



Vancouver Indigenous activist Lorelei Williams is no longer



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Lorelei Williams never set out to be an advocate, a dancer or to get involved in politics.

She studied tourism management and spent six months in Japan in 2001 doing an internship at a high-end hotel. Ironically, in Japan the young Indigenous Canadian wasn't regarded as a visible/invisible minority.

"Guests actually thought that I was Japanese," says Williams, who learned the language well enough that occasionally, she still dreams in Japanese.

Yet, despite what Williams might have hoped for and dreamed of when she was in her 20s, she wasn't in Toronto Wednesday evening being feted by the tourism industry.

Instead, Lorelei Williams was celebrated by Samara Canada as the Everyday Political Citizen of the Year in the over-30 category, chosen by a jury that included Margaret Atwood, Rick Mercer and Preston Manning.

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Lorelei Williams who is receiving an award as an unsung hero for her political action on Wednesday in Toronto, in Vancouver, BC., December 4, 2017. N I C K P P N R G O C A Y I

Williams's activism began by accident six years ago at a rally in downtown Vancouver to raise awareness about the more than 1,000 Indigenous women murdered or missing in the past 40 years.

Her T-shirt was imprinted with the images of two of those women. She stood out in the crowd and journalists asked about the women on the T-shirt.

One was Belinda Williams, her aunt who went missing 39 years ago — two years before Lorelei was born. Police refused to open a missing person's file until 2004 and only after serial killer Robert Pickton had been arrested.

The other woman was her cousin, Tanya Holyk, who was 21 when she went missing in 1996. Her DNA was found on the Pickton farm six years later.

Williams (who bears an uncanny resemblance to her aunt) made the news that night, articulating her family's suffering and that of others.

After the rally, former Province reporter Suzanne Fournier asked whether Williams and her family were involved with the provincial Missing Women Commission of Inquiry that former

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attorney general Wally Oppal was conducting in the building that towered over the rally's site.

Williams didn't even know there was an inquiry. But within a few weeks, she told her family's story to the commission and has been telling it ever since.

"I don't even have any words to explain how I really feel," she said in an interview. "It's an honour to be getting this award ... But at the same time, the reason," she pauses to collect herself.

"It actually just makes me want to cry because there is so much suffering. You know, I shouldn't have to be fighting for this ... I shouldn't have to do this. It's actually pretty hard work, telling my family story over and over, talking about our history and my history."

It's all the more emotional because Williams received the award on what would have been the eve of her cousin's 42nd birthday.

"The weird thing is that I've been doing this work for my aunt, cousin, daughter and myself and Indigenous women and girls and to get it the day before Tanya's birthday is really, really ...," her voice trailed off as her tears welled.

"It's OK, you know, it makes me feel like she is here with me. She's fighting this battle with me."

It's also weird, she says, that two years ago — on Dec. 8 — the National Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women was announced and, a decade ago on Dec. 9, Robert Pickton was found guilty of killing six women.

"So, here we are 10 years later. I want to be optimistic. But it's hard when only a few weeks after the missing and murdered inquiry was in Smithers, a lady (Frances Brown) went missing and still hasn't been found."



FILE PHOTO – Lorelei Williams of Butterflies in Spirit dance group in Vancouver, B.C., May 17, 2017.

A R L E N P / N R G E D E K O P

Williams grew up in Vancouver. Lorelei's mother thought that away from the Mission reserve they might escape the legacies of abuse and trauma from the time she and others spent at residential school.

"Mom never spoke of the abuse and what happened to her. But we couldn't turn the lights off when she was sleeping. If we did, she would wake up screaming ... After 'lights out' in residential school was when bad things happened."

They lived on social assistance. Her mother was an alcoholic and often Lorelei, her two brothers and sister woke up to find people passed out and beer cans all over the place.

As the oldest, Lorelei became the de facto parent. It may help explain her fierce resilience.

An elder recently warned Williams that she's burning out. In addition to work with the Butterflies in Spirit dance group, Williams has a full-time job as women's coordinator at the Vancouver Aboriginal Community Policing Centre, takes a course in Aboriginal justice at the Native Education College, volunteers for the Missing and Murdered Women's Coalition and is raising two children on her own.

She's also trying to take care of herself. A recent trip to New York gave her time away from everything — "time to be myself and do normal things."

She gave herself several hours last week to try on everything from gowns to poufy, princess dresses in her search for something to wear to the Toronto event.

In the end? "I bought the dress that I've been wanting forever ... I also found my wedding dress."

Is she getting married soon? "No," she laughs. "I need to find a boyfriend first!"

Yet, asked about hopes and dreams for the future, Williams says she has none for herself. Instead she talks about her dream of a safer world, especially for her 12-year-old daughter and her hope that her nine-year-old son will be respectful to women and treat them well.

It is why Williams works so hard. But a vibrant young woman like Williams shouldn't have to leave home to find space to be normal. And surely it can't be right that hopes and dreams can only belong to the next generation of Indigenous people.

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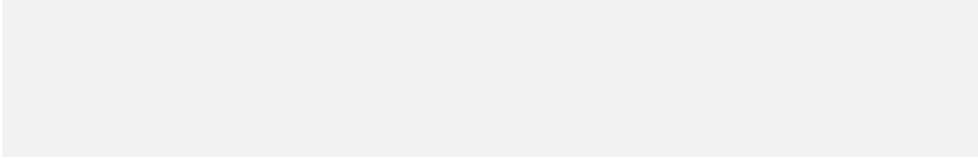
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