Nisiiminan Safe Rides

Nisiiminan in cree translates to “My Little Sister”. The Safe Rides is a local program that was conceived by Paulene Ballantyne from conversations with a group of UCN students expressing concerns for the safety of themselves and other women in the community. Especially when they are out socializing on the weekends. Coordinator Paulene Ballantyne spoke to me about the role of the safe rides program in the tri community and its design to protect young women living here.

Nisiiminan Safe rides is a nonprofit grassroots initiative designed for women to call for a safe ride home on the weekends. Safe Rides purpose is to create a service for women who many times are targets of violence, sexual exploitation, and murder. The conversations started in the fall of 2019 after the remains of a young woman, Kendara Ballantyne was found in a wooded area behind UCN. Kendara was just 18 years old when she went missing. The experienced team of the OCN Bear Clan found her remains after an extensive search in and around the community. The name “Nisiiminan” was selected by the family of Kendara, so that we do not forget her. The Nisiiminan Safe Rides is one of few safety themed projects created to keep women safe, create awareness to the dangers of walking alone and to be an advocate for those who may have experienced violence and or sexual assault and abuse. This group of concerned volunteers have put the safety of “My Little Sisters” into action. The Nisiiminan Safe Rides program allows women to access a free ride home at no charge, safely and without judgement.

Manitoba provincial statistics reports that the single greatest risk factor for experiencing sexual violence is to be a woman or girl or perceived as feminine. It is reported that other risk factors include age, ethnicity, being unmarried, geographic location, particularly those living in a small or rural community and living with a physical or mental disability (Canadian Women – Facts About Violence). They also report that indigenous women are 6 times more likely to experience sexual violence than a non-indigenous woman. Stats Canada indicates that 95% of sexual assaults are not reported to the police. The sad part of these stats is that only 5% of sexual assaults experienced by Canadians over the age of 15 are reported to the police.

It is from this statistical information as well as from recent events and past missing women in our community that the Nisiiminan Safe Rides is created and deemed valuable to young women’s safety.

Paulene Ballantyne explains that the program was met with skepticism at the beginning as women were unsure of the intent. It was necessary to be highly visible and identifiable as a viable program helping other women. Nisiiminan Safe Rides did the work of being visible in the local bars, streets, back lanes, and places where women would frequent on the weekends. The volunteers recognize that they need to be safe as well. They always go out with no less than two volunteers in a vehicle and use radios to stay connected to other Nisiiminan Safe Ride volunteers. All drivers and volunteers wear identifying vests and issue Safe Ride numbers that women can call for assistance. The team have a physical presence on the streets of the tri community as they drive down back lanes and main streets to ensure that women who may be trying to get home, do so safely. All of this happens in the late hours of the evening and early hours of the morning. Some weekends the Safe Ride volunteers are still out on the streets at 5 a.m. All the Nisiiminan Safe Ride volunteers are currently training in the Community Crisis Team Development through MKO Mobile Crisis Unit. This training provides holistic, culturally sensitive, and safe crisis response trauma intervention to First Nations in Manitoba. If there is a crisis in the community, it is important to intervene in a timely manner and ensure the crisis is supported and that after care is in place. Although the primary purpose of the Nisiiminan Safe Rides is to ensure that women receive a safe ride home, the volunteers value this additional training to better serve women who may be in a vulnerable situation.

Paulene is eager to launch the Safe Rides program to other communities within the Province. She is working with UCN, her instructor Noreen to collect data on the safe rides project to determine if it has a positive influence of reducing the numbers of women who are subject to violence, sexual abuse or worse. Although she wants to focus on indigenous women, she involves all women in her Safe Rides Program. Paulene is dedicated to encouraging all communities to develop similar programs which will help keep women safe. The Nisiiminan Safe Rides was operating until March at which time the pandemic struck. Safe Rides will start up again as soon as it is safe to do so.

As with other successful programs, it takes many community minded individuals to keep them running. Paulene recognizes this and appreciates the contributions of her team members: Tammy, Corey, David, Janet, Juliet, Joy Britney and Keltz. They would volunteer weekend after weekend to ensure the safety of women in our community. They truly are amazing people who care for others. You can connect with this group by contacting nisiiminansafe@gmail.com or phone 1-431-355-0798.

It takes many to keep our community safe. Pauline and her crew of volunteers through the Safe Rides believe in giving back to the community. They are making a difference.