started exercising, eating well and sought counselling for depression.



(<http://wpmedia.montrealgazette.com/2016/05/montreal-que-may-26-2016-beatrice-deer-inuit-singer2.jpeg?quality=55&strip=all>).

Beatrice Deer, Inuit singer, poses at her office in Montreal, May 26, 2016. The tattoos on her legs are from ink drawings her sister Janice drew prior to her suicide in 1989.

“Sometimes, the thing with healing, it doesn’t have to be painful,” she said. “I can think about (my sister) and I’m not in pain. I think, ‘I wonder how she would be or what she would do,’ and things like that. That’s the thing with healing and therapy is you learn to accept things and life doesn’t have to just be pain.”

But there was a sort of trade off. She says that none of the resources she needed were available in Quaqtq—a fly-in community at the northwestern tip of Ungava Bay.

“Those resources, the help that I needed and that so many people need, we just don’t have it up north,” said Deer, who lives in Montreal with her two children. “That’s not right.”

For residents in Inuit and other isolated communities, the only way to Montreal is a roundtrip flight that costs upwards of \$2,000 a ticket. The advantage of attending the November conference is that when people leave

the event, they take suicide prevention skills home with them, according to Thelma Nelson, the director of Dialogue for Life.

“Everyone that comes to the conference, it’s healing, they don’t feel so alone, they know that other people are going through the same thing and they know that there’s help out there,” Nelson said. “They learn something and they get inspired and they go home and help others.”

The Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services is meeting this week to discuss the problem of suicide in the region. The regional board declined to answer the Montreal Gazette’s questions about access to mental health resources but said that a public announcement on the matter is coming soon.

Most studies suggest the suicide crises stem, in part, from the legacy of Indian Residential Schools. Poverty, overcrowded housing conditions and substance abuse also play a factor in the deaths.

Frontline mental health experts in Nunavik and other remote aboriginal communities told the Montreal Gazette this week they are overwhelmed and seem to constantly be in crisis mode. Workers, they say, burn out, making it even more difficult to deliver therapy and other mental health services, which they say are sorely lacking.

For Tarnowska, waiting for a government response is simply not an option.

“Sure, we need systemic change but I don’t want to wait or think that this is someone else’s responsibility,” she said. “Maybe this is just one good thing but it’s better than a passive thing. I think we can get together, have fun, learn something and raise money for a good cause.”

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