Paulene Ballantyne

Nisiiminan Safe Rides, OCN Bear Clan and Suicide Prevention

Paulene Ballantyne is a local woman who grew up in Umpherville Settlement and is a member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation. She went to school and graduated from MBCI in The Pas and received her Bachelor of Arts Degree in Aboriginal and Northern Studies in June 2020 from the University College of the North. Paulene is a single mother and stepmother and just recently became a grandmother. She is one of many bringing awareness and safe programs to the community. She is playing an essential role focusing on safety for women, children, and families.

 A few years before the launch of Nisiiminan Safe Rides, Paulene was behind the red ribbon campaign on the Bignell Bridge. The red ribbon is a symbol of awareness and serves as a reminder that we are all empowered to shape our community through positivity, bravery, and strength. Red is the official color of the MMIW campaign. It is hoped that by using red we can call back the missing spirits of women and children and lay them to rest. Paulene’s intent is to bring light and raise awareness and support toward missing and murdered indigenous women/men. Paulene invited her friends (Janet Head, Jennifer Flett and Rhonda Head) to listen to her red ribbon idea. Together they decide to tie hundreds of red ribbons on the Bignell Bridge in recognition of the lost lives of missing and murdered indigenous women and men. On one of the snowiest evenings in December 2015, these four women tie many beautiful red ribbons onto the rails of the bridge. “Funny thing about that night” she states, “it was warm…and lots of vehicles were honking in support. We were trying to be anonymous!” she laughs. In the morning both the communities of OCN and the Town of The Pas crossing the bridge witnessed a sea of red ribbons blowing in the wind. The campaign went viral due to Rhonda Head’s international musician status reaching as far away as Australia and since globally. The red ribbons today are a part of the continuing awareness towards missing and murdered women and men in our community.

Kendara Ballantyne was one of these missing young women. In the summer of 2019, at the request of the family of the missing youth, Paulene along with the experienced team of the OCN Bear Clan Patrol come together to search for the missing 18-year-old. After an extensive foot search, the members of OCN Bear Clan Patrol find the remains of this young woman. From this discovery, other young women living here also express concerns for their own safety. Paulene and other UCN student peers talk about the possibility of offering a free ride service to women on the weekends. Out of these conversations the Safe Rides program becomes visible in our community.

Paulene is the Coordinator of Nisiiminan Safe Rides which is a not for profit grassroots initiative. The Nisiiminan Safe Rides paints a picture to protect as many women as possible through a safe ride home. The safe rides are to honor the work that the OCN Bear Clan Patrol do by protecting women and in loving memory of Kendara Ballantyne. The family of Kendara had the honor of naming the new safe rides initiative Nisiiminan which means “My Little Sister”. The hope of Nisiiminan Safe Rides is to protect women from experiencing violence, sexual assault, and exploitation by providing a safe ride home after hours.

Paulene and the Safe Ride drivers and volunteers team up to patrol the streets and bars and encourage women to accept a ride home safely. The volunteers walk through local bars talking to women and hand out Safe Ride Cards to call. These volunteers are nonjudgmental with no charge for the service. The volunteers work together in pairs and are identified by wearing safety vests and are equipped with radios. “We keep records and record the women’s first name only, time of pick up and drop off along with the location. We also offer resources to agencies within OCN and The Pas. The group drives the streets of the Tri-Communities in search for women who are walking alone, stopping to offer a free safe ride home. We offer the service into the early morning hours, usually driving until 4:30 a.m. and sometimes later. At first, we had to explain to the women what we were doing but soon the women became familiar with the Safe Rides program. We built trust through many conversations plus handing out cards with a contact number for one of our awesome group of volunteer drivers.” Drivers ensure that each woman arrives at home and is safely inside before they depart.

As with other successful programs, it takes many community minded individuals to keep programs operating. Paulene recognizes and appreciates the contributions of her team members: Tammy, Corey, David, Janet, Juliet, Joy, Britney, and Kelz. They would volunteer weekend after weekend to provide safe rides. All the volunteer Safe Ride drivers are currently training for the Community Crisis Team Development through MKO Mobile Crisis Unit.

My hope for the safe ride initiative is to create an Indigenous perspective on the sexual exploitation of Indigenous Women and all women. Research and collection of data is important in this safe ride program. Paulene has applied and received a funding grant to begin collecting data from the Safe Rides. The hope is to collect data, research, and work with her instructor Noreen to create an Indigenous perspective of sexual exploitation that is happening locally as well as in larger Urban centres and across the Province. Our goal is to stop the exploitation of women. We can do this by educating and creating awareness for women especially those leaving smaller communities and moving to urban centers. There are many dangers especially for young women when moving to an urban environment. Upon receiving approval from UCN and under the mentorship of my instructor Noreen, we will work together to release a survey to see how the Nisiiminan Safe Rides works to reduce exploitation and violence. Paulene is looking further down the road in launching a Provincial Safe Rides program. She is dedicated to encouraging all communities to develop similar programs which help keep women safe. The Nisiiminan Safe Rides was running in our community until March at which time Covid-19 regulations closed many services. Safe Rides will start up again once it is safe to operate.

Paulene Ballantyne is resilient and strong wanting the best for others in our community. Her own personal experience of the loss of her daughter is traumatic. On April 17th, 2018, Paulene’s 16-year-old daughter Taegan attempts suicide, is found by her father hanging in a structure in the back yard, is resuscitated by First Nation Safety Officer and friend Zenon. Paramedics arrive to stabilize her. Due to the quick actions and efforts of the FNSO OCN Police and NHA paramedics, Taegan is life flighted to Winnipeg Children’s Hospital with a doctor and nurse. Taegan lives one more day in Children’s hospital with a team of Pediatricians and specialists working to stabilize her with the hope that they could keep Taegan with her family. “After conversations with the neurologist, I knew then my daughter would leave me. Due to the increasing amount of seizures happening and her organs shutting down, her father and I had to make the difficult heartbreaking decision to take her off life support. I recall one Nurse who stayed with my girl and never left her room. She cared for my baby so well. She told me to talk to her and tell her I was with her. I know that she could hear me, and she knew that I was with her. I kept wiping the tears from her eyes. The lead Specialist was so understanding and caring and gently broke the news to us that Taegan would not survive. I crawled into bed with my baby, hugged her and held her. With the support of my two older sisters, Esther and Angela, my family and close friends, we let go of Taegan.” April 18, 2018, Taegan peacefully passes away in her mothers’ arms. “The hardest thing I’ve ever had to do was tell my girl to leave me; six breaths and she was gone. I am grateful for the extra time I was given with my baby girl. I am grateful for that answer to prayer that she spent one more day with me. I am grateful for the support of the police, paramedics, doctors, nurses, and flight crew. We do not give enough credit to those who save lives. It has given me a sense of peace knowing that we have good people out there who do this day to day. My daughter Taegan received the best care possible and I am profoundly grateful that I was able to be with my child until the end of her life.”

Paulene’s daughter is just one of many young girls who suffered from depression, anxiety, bullying and as a result mental health issues that led to her suicide attempts and ultimately her final statement of suicide. As a cry for help, Taegan attempted to take her life in 2017 and 2018. Both times, her mother seeks professional help and treatment from outside of the community at the Brandon Youth Treatment Centre. There are limited resources for our youth. I would drive a thousand more miles to keep my baby girl with me so that she could have got that help she needed and wanted. Ultimately, Taegan is successful on the third suicide attempt. “It was a blessing to spend time with her during her short time on earth.” She taught me more about life then my own personal experiences and showed me that life is short and precious. I am living my life through her memory now. Paulene is keeping the memory of her daughter in her heart through community awareness of suicide, safety programs such as OCN Bear Clan, the Nisiiminan Safe Rides, through her own self care with her friends and by having open conversations to address these complex issues and instilling hope for grieving mothers who have lost children.

A year later, Paulene and her husband mutually decide to end their marriage due to the intense strain on their relationship and loss of their child.

The grief and depression caused by these events has a profound effect on Paulene’s’ life. Paulene reaches out for professional help to deal with her own personal pain and loss. She sees her doctor and is referred to therapy to deal with the” unexplainable why”; “Why” her daughter took her life. Her therapist explains to her that it is not her fault for the loss of her child; that it is unaddressed mental health issues. She takes further therapeutic measures by contacting other women, who have gone through the same experience, the loss of a child by suicide. Some of these women are her friends and some become her friends. It is in these conversations with other women that she finds strength and realizes that her purpose is to get involved in reversing the shame accompanying suicide. Paulene believes that suicide should not be looked at as shameful or bad, but as an issue of understanding mental health and how it is taking loved ones away. She continues to connect with other mothers who have lost children to suicide as only they can understand what it feels like to the heart, soul, and body of a family. She explains, “We can understand how it feels, can talk, and have created a bond and support system.” She had never experienced suicide in the family prior to her daughter’s death. There were family tragedies, but nothing like the tragedy that suicide leaves behind. A few months after she passed away, Paulene and her youngest daughter Bailey found a letter that Taegan left behind and wrote of her struggles, pain and heartaches but she also wrote that ‘she loved her mom very much and she wished the best for her mom.” Her little girl was instilling hope in her and with that, Paulene decides to live her life in a good way by giving back and helping others.

Paulene knows that she will never fully recover from losing her daughter. She is seeking a direction in moving herself forward and helping others in the community who have experienced suicide of a family member, missing children, missing women, or family members. She recognizes the need to look after her own mental health. Taegans parting letter continues to play a directing role in Paulene’s life.

Paulene’s daughter inspires her to create a conversation around suicide, address social issues in the community and bring safety to those living in this area through the volunteer work she does with the OCN Bear Clan. Walking with the Opaskwayak Cree Nation Bear Clan is one means that she uses to reduce the mental, emotional, and physical stressors. She volunteers as a lead but works alongside with Tristen, Gordon, Brandon and Michael, the original guys who do the actual work for OCN Bear Clan. At first the purpose was to ease the stress in her life and walk for her own mental health but soon it becomes a rewarding experience. She mentions that the structure of the OCN Bear Clan Chapter is modeled after the Winnipeg Bear Clan Patrol Inc. The OCN Bear Clan have extensive training in Mental Health First Aid First Nations, Non-violent Crisis Intervention Training, Assisted Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) Safe Disposal of Sharps and Needles and currently the Community Crisis Team Development Training (MKO Mobile Crisis Unit). This training helps them serve the people that they are dealing with quickly and safely. Paulene has extensive training in working with several levels of Trauma, has training in Mental Health counselling skills, Mental Health First Aid First Nations training, Vicarious Trauma training, Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST), Non Violent Crisis Intervention Training, Women in Crisis Training, Working with High Risk Kids and their families as well as working with vulnerable people with addictions and mental health. She is currently receiving Community Crisis Team Development Training through the MKO Mobile Crisis Unit.

Paulene continues to value training for herself and those working with her to continue to support vulnerable women, children, and youth in the community. Paulene and her team are trained advocates who work together with health care providers, medical personnel, Doctors, and Police. Paulene is an advocate for women who have been abused and have experienced violence and sexual assault. She believes that everyone needs to receive medical treatment in a respectful manner.

Recently Paulene was appointed to an Indigenous Advisory Committee at the University of Manitoba to be involved in policy implementation for fair and respectful medical treatment of indigenous people. Together with a group of 25 other indigenous representatives they will create policies to eliminate systemic racism within the health care system. The goal of this advisory committee is to eradicate racism towards Indigenous people. We all deserve health care treatment in a dignified, respectable, and safe environment.

Paulene values time spent with her girlfriends, Jennifer, Joy, Jeanine, Rhonda, Monica, Carol, Geraldine, Clarissa, Crystal, Lorraine, and Cheryl. Each of these women have a huge impact in her life since her daughter’s passing and have helped her to overcome the struggle with loss and grief. Together they venture off into the wilds of Northern Manitoba enjoying each others companionship while fishing, kayaking, rock climbing, hiking trips, camping and most recently an all female moose hunting group. Covid -19 made this possible she jokes. Some of these women are the same friends who have been involved in keeping OCN and the Tri-community safe through a variety of awareness and movements initiated by these individuals.

Paulene has endured much grief and loss. Out of this, she has found hope and the incredible strength and courage to share her story. “It’s a really hard story to tell but it is time…” She continues to be strong through the many volunteer programs that she has brought to our community to keep us all safe and out of harms way. If you are interested in becoming involved in one of these valuable programs that protect our communities, you can contact Paulene Ballantyne at nisiiminansafe@gmail.com or 1-431-355-0798