

NATIVE WOMEN'S
ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

L'ASSOCIATION DES FEMMES
AUTOCHTONES DU CANADA



Storytelling: Amber'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 Chateaufort Road, P.O. Box 331, Ohsweken, ON N0A 1M0

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Amber with her mother,
Gwenda Yuzicappi

“Wicanhpi Duta Win”/Red Star Woman: Amber Redman’s Story

Amber Tara-Lynn Redman was born on January 30, 1986. Amber was from Standing Buffalo Dakota Nation; she was the middle child and only girl of loving parents Gwenda Yuzicappi and Art Redman Sr. She was very close to her older brother Bevin and her younger brother Dreyden. Amber went missing on July 15, 2005, and after almost three years of searching her remains were found on May 5, 2008.

Amber led a beautiful life filled with positive experiences. From the moment she was born at the General Hospital in Regina, Saskatchewan, Amber was loved by her mother and father. She brought joy into her family’s life and made everyone happy. Amber was breastfed and this mother-daughter bond continued as she grew into a chubby baby. When relatives came to visit baby Amber she would run to the door to greet them, her thick hair sticking out in all directions. Family members would constantly pick Amber up and place her on one of her favourite toys, a rocking horse. Amber was a “daddy’s girl” who was very spoiled; her father would carry her around until she fell asleep in his arms..

As Amber transitioned from baby to toddler, she became adventurous and mischievous. Her mother Gwenda remembers that Amber loved to be outside and could often be found wandering around in the bushes or playing with the puppies. When she was indoors Amber would watch her favourite show, *The Flintstones*, with her teddy bear. An intelligent toddler, Amber knew exactly what time the show would play.

When she was three years old Amber’s father, Art Sr., designed and beaded her first fancy dance outfit in her favourite colours, purple and pink, and her parents traveled with her on the powwow trail. Amber felt the pride of being a Dakota Winyan (woman) and dancing to the heartbeat of the drum inspired her Spirit to dance with All The Relatives. Amber danced to be a part of the Sacred Circle and to strengthen her Spirit; it was not about winning. Her spirit shone brightly as each step was a glimpse of what she was feeling. Amber enjoyed the inexplicable experience of being one with the Wannage (Spirit). Another inspiration for Amber was the Dakota language. This gift was taught by her great-grandmother, the late Agnes Yuzicappi (Wakan Win); Unchi (Grandma) would speak in Dakota to Amber. Amber listened with her heart and captured each teaching there. Unchi inspired Amber to receive her Dakota name and Amber was honoured with the gift of her name “Wicanhpi Duta Win” (Red Star Woman). She wanted to learn about the Star Teachings, which are a vital part of the Dakota history. The family would see “Wicanhpi Duta Win” as she shone brightly as a “Red Star” in the night sky.

As she entered childhood, Amber's parents ensured that she had a balance of traditional Dakota and western influences in her life. Gwenda and Art Sr. practiced the Dakota traditions. Amber's parents allowed their children to choose the paths they wanted to follow. When she was 14 years old, an Elder asked Amber if she would consider being the Sundance Mother. Amber was honored to replay the history of the White Buffalo Calf Woman, who brought the teachings of the Sacred Pipe to the Lakota People. Amber witnessed and felt the power of prayer, sacrifice, being humble and being close to Wakan Tanka. At the end of this experience Amber left the Sacred Pipe for the People to continue to practice this teaching. She then exited on the same path that she began and turned four times with a wave to her Dakota Oyate (family). All the Helpers, Sundancers and Relatives felt in their Hearts the Love and Power of Prayer, which are the greatest gifts given by the Creator. Amber's mind, body and spirit were in balance. Each story tells of Amber's life experiences; she was seen in the Stars, the Animals, the Trees, and the Rocks. Everything on Mother Earth has a Spirit and a Teaching.



Amber as a baby

Amber's beauty was seen by a person who did not know her at all. This experience illustrates the teaching that some people have a gift that allows them to see the spirit of others. Here is a story told by Amber's cousin, Jessica:

Amber and Jessica attended a memorable powwow in Bismarck, North Dakota. There was a young man staying beside their camp site. When this young man saw Amber he fell in love with her beauty. He introduced himself to Amber and told her that she looked like a "princess." He then asked if she would do him a favour. Amber was shy and turned away but Jessica encouraged her to listen to his request. The young man asked if she would take a picture with him coming out of the tipi. Amber began to laugh and walk away but the young man persisted explaining that his fellow singers would not believe he had a picture of him with this "princess." Jessica once again encouraged Amber and insisted that there would be no harm in having this picture taken. Finally, Amber agreed and they took the photograph. Amber felt embarrassed when she saw how happy this picture made him. When Amber went missing in 2005 and this young man saw her poster at a powwow, he asked Jessica, "Is this my princess?" When Jessica said yes, he turned and walked away from the powwow. Jessica felt his sorrow.

Amber shared in the joy of her family's accomplishments and made sure to support their dreams and aspirations. Her older brother, Bevin, competed in basketball at the North American Indigenous Games (NAIG) and he told Amber that he wanted her to watch his game. Amber had recently started a new job. When she asked for the time off work and was denied, Amber followed her heart and decided to quit. She explained to her employer that her brother was her priority and watching him play against New York was a once in a lifetime experience. Amber was excited to watch Bevin play his best. The whole family was proud of Bevin. When the game was over, Gwenda brought Amber and Dreyden to eat at a revolving restaurant at the top of a

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high-rise building (Bevin had to stay with his team). The three of them shared in the experience of tasting escargot. Dreyden said he was eating octopus and Amber used her fork to pick it up so she could see, smell and then taste it. She said it was gross. Gwenda enjoyed watching each of their reactions as these experiences are kept in a Mother's Heart. Gwenda strongly believes the greatest gift from the Creator is the gift of a child.

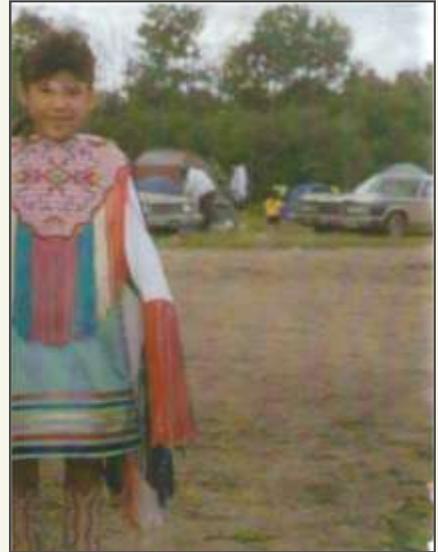
Amber saw gifts given by the Creator. Amber and her mom witnessed a gift being born and Amber named this baby girl after her late paternal grandfather and her late paternal great-grandmother. Amber became one with the baby and later encouraged her mom to bring the baby home. Amber asked if she could adopt the beautiful little girl and Gwenda agreed. Amber's heart pounded with excitement when she held her baby girl. To this day, the young girl talks endlessly about Amber.

When she sees Gwenda struggling, she sits down beside Gwenda and uses her healing hands to caress Gwenda's hair and wipe her tears. She tells stories of Amber. Only Amber knew of this young girl's gifts and Gwenda will ensure she reaches her full potential.

Amber was athletic and enjoyed playing basketball and volleyball in high school. She and five friends from Standing Buffalo were on the basketball and volleyball teams and Amber loved traveling with them to compete in tournaments. Amber's passion for sports and being with her team showed when she played. She would smile at her teammates, played her best and used humour in each game.

After she disappeared Amber sent a message to her loving companion, Cody, when he went to NAIG in Denver, Colorado. Once a great athlete, Cody stopped playing sports after Amber went missing. When he decided to return, he tried out for North American Indigenous Games and made the Saskatchewan athletics (track and field) team. The night before the competition began he dreamed of Amber. In his dream he felt Amber was real. He held her and continually told her "Oh, my God, I can't believe I am with you!" Amber took Cody to the very top of the mountain where the clouds were below. In the dream he took off his jacket and put it on the ground so that Amber could sit down. Cody tickled and hugged her and watched every smile. He especially remembers her laughter echoing in the air. Amber asked Cody why he stopped playing sports until then. She knew of his potential. Amber pointed into the clouds and Cody saw his bedroom wall and on it were three medals. Cody was so happy to be with Amber that he did not think of the medals. All he wanted to do was hold her and keep her close. He was not going to let her go.

Cody woke up and realized it was a dream. He quickly called Gwenda and told her of his dream. Gwenda and Cody became emotional over the phone and Gwenda told Cody that no matter where he is, distance is not a factor. Her spirit traveled to his and this is where their spirits united as one. Gwenda explained to Cody that he would always be her only son-in-law, he would always be a part of her family. Gwenda said to Cody, "Amber brought you a message to be the



Amber in her first fancy dance outfit

best, the athlete she knows you to be. Cody, follow your heart and your dreams will come true.” Cody came home with three medals which are with Amber’s medals.

Amber’s childhood and youth were not without some hardship.

Amber was unhappy when her parents separated. Additionally, as a teenager Amber was bullied by girls who were jealous of her relationship with her boyfriend. Because her teachings instructed her not to fight but to leave the situation, Amber endured the pain of verbal abuse without retaliating. She came home crying and the anger grew in her Mother’s Heart as Amber told her mom of the experience. Her mom suggested they talk with the girls. Amber’s response was, “No Mom, I just want to forget this happened.” Gwenda held her daughter close and told her everything would be alright. Amber fell asleep in her mother’s arms. Gwenda thinks the moral of this story is forgiveness; in spite of the pain she endured, Amber forgave these three young girls for their verbal abuse and for keeping her cornered in a room. Gwenda has a message for Amber: “My girl, as your mother, I now understand why you chose not to confront these young girls but to forgive in your heart.”

Amber was a very independent woman. She bought herself a car with her bingo winnings. Driving on a grid road through mud, slush and snow was hard on the car; it needed a mirror, a muffler and an oil change. Amber bought the parts and drove her car onto a ramp in her driveway where she herself changed the oil and replaced the muffler. Two of Bevin’s friends came over while Amber was working on the car and asked Bevin what she was doing. Bevin told them that Amber just gave her car an oil change and now she was changing her muffler. Bevin’s friends laughed and insisted Amber did not know how to repair these things. When they realized that Amber really was fixing her car, they felt embarrassed and resorted to teasing one another. Amber’s ability to accept and complete a challenge was evident on this day. Bevin was so proud of his sister and how she showed up his friends.



Amber with her brother, Bevin, at graduation

On July 15, 2005, Amber went to Trapper’s Bar in Fort Qu’Appelle with Cody and her cousin Tommy. Earlier that day Amber got paid for babysitting. She took her aunt and cousins out for pizza and chicken. By the time Gwenda got home Amber was already gone. It was unlike Amber to go out to the bar on a Thursday night. When Gwenda asked the waitress about Amber, she said she served Amber only two drinks and was surprised when Amber fell and appeared intoxicated. Gwenda believes something was slipped into Amber’s drink. Amber and Cody had an argument in the bar that night and Cody left. Tommy said he went to the bathroom and when he came out he could not find Amber. Amber had Tommy’s car keys so he called his mom who came to get him. This was the last time Amber was seen by those close to her.

Cody called Gwenda every day to see if Amber was home. When Gwenda asked what happened, Cody told her about the argument. Knowing this, Gwenda told Cody that Amber may need some time and advised him to call back the next day. On Monday morning, Cody filed a missing persons report then called Gwenda to tell her. Gwenda was in shock. Six days after Amber was last seen, Gwenda, her family and the community organized the first of a series of searches that lasted for three weeks. The neighbouring communities volunteered to help out. Gwenda's family and community continued to search endlessly. It took nine days before the media began to cover Amber's disappearance. Despite this delay, Gwenda felt that the media coverage of Amber as a missing woman was both helpful and respectful.

Gwenda does not believe that the police took immediate action to initiate a search. The police explained to the family that they were following a process where they had to contact and interview everyone in the bar and Gwenda understood that this process was time-consuming. Gwenda asked to deal primarily with a female First Nations police officer and this request was honoured. As the days passed, police gave the family daily updates, offered support and let them know that officers were only a phone call away. It is evident that the police's determination and dedication resulted in locating Amber's remains. The Yuzicappi and Redman families showed their gratitude towards the many law enforcement officers who participated in this process by shaking each one of their hands and thanking them for their efforts. As Amber's mother, Gwenda understands that although none of the officers knew Amber, seeing her picture spoke a thousand words. Gwenda believes in the prayers that were also sent to the police officers to assist in their efforts.

Amber and her family received strength from the Unchi Hanwi Oyate (Grandmother Nation). As each full moon passed, the Grandmother's face appeared in the moon and her lips whispered prayers onto the family. Gwenda has a message for the Grandmother: "Unchi, I know in my heart you are with me during this time of hardship. Unchi, you told my Tanke (younger sister) that when the family smells the scent of sweetgrass you are with us. Your strength is felt as each second passes and only you know the pain endured in this travesty. Unchi, I am starting to grasp the understanding that Wakan Tanka (Great Spirit) honoured me with the gift of Wicanhpi Duta Win. Through my Ancestral Teachings, I was sought out to be one of the Inas (Mothers) who is able to gain strength from these teachings with the power of prayer. I know, Unchi, that you were with Wicanhpi Duta Win along with All Our Relatives. As a mother, knowing this gives me so much comfort as I now understand Wicanhpi Duta Win was not alone."

Gwenda and Amber's family believe strongly in the power of prayer and hoped for Amber's safe return home. Her family continually asked the Grandmother Nation to help locate their loved one. The enduring pain of not knowing where Amber was and whether or not she was safe was excruciating for her mother, brothers, grandmother, sisters, her loving companion, aunts, uncles,



Amber with her great-grandmother, Agnes

cousins and nieces, as well as for the loved ones who have journeyed to the Spirit World, including her father, uncles, aunts and grandmother. The family's love for Amber was in the hands of the Creator. As each season passed, the family fed Amber's Dakota Spirit to keep her spirit alive. The family did not know where Amber was so they asked the Creator to keep her alive in their hearts.

On May 5, 2008, Amber's remains were located. The Yuzicappi and Redman families went to the site where she was found to offer prayers and sing the sacred songs. The ceremony was one of the many that the family held regarding Amber's journey to the Spirit World. The family felt and heard the presence of All Our Relatives and this confirmed that Amber was not alone on the day her life was taken so tragically from the physical world. Gwenda gave thanks to Amber's father, the late Art Redman Sr., for fulfilling his promise that no matter what he would find his "baby girl." Exactly seven months to the day that Amber was found, her father journeyed to the Spirit World. Art knew the pain that the family was going through and he did everything he could to assist in bringing his daughter home.



Amber Redman,
January 30th, 1986 -
July 15th, 2005

Art told Gwenda that Amber came to him as he was driving. Amber asked her Dad to bring her home. Art was determined to fulfill his "baby girl's" request. Art showed his love for Amber when she was born and he held her in his arms until she fell asleep, when he designed her regalia of her first outfit, when he listened to her words "I Love You, Dad" as she gave him a hug each time she saw him. Amber said her heart would race with excitement when love was shared in their hugs. Art was proud of his daughter at her graduation. Amber asked her father if he would keep her Eagle Feather for her and he did. Art and Amber now share an everlasting life where there is Love, Peace and Teachings. Gwenda believes Art and Amber are happy and that Art continues to be the best father he can be for Amber. She believes that if their family calls on both of them they will help guide us. Gwenda says, "I look forward to that beautiful day when I will see Wicanhpi Duta Win and All My Relatives."

On May 13, just over a week after Amber's remains were found, as Gwenda and her family sat outside, Amber's cousin Tanya whispered to Gwenda, "Look behind you." When Gwenda turned she saw two beautiful buffalos walking up the pathway towards the fence. Gwenda offered a prayer then patiently watched each movement they made. The bigger buffalo looked at the women three times and proceeded to walk down the valley and then up the other side of the hill. When the buffalo reached the top of the hill she began to dance, turning around and around and kicking up both back legs. Tears filled each of their eyes as they watched this beautiful buffalo's graceful dance. In her heart Gwenda knew Amber came back to let her know that she was alive in the Buffalo Spirit. Later that night, Gwenda received a call confirming that more of Amber's remains were located. Gwenda believes that Amber came to bring strength to her family before they would receive this news, to encourage and help them to remain strong in prayer.

Amber sent another beautiful message to her family as they prepared for her final journey. The family was preparing for a ceremony offering food and prayers when Amber's nephew, Dallon, witnessed four deer dancing from each of the four directions. As each deer danced towards the centre of the circle, the flowers within the circle turned red, yellow, white and black.

Gwenda forgot the bowls, cups and utensils to feed the family so she invited everyone to her home to eat. As each person entered her yard, they could see a big buffalo running towards the house. As the buffalo got closer to the house, she switched pace and began to walk. Gwenda offered prayers and thanks for experiencing Amber's message of thanks for her family's prayer and strength. As the Buffalo Spirit brought strength to the family, their prayers were answered.

Gwenda, as Amber's mother, was given the ability to prepare for her journey to the Spirit World. Gwenda also realizes that there are many families out there who take each step not knowing where their loved one is. Seconds and days pass and families continue to live with excruciating pain, a pain that will not be forgotten. Gwenda's heart and prayers are with all the families who have loved ones who are still missing or who have been murdered. Gwenda will be there to support and offer her prayers to you.

Amber came back to her family in different forms of life to let them know that she was found, that she loves and misses them, but she is happy to be with Our Relatives in a place where there is everlasting love and no harm can ever be brought upon her again. Gwenda continues to tell the story of her daughter's life and gives thanks to the Creator for allowing her to be Amber's mother and experience the love and teachings Amber shared with those around her. Gwenda would like to dedicate these messages to four beautiful girls named after Amber: Patience Amber, Isabelle, Amber Rose and Kanesha Amber. Gwenda believes that the Spirit of Amber will live strongly in each one of these beautiful young women. Gwenda, as Amber's mother, will be watchful of Amber's teachings and she will offer thanks as each is received by the young girls. Pidamiye! Wopida! Midakuye Owasin!

Update:

Amber's remains were found on May 5, 2008 on Little Black Bear First Nation after a police sting operation. Two men, Albert Patrick Bellegarde, 29, and Gilbert Allan Bellegarde, 31, were charged with first degree murder. On December 12, 2008 the Crown stayed the first degree murder charge against Gilbert Bellegarde. On January 22, 2009 Albert Bellegarde pled guilty to second degree murder and was sentenced to life in prison with no chance of parole for 15 years

The family believes only one portion of the story was told by Albert Bellegarde's sentence. They feel that justice has been only partially served and that Gilbert Bellegarde should also be held responsible for his actions. Gwenda also firmly believes that some members of Little Black Bear First Nation knew what happened to Amber and kept silent. She believes it is important for First Nations communities to speak out in order to ensure that Aboriginal women and girls are safe.

A Message from Gwenda on behalf of Amber's Family:

Amber will not be forgotten. I will continue to speak out regarding my daughter's murder. I have written a poem for my daughter:

*I call to the Grandmothers in the West...hear my prayer...
I call on the Grandmothers in the North...hear my prayer...
I call on the Grandmothers in the East...hear my prayer...
I call on the Grandmothers in the South...hear my prayer.
Wicanhpi Duta Win I feel your presence...I listen to each message that you send...I see your beauty within the animals and the elements of Mother Earth...I am beginning to understand your purpose from which the Creator has given your spirit.*

*Creator, I give thanks for allowing me to be her mother, as do her father, her brothers, her grandmothers, her niece, her uncle, her auntie, her cousin, her friends... for allowing me to learn from her teachings...for allowing me to understand each gift she inspired.
Wicanhpi Duta Win, we are honoured to be a part of you.*

All my Relatives, I am pitiful, small and weak. I ask for your guidance and understanding as each day passes.

This journey that our family has endured taught us patience and enhanced our love as a family. When situations are difficult we think about the teachings they provide: Learn Life's Lessons, strengthen our Dakota Nation and ensure Prayers are being heard from the Wakan Tanka.

It has been very difficult to comprehend all that has happened within the last few months. In January 2009, our family was called to the Fort Qu'Appelle Detachment to hear the details and ask questions of Amber's murder. The very next day in the Court of Queen's Bench in Regina, SK we heard every detail of her tragedy. Amber's family felt the pain that she went through. It was very difficult to be in the same room as the person who murdered Amber and hear the story of how he disrespected a Dakota Woman. The auntie asked Albert Bellegarde to look at her but he did not have the strength to lift his head as we shared our stories of Amber's personality, of her family's love, of her many gifts. If only he had known who Amber was as a Dakota woman.

We do not believe that justice has been served. It was two years and ten months before arrests were made. One man remained in custody until sentencing, but the other was released in July 2008 and the charges against him have since been stayed. It is hard to understand. How is it that two men were charged with first-degree murder but eight months later one pleads guilty to second-degree murder and the other walks free?

It was very difficult to be in the same room as this person who took Amber's life and hear the story of how he murdered a Dakota Woman. I have been told that Amber forgave these two men for what they did to her. Amber's purpose here on Earth was to bring this issue of the missing

and murdered Women to the forefront because society did not see this as a priority. Search deep within your hearts and listen to the teachings that the Women bring to each family and let us not forget their role as Women.

We, as Women, are givers of life. We, as Women, have rights. Where are the leaders? Why are our missing and murdered Women not made a priority? I believe that if my daughter was a Caucasian Woman her disappearance would have made the national headlines, that the search for her would have begun immediately, that the media would have continued to keep her story alive and that people would have come from all walks of life to help in the search.

Leaders, help the many, many families who have missing loved ones. Too often the result is that our loved one is found murdered. We, as Canadians, tend to believe we live in a country that is rich in equality and rights. As one mother, I am challenging our leaders to initiate this change. Prioritize our Women's rights, put aside your meetings and stand strong beside our Women. Help us end the silence.

We need that balance to help find a solution as to why our Women are going missing and being murdered. Our communities need to take responsibility for the safety of our women and girls. Wrongs must be made into rights. We must honour the teachings of respect, honesty, empathy and compassion. I understand there is a Brothers in Spirit group who believe strongly that our Women need the strength from the Men, who believe this balance is a step in finding a solution to this issue.

I will be having a four year Memorial for the late Amber Redman and I want to invite each one who reads this story to come and join in celebrating her life as a Dakota Woman. There will be a Women's Volleyball Tournament and a Men's 3 on 3 Basketball Tournament. Amber enjoyed these sports and My family believes she will be there with us laughing, enjoying this time with all who attend. Lastly, Amber wanted me to personally thank all who contributed to solving this crime. Pidamiye! Wopida! (Thank you) Midakuye Owasin (All My Relatives)!