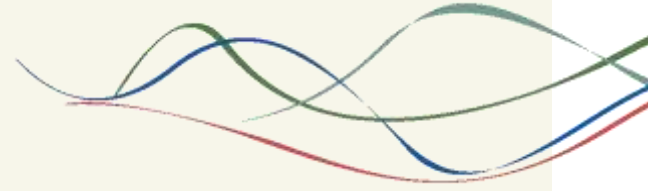




NATIVE WOMEN'S
ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

L'ASSOCIATION DES FEMMES
AUTOCHTONES DU CANADA



Storytelling: Nina's Story



For years, communities have pointed to the high numbers of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) has been honoured to work with families of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls to share the story of their loved one. As part of the storytelling process, families' are also invited to share their experiences with the justice system, media, victim services and other institutional and community supports.

Storytelling is a way of teaching and learning. The stories shared by family members are intended to raise awareness, educate, and promote change. They have been told to honour the daughters, sisters, mothers and grandmothers that have been lost to violence and remember those still missing. This is what their stories tell us.

Satellite Office

1st Nicholas Street, 9th Floor, Ottawa, ON K1N 7B7
T 613.722.3033 or 1.800.461.4043 F 613.722.7687

Head Office

Six Nations of the Grand River,
1721 Chieftswood Road, P.O. Box 331, Ohsweken, ON N0A 1M0

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A Short Life of a Sweetheart:

Nina Courtepatte's Story

Nina Louise Courtepatte is remembered as a beautiful girl with a passion for movies, music and dancing. She was a gifted artist, with a special talent for drawing and writing. Nina wanted to be famous and dreamed about becoming a model and actress. Shortly before her death, she was the winner of a local modelling contest. On April 3, 2005, Nina was brutally raped and murdered on a golf course outside of Edmonton. Five people

have been tried in connection with her murder. Nina will be forever cherished by her mother Peacha, her father Tim, Darcy, Annie, Patrick, Eathan, family and friends.

Nina was born on October 3, 1991, in Edmonton, Alberta. Born with long, thick, dark hair, Nina was a very happy and inquisitive infant. She brought much joy to her family. She was very curious and her mother, Peacha Atkinson, laughingly recalls how Nina would try to chew on practically everything. She attended Aboriginal Headstart, an early childhood development program for Aboriginal children and their families.

As she grew Nina became more vocal and outspoken. Her parents encouraged her to use her voice. They taught her about safety and about standing up for herself. Peacha believes these early teachings had a strong influence on Nina, who was very compassionate. She liked to take care of people. Nina did her best to support and encourage classmates who were being picked on, telling them that they were beautiful and that they had inner strength. She was not afraid to challenge people; if she thought a teacher was wrong, she would stand up and refuse to sit down until they acknowledged their mistake. In grade six, Nina participated in the D.A.R.E. program (Drug Abuse Resistance Education). Peacha remembers watching bemusedly as Nina reprimanded a stranger she caught smoking next to a no-smoking sign.

When Nina was eight the family moved to the Dunluce area of Edmonton and Peacha recounts a series of bad experiences that occurred during their time there. It started when Nina realized that she could scare her mother by hiding outside after dark. The behaviour escalated. Not understanding the significance or consequences of her words, Nina began to tell people that she was being abused. Peacha and her husband tried to address Nina's behaviour, but it was too late. Child and Family Service workers were called. Nina was never removed from the home, as child welfare workers found nothing to confirm the allegations. The family later moved to the west end of Edmonton and after that Peacha says that Nina was much happier and her behaviour really improved.

Family was important to Nina and she had many close relationships. The fourth of six siblings, Nina was very protective of her younger brother and sister. She would not let any harm come to them. As a child she liked to tell them stories and would dress them up using make-up and nail polish. When she was older she liked to make pancakes and eggs for her family on weekends. Nina had a very special relationship with her older brother Patrick. Apart from her diary, Patrick was the one that Nina confided in the most. He was the one she went to when she needed to talk. Nina was also very attached to her mother. Peacha was learning Cree and as she learned new words and phrases she would teach them to Nina.



Nina modeling.

Nina had a very vivid imagination and her passion for drama led her to write and act out her own performances. She was involved with the Boys and Girls Club of Edmonton and acted in many of their plays. She loved shows like *American Idol*, *Canadian Idol* and *America's Next Top Model*. Despite her young age, Nina was absolutely determined to realize her dreams and begged her mother to contact modelling and acting agencies in Edmonton. If for some reason Peacha did not phone when she said she would, Nina would make the call herself! She was always looking for ways to make her dreams come true. Nina was rewarded for her determination when in the summer of 2004 she won a local modelling contest and was invited to enroll in Chan International's professional modelling program.

Nina was a popular and social girl. She made friends very fast. Peacha notes that Nina, like many youth, tried to challenge the rules. However, she also emphasizes that Nina always called home when she was supposed to and always came home when she said she would. On March 30, 2005, Nina said she would like to spend the weekend at a friend's house. This was not unusual. The girls had been friends for years and were practically inseparable. A few days later Peacha got a phone call from the friend's mother. She asked to speak to her daughter, saying that the girls had told her they were staying at Nina's house. It was then that Peacha learned Nina's friend had developed a pattern of running away for three or four days at a time. Her mother tried to stop her without any success. The friend's mother told Peacha not to worry, that the girls would certainly come home in couple of days. But Peacha was worried. She phoned Nina's friends, she called the youth shelter and the *ihuman Youth Society*; she called every organization she could think of. Despite being deeply concerned, Peacha fully expected that the girls would return home in a day or two. Given her previous experiences with Child and Family Services, it is not surprising that Peacha did not call the police.

Two days later, Peacha learned that the body of a girl Nina's age had been found on the Edmonton Springs Golf Course. She immediately contacted the Edmonton Police Service (EPS). The police asked a series of difficult questions: "Did she have a habit?" "Did she drink?" "Had she 'run away' before?" They also asked for a picture of Nina. When they came back the next day, Peacha knew it was Nina. She was only 13 years old.

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Five people—two adults and three youth—were tried in connection with Nina’s murder. One of the adults, Michael Briscoe, was initially acquitted of all charges. The Crown appealed this decision and in 2008 the Alberta Court of Appeal found that Justice Brian Burrows had erred in his judgment and ordered a retrial. Joseph Laboucan, the other adult charged, was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison. Laboucan appealed in June 2008, but the conviction was upheld. Peacha is lobbying to have Laboucan declared a dangerous offender. Despite his life sentence Laboucan is still eligible to apply for the so-called “faint hope clause,” and Peacha intends to do anything she can to block his application.

Of the three youths, Michael Williams pleaded guilty to first-degree murder and was sentenced to life in prison with no chance of parole for 10 years. Williams was sentenced as an adult but is appealing this decision. Like with Laboucan, Peacha is lobbying to have Williams declared a dangerous offender. Stephanie Bird, another youth, was convicted of manslaughter, kidnapping and aggravated sexual assault. She was sentenced as an adult to 12 years, 9 years with time served. However, the Crown is still seeking a murder conviction and has appealed Justice Ross’ decision. In August 2008, Peacha was shocked and horrified to learn that Bird had already been granted two escorted day passes allowing her to leave the correctional facility. The third youth, a young woman known as “Buffy,” was convicted of second-degree murder and aggravated sexual assault in July 2008. She was tried as a young offender and cannot be named. She is scheduled to be sentenced in March 2009.

When asked about her experiences with the criminal justice system, Peacha is very critical. She argues that sentencing should exclude time served in custody, that a prison sentence should begin on the day of sentencing. Peacha is also lobbying for changes to the Youth Criminal Justice Act so that violent offenders can be named in the media and tried and sentenced as adults, regardless of their age. Peacha believes more programs are needed for youth involved in the criminal justice system. She argues for strong intervention and points to the documentary “Scared Straight” as a potential model. Peacha says although they have been convicted, the youth are not taking responsibility for Nina’s murder. She describes one particular instance in which one of the youth waved at her in the courtroom.

Peacha wishes she could have had contact with some of the witnesses connected to the case, particularly Nina’s friend and the man who found her daughter’s body. However, by law she is not permitted to communicate with them until after the trials had concluded. Peacha understands the purpose of this, but knows that they are suffering too. She would love to sit in a circle with them. She says that not being able to talk about what happened makes it more difficult to heal, not only for her own family but for the other families involved.

Peacha describes her relationship with the police officers that investigated Nina’s murder as positive. She knows that other families have encountered discrimination, but this was not her experience. She believes Nina’s age and the brutality of her murder pressed police into immediate action. Peacha believes the officers were truly horrified by what had been done to Nina and worked overtime, sometimes without pay, to find the people responsible. A few officers went so far as to promise Peacha that Nina’s murderers would be caught and punished. It

was a close relationship, with officers calling regularly to inform her of new developments. It should be noted, however, that Peacha was very assertive about her rights as Nina's mother. Once, police released information to the media without informing her first. She called the police immediately, demanding to know why she was not notified.

Almost immediately after Nina's death, the media reported on the family's interactions with Child and Family Services. The grief of losing Nina was compounded by malicious reports of alleged abuse. Some reporters went so far as to insinuate that, had she been apprehended by Child and Family Services, Nina might still be alive. The family was devastated. Peacha says the media reported without knowing the truth. They did not represent the situation accurately, basing their stories on what other people said, people who were not truly connected with or authorized to speak on behalf of the family.

Mindful of this violation, she did not speak to the media for two years after Nina's murder. She has since broken her silence, but remains extremely cautious. She says reporters have tried to confuse her by rephrasing questions that she had already refused to answer, trying to get her to say what they wanted to hear. She recalls one particular incident in which a reporter wanted her to comment on a statement made by one of the offenders. Peacha said she had not heard the statement and, more importantly, that she did not want to know what had been said. The reporter responded by repeating the offender's statement to her, so that she could comment on it and give him his story.

In recounting her experiences, Peacha emphasizes the need for better resources for families. She stresses the need for more information about where family members can get help, financial assistance and supports for healing. She knew nothing about victim services and had no idea where to access the help she needed, such as financial support to give Nina a funeral. Peacha approached her community of Onion Lake Cree Nation, but was refused financial support on the grounds that she did not live in the community and that Nina was not a status Indian. It was only when Peacha approached a funeral home to inquire about payment options that she learned she could apply for a victim's package. Although grateful for this support, the victim's package did not resolve all of the family's needs. Because the funds were limited, Peacha was forced to choose cremation over burial. And when an administrative error delayed her claim, making it impossible for her to pay for the services, the funeral home took her to small claims court and refused to release Nina until the bill was paid in full.

Money continues to be a source of anxiety. In the months following Nina's death, Peacha was not ready to return to work but worried that unless she was able to claim long-term disability she would have no choice but to go back before she was ready. Recounting this experience, Peacha says people need to recognize that grief affects everyone differently. It is often assumed that depression occurs immediately after a tragedy, but this is not always the case. In fact, it can be months or years before those affected experience depression. Peacha says employers need to acknowledge this and change their policies accordingly. Employees should be able to take time off for healing when they need it, instead of being restricted to a short period immediately after the event.

Peacha emphasizes the need for more support and understanding from members of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. In the days and months following Nina's murder, Peacha felt very alone. She was the only one who sat through all four trials. Family and friends made a point of coming to the first trial, especially the sentencing, but she was the only one sitting there consistently every day, for every trial. And not everyone was supportive. Peacha speaks of being "deserted" by certain friends and family members, of experiencing an overwhelming feeling of abandonment. There were hurtful and judgmental comments like, "Oh, if only you didn't let her go out..." Peacha says that she sometimes feels as though she is carrying an infection that no one wants to catch. She relates how after Nina's death she tried to find new housing. When the landlord found out who she was, she was refused.

Perhaps more than anything else, Peacha wants to help other families with similar experiences. She says that after Nina's murder, family and friends did not know how to act around her, did not know what to say. It was a lonely position to be in, made worse because what Peacha needed, more than anything else, was someone to talk to. Peacha says that victim's services workers do not know how to deal with families that have lost someone to murder. Although Peacha received some direction from other families, she was essentially left to find her own supports. She says this information needs to be more accessible, preferably under one roof.

Peacha wishes there were more supports for families, and is trying to fill that gap. She gives her phone number to other families that are on the same journey. She shares her experiences dealing with both police and the courts, advising families of their rights, trying to prepare them for the process ahead. She is frustrated, however, by the feeling that there are more resources available to offenders than to families. She says family members also need access to supports like healing circles and counselling—but these services can be expensive and not everyone can afford to pay. Peacha is advocating for better financial supports for families, resources for counselling, or to attend conferences on grief and healing.

In honour of Nina, Peacha has founded the *Nina's Dreams Trust Fund*. The fund provides scholarships for youth interested in the arts. Scholarships are available to both young women and men, as Peacha believes there needs to be better recognition of the abuse and other harms experienced by boys. Through *Nina's Dreams*, Peacha hopes to encourage other young people to pursue their dreams. Apart from her activism, Peacha is focused on her family. She has two other children to look after, and it is her kids that keep her going. And she needs time to work on her own healing. After all, Peacha has a lot to do. She wants to make Nina's dreams come true.

Update July 2010:

In 2007, Michael Williams was sentenced as an adult to life in prison with no chance of parole for 10 years. Williams appealed, but the sentence was upheld.

In September 2008, Joseph Laboucan was charged with second-degree murder in the death of another woman, Ellie May Meyer. Ellie May's body was found outside Edmonton in May 2005.

In October 2008, the Alberta Court of Appeal ruled that Michael Briscoe should be retried on charges of first-degree murder, aggravated sexual assault and kidnapping. Briscoe challenged the decision, but the ruling was upheld by the Supreme Court of Canada. His trial is scheduled to begin in February 2011.

In January 2009, the Alberta Court of Appeal ordered a new trial for Joseph Laboucan on charges of first-degree murder, kidnapping and sexual assault. The Crown challenged the decision, and in 2009 the Supreme Court of Canada ruled to uphold Laboucan's conviction.

In February 2009, the Alberta Court of Appeal upheld Stephanie Bird's manslaughter conviction. The Crown appealed the decision and in December 2009 the Supreme Court of Canada convicted Stephanie Bird of first degree murder.

In June 2009, "Buffy" was sentenced to a four-year jail term, followed by three-years of supervision—the most severe sentence available under the Youth Criminal Justice Act.

In April 2010, Michael Briscoe was also charged with second-degree murder in the death of Ellie May Meyer.