

Episode 2.20 Justice for Our Stolen Children with Robyn Pitawanakwat, Richelle Dubois, Satin Denny, and Gaylene Henry

June 1, 2018

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Hey Babes. This episode is pretty special. I'm interrupting my planned release order. Sorry, Alba and Jennifer and Emily because of the unturn-downable opportunity offered to me this week. I just got back from Regina, Saskatchewan where I was attending the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences. That's a big conference that happens in Canada every year. Regina is also the home of friend of the podcast, Michelle Stewart, a brilliant academic and activist who you might remember from season one, episode three. Michelle introduced me to some extraordinary women she's been working with and asked would I like to record an episode with them. I said, okay. I would say, let's go. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Our guests today are Robyn Pitawanakwat, Richelle Dubois, Satin Denny, and Gaylene Henry. Because there'll be introducing themselves in the episode, instead of going to tell you a bit more about the camp. In the wake of Raymond Cormier and Gerald Stanley's acquittals, community members from Regina are camping on the lawn of the Saskatchewan legislature demanding justice for Indigenous youth. Indigenous people are having their children taken from them by child protective services, the justice system, and violence. If and when the time comes to have their day in court, no justice is delivered. I sat down this week with Robyn, Richelle, Satin, and Gaylene to talk about the work they're doing at the camp. [Music: "That's Alright" by Laura Mvula]

Robyn: My name is Robyn Pitawanakwat. I am here to help families get reunified and to support the families of Colton Boushie and Haven Dubois, and other families that are seeking justice for their lost loved one. Yeah, that's who I am.

Richelle: My name is Richelle Dubois. I was one amongst four of us that started the Justice for Our Stolen Children Camp.

Satin: My name is Satin Denny. I'm from Red Pheasant First Nation. And I'm here to support of my people, and also this part of my brother Colton Boushie, and also just here for my people and children, and to share my story of the things I've been through past couple of years with the trauma and everything that has happened.

Gaylene: My name's Gaylene Henry and I'm a Cree, Cree woman from Ochapowace First Nation. I am here to raise awareness for Indigenous issues, and I'm here to

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

support the families and to support my people, and to do anything I can to help, to help inform people. And you know, I'm also here in support of my family.

Hannah (Host): Thank you all so much. So the first question I'm gonna ask, I'm going ask, you know, probably these first questions just for whoever would like to, to answer them. So the first question, if you could tell the listeners a little bit about the camp, about how long it's been here, and about what work you're doing with the camp, set sort of where we're, we're, where we are sitting right now.

Richelle: I'm Richelle Dubois and I was sitting on a couch one night after the Colton Boushie trial verdict and the Tina Fontaine verdict, and I was looking and somebody had set up a camp in Winnipeg. For me, I was onboard already. I was already thinking the same, "what can I do, what can, what can be done?" And I was just going to come out and set up a tent, and I informed, or I let some of my friends know what I was about to do, and they backed me right up. And in an hour, I believe, things were good to go. It was that fast. That's a work with a strong team of supporters from all backgrounds. For me, I am still seeking justice for my son Haven Dubois. It's going to be three years. I found him in the Pilot Butte Creek, and I want to, I want an inquiry looking into the case and how it was handled through RPS, the coroner's office and the Minister of Justice. So I'm still working form my son's case. When we started this, there was myself, my son Prescott, and Shannon. There was four of us. We set up two tents and we had the fire going by lunchtime. That's all. Did the sacred fire, put some sage in, had a prayer. Sacred. We had few other tents come in and other people supporting. We had a lot of support. We have a lot of support. So yeah, we've been here for 91 days now. My fellow colleagues and friends, Prescott and Shannon, have been here from day one, are the backbone of the camp, and we really respect them and what they are doing here as well. There's a whole team of us, there's a team behind the scenes that people don't see. There's, we're a family now. We're a group, we're, we're together. So, and we've had all kinds of people come and stop in support, let us know that they support us from all over the world, the United States, across Canada, all different backgrounds. The Sikhs had their Sikh Day just across the street over there and we were engaged with them. They, some people came over here. There was also a walk for the genocide in Rwanda. Some people from over there came across and had a visit with us. So yeah, we've been getting some good response from all kinds of people. And in our, we've had over 1200 visitors come that have signed the book. And that's not to mention the ones that we did, they didn't sign the book before they left, so there's a little bit more than that.

Hannah (Host): So I've, I've spoken to about Colton Boushie and Tina Fontaine on the podcast before, but I also like, when I, when I try to do the work of contextualizing that for my listeners, that also comes from a place of, of a lack of understanding of reading articles, of sort of hearing people's stories. And I think if anybody was willing to speak to sort of a sense that I have that losing Colton and that the Gerald Stanley verdict was sort of the straw that broke the camel's back in an ongoing system and pattern of violence, rather than being a sort of, you know, one, one incident. And I think that's a context that a lot of settlers are missing, is

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

the sort of, you know, the, the larger story and the larger context that, that a lot of these conversations are part of. I wonder if anybody would sort of be able to speak a bit to that larger context.

Robyn:

I think for the majority of Indigenous people, we're used to our cases, when, when our loved ones pass, when they are taken, we're used to those cases falling through the cracks. I, I think that I, I can only speak for myself in that this was a case where there was a smoking gun. He admitted to killing Colton. There was no one else suspected of having done it. And he was able to say, "yes, I did it, but it's okay because..." and like, that is just devastating. And then the same thing with the Tina Fontaine case, knowing that these people, both of these white men admitted at different points to having killed these Indigenous young people. And that's okay. There's no problem with that in the justice system. Justice is served. These people get to walk free. They get to live their lives and the families are left devastated. And the rest of us who are seeking justice for our loved ones, for, for people like Richelle, our, our other friends, the Machiskinic family, they don't even have somebody who's come forward as a suspect. And so to know that when you have all of those things lined up, you have the suspect, you have the weapon, you have the place. You know all those things, and still there's no justice. I think it's devastating to see that over and over again. And this is certainly not the first time in Saskatchewan, not the first time in Manitoba. And the more we sit here, the more stories we hear from other people— I've been a member of Saskatchewan Coalition Against Racism for quite a number of years, and my stepfather has been a member since its inception and he brought us a story out of White Bear, where if you took out the names of the people, it sounded exactly like the Colton-Stanley scenario. And so this has been going on for so long. And the only thing that's different about this case is it's getting international attention.

Gaylene:

Just as like, my experience in being an, a Cree woman and an Indigenous woman, I find myself constantly fighting stereotypes. And that's what the system sees. The system sees the stereotypes. So we bring it on ourselves. And that's the mentality that a lot of people have. You know, like, oh, you know, like once they find out alcohol or drugs have been involved or not involved, it's still somehow our responsibility that we've gotten ourselves hurt or that we've gotten ourselves killed. And you know, it's really, you know, I try not to think about it, but it's, you know, when it comes to where I feel like I'm disposable, and nobody should have to feel that way. You know, like, no person should have to feel like, you know, if you went missing tomorrow, nobody would, nobody but my family would care. And I understand, you know, what's happening. And I kind of have a feeling about, you know, what's happened and a family experience, you know, it's happened personally in my own family. So I think if we can just, you know, raised people's levels of consciousness about the Indian experience and about our ongoing experience being aboriginal people. You know, we're not, all drunks were not all druggies, you know. We're not all uneducated. And you know, just because they speak with an accent does not make me uneducated. It just happens to be a Cree accent. It could be if I was from France and came over here and spoke with the French accent, you know,

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

that doesn't make me any less educated. I just happen to have an accent. So, you know, I, I think, you know, if we can bring more awareness to, to our issues and to who we are as a nation and as a people like, if we can start planting the seeds now because I, you know, I don't want my nieces and my nephews and my grandchildren to have to face or hear or see or experience the things that I have had to. It's 20-effing-18 already, you know, come on, you know. We evolved physically now we just gotta evolve mentally. So...

Satin: This happening to my brother and it kind of opens up, it opened up the doors that have been shut for a while to our people. And because of this happening— letting Gerald Stanley walk free— that it opens up their door to say, "okay, it's okay to fire and shoot people." You know, because most of these people, most of the farms are, there are reserves around them, so they know. So this gives them more level just to go and do what they want. I mean,

Richelle: When you say like, the reserves that are so close, I know I would drive from the city here to my reserve sometimes twice a day and there was never any— it was a road that I've taken several million times in my life and after the verdict of Colton's case there, one night I was driving like I usually do with my little sister and we were taking the back roads as I usually do and it dawned on me that I didn't have the very best car, and my cell phone was dying, and if anything happened, like I got really scared and terrified. And I think me and my sister realized that at the same time as to "Whoa," like "what are we going to do if you break down? "You're not going to walk to the closest farmer's house. You know, you just sit there like a waiting duck. So that's how I felt and that really scared me, and like I've never felt so, so scared in your own backyard. Like it was okay. Like I felt like someone could just come up and shoot us right there. So there is, you know, with the reserves and the farmland, it's, there's a line there now that has always been there, but now it's more public I guess, and more, you know, everybody knows. Because it's more visible and you can see it when you go to town. By the smaller towns on the reserve. Like you can see it, you can feel it. It's just, it's there.

Robyn: I'd just like to add to that too, that it's not just a feeling, a sense that we have, it's very public that they are actually are groups called Farmers With Firearms that are being incredibly vocal about how it should be their right to stand their ground even though we don't have Stand Your Ground laws. And there was an organization, the Rural Municipalities Organization here in Saskatchewan that actually voted to put forward requests for legislation to be changed so that they could shoot anybody that comes onto their property. And, you know, they don't mean anybody.

Hannah (Host): They sure don't.

Robyn: And so like, it is a very real fear now. And Saskatchewan is an isolated place. We have farms everywhere. You want to drive anywhere to do anything simple out, right outside the city, you know, if you're a brown person or if you're a parent

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

that has very visibly brown children, you're at risk in a very different way than everybody else.

Gaylene:

To add onto that, it's, you know, like I've, I've, I've grown up in this city, but I've also, you know, since I've come home, I've lived most of my time on reserve and in, in the rural setting. So like, it was quite a culture shock for me to come home to my own backyard. Like Richelle said, you know, I shouldn't be scared on, in my own backyard. And what really made me think after Colton's case was like, my brother lives on an acreage. It's on reserve land, but it's off reserve. It's, it used to be somebody's farm but are, you know, now he lives on it and I like, I'm scared. Like, if somebody rolled up and, you know, wanted to do my brother harm— and my brother is a hunter so he has firearms—and if my brother had to defend themselves, would he get the same treatment in the system? I don't think so. And I can, I can, I can confidently say that and you know, to, to be able to confidently says that makes me very sad. It's, you know, I think that the cases that have been coming out, a lot of things come to a head. And you know, what the younger generation of people, we have more people that are willing to speak out and then we have older people like myself that are just sick of it. And I don't care if I'm going to be, you know, the loud mouth or if people don't like me, you know. I'm not going to stay quiet anymore. You know, I've stayed quiet my entire life and it hasn't done me any good. So might as well just, "rawr," [Laughs] You know, like, that's my little "rawr" for now. But yeah, you know, like it, you know, you, you'll be hard pressed to find Indigenous people in Saskatchewan that have not lost a loved one and have not gotten justice for it, or somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody. You know, if it hasn't touched your own family, it's touched your friend's family. And to say that makes me very sad because it, we're such a small percent of the population, but the more we can educate— because we are the fastest growing demographic— so the more we educate, like the more that we, you know, make our children aware of their surroundings, and make them aware of the environment they're growing up in so they can be that change, you know. And that's what I hope to see in my lifetime.

Satin:

I myself used to live two miles away from Gerald Stanley, not knowing. I grew up there on a farm. So yeah, I just never felt that way, felt threatened we would be hurt or anything like that. And I used to also jog by Gerald Stanley's not knowing that was Gerald Stanley's farm. I ran those back roads a lot and not once did I ever think I was in danger. And then today, after all this happened, now it's hard to go around even to events with white people because you have that feeling now of "are they racist," and you're looking at them, "do they, do they hate us that much?" They have that much hate on us right now? You know, and it is, it's hard to even be in the area where I'm at right now in the group sessions that I'm taking that even looking at them, the people that are trying to help me are they secretly racist underneath? I mean, a lot of this has opened a lot of thought to my people now. Now we have to be cautious of who's who. I mean there's been so many threats, we've dealt with so much hate and it's all been open and it's out there now and it's sad. You know, it's sad that we get judged right off the bat just because of the color of our skin. It's hard. It is.

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

Richelle: I feel like for, for my son, he was judged before, he was judged before his body was even cold. They had already said that it was non suspicious before I got home from the hospital that day, and they wrote them off right away. And the whole, right from the beginning, the investigation was shoddy, if that. I mean that's still being nice. They, they made, the cops made us feel like we were, we were criminals instead of the victim. The way they did their investigation was really hard, hard to deal with and I'm still fighting them. And you know, I see other families as well fighting the system. And when with Colton, Tina, it makes me angry because this is what we have to do to fight for our children. You know, we try so hard to protect our children. You know, we know about residential schools, the Sixties Scoop. You know, we try to keep our children close. The foster home, the foster care system, all of it. I tried so hard to protect my child and he was at school when this all happened. You know, you can't even send your child to school anymore without worrying what's going to happen between them that time when they're gone out of your sight until they get back. And it's even, with the case and everything being so public, you know, I worry about my, my other son, my young sisters, my nieces and nephews, what they have to grow up in, and how scared, the scary feelings for them to go to school to get an education, for them to go to the park. You know, there was a couple incidents of people trying to abduct children around here. There's something really recent that I heard today actually, of an incident on the reserve, not too far from here, of someone trying to abduct the child off the reserve. And now there's a post going around saying, telling everybody to watch your children even on the reserve because they're trying to take them off the reserve now. So the system was not meant for us. It's doing exactly what it was meant to do and that was to protect the settlers.

Hannah (Host): I was reading recently a really wonderful book by a Black American activist Ijeoma Oluo, who's writing about why Black people don't trust police and she gives the history of it. She says, you know, if you want to understand this, you need to understand the origin of the police system in America, which was to catch runaway slaves. So why would you ever trust that system? And the history in Canada so similar. It's like we ask the, the history of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police in western Canada was a overtly an arm of colonialism. So, so why would you trust the system to care for you and your families when you know this is the history of the system? I would really love to return also to sort of, you know, what you were saying about, about stereotypes and how harmful they are. And a suspicion I have so often with so many settler Canadians who either have or believe they have never sat down and had a conversation with an Indigenous person, and that you can live in Canada your whole life and just never have a conversation with somebody whose land you're living on. And how much, how much I think— I mean, and this might be just like idealistic bullshit on my part— I think a lot of people would like understand things differently if they had more conversations with people. That is obviously not the case when we're looking at places, like you said, you know, you used to run by Gerald Stanley's house everyday. So that, so you have to say like, people are living right next door to you and are still capable of this kind of violence then like, you know, getting to know each other better is obviously not, not an answer, which

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

is where I think we also, we need that two-sided approach. Right? Like a lot of people need to get a lot better at having conversations and then we also need some like, some transformation of systems so there's possibilities for justice.

Robyn:

You did ask earlier what all our roles are within the camp, and there are people that are here in camp that do the day to day maintaining of the camp. That's an incredibly important job. There are fire keepers, there's elders, then there's the family members who bring forward the stories. And then there's a few of us who hang out in the background and when families come into the camp to let, like what they're doing is they're reaching out and saying, "yeah, me too. This happened to our family as well." And there are some ways that we can support families that are actively dealing with custody cases where their children have been removed from their home. One of the cases of one of the key members of the camp, she is fighting to get her grandchildren back. She has four grandchildren. They have never all lived together. They are currently all in separate foster situations. Three of them are in foster homes and one, a small six year old child, is in a facility already. So we like to believe we don't have orphanages anymore or anything like that. We don't have residential schools anymore, but we have these systems that perpetuate all the same problems. So one of the things that we are actively working on right now is, as people bring their stories forward, we are trying to find ways to support them. So we are, we're going to family court with them. Then we're going to their lawyer's office with them. We're going to social services or the child protective services offices with them to let these agents of discrimination know that these people are supported, they have community, they have family and they are the people that need to have their children. Not these overcrowded homes with people that don't even teach these children still that they are Indigenous. One of the children that we're, whose family were working with, he didn't even know he was aboriginal. And I mean there's no mistaking that this child is aboriginal, he doesn't look white. But I think they're, they're, they're still trying to kill the Indian in the child. And, and yeah, we're, we're actively working against that and we're doing it all on a volunteer basis. We're watching these people who make a career out of removing children and we're fighting back with every spare minute we have, every tiny resource that comes in. And hopefully we're taking a bit of, a chunk out of, out of the system and we've had some, some successes while we've been here increasing visits. There is a lot of family members that their visits aren't regular, or they're only one hour every couple of weeks, and so we've been able to increase the frequency and then the length of time. And then hopefully we're, we're going to be reuniting families as well. And we'll continue the work whether the camp is here or not. It would be great if the camp could stay because then people know where they can come. Like today, we actually had, the people came in together, they had an appointment at the legislative building, but they saw the camp and came in. And already we were able to make more calls and assist them in a much more tangible way than anything that's going to happen inside that building. And so they still went inside the building to see what, what could happen in that direction, but you know, we'll be, we'll be showing up in court with them and we'll be going to

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

legal aid with them to file the paperwork. And yeah, we'll, we'll continue to support families. Whoever comes in we'll be there.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. That didn't occur to me as a, another function of, of being here, and being present and being visible is that people know that they can come and that you can sort of, you know, make space for other people to, to come and draw on the resources that you've built here, which is really remarkable. How is, so you've been here for, for 91 days, which is really incredible. Has it been a fight to be able to stay here?

Richelle: Well, the first day we were here, I did get served a letter saying that I had to be off the property by 5:00 that day. So I messaged my good friend Evan Bray and told him that I am camped out in front of the ledge and I got served, they're asking me to leave, I'm not going and left it at that. I got his reply was "I respect what you're doing. Okay." And we left it at that. They have come in a couple of times, a RPS, but pretty much no, they have been leaving this alone. Nobody has come in and told us we had to force be out here. Just that one. And the guy that served me was actually the janitor, I believe from across the street. They sent over the janitor to ask us what we were doing when we were setting up camp and then he went back. And then later that day somebody came and just handed me a letter and that's all it said was, "you need a permit. Do you have no permit? Basically be off by five." And I said, "okay." Yeah, not going to happen.

Robyn: Evan Bray is the police chief here.

Hannah (Host): I didn't know that.

Robyn: Direct line of communication with police chief.

Hannah (Host): That is great. So I mean this may be a silly question and please go ahead and tell me if I'm asking a silly question, how long will you stay?

Richelle: Well, we're at 91 days now. I mean, anything is possible. That's, I'll leave it at that. I mean I, my fight continues. The camp is a good platform for other families to come. And we support each other and hearing the stories to know that I'm not alone in this fight. And with the support that I have of, you know, my friends here, they have helped me earlier before the camp fighting, coming with me to meetings and listening to what they had to say, and filing paperwork and, and not all of them are first nation. And I could honestly say that I've had a lot more settler friends back me up than I did my own people from different levels of the community, whether it be the organizations or FSIN or AFN, you know, they're there to take a picture with me. And that's about as far as that ever went. So the settler friends that I have, they're awesome. They're, you know, so when building a community here, it's not just first nations here. There's a lot of, you know, different people from different backgrounds that come hang out, come on a regular basis, or are working behind the scenes in

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

other ways that they can help. You know, some of them can't be here all the time, but they can, you know, help organize this and that, or you know, "oh, I know a friend who..." you know, communication and having some good allies.

Gaylene: The camp was set up like, in the middle of winter. So it was already like what, well into the minus twenties and right after it's set up there was a huge dumping of snow. So, you know, and I was talking to my brother about this and he just said, "you know, what, don't worry, it's going to get warmer." And it, it's true. So, and you know, like, I think that, that the, the, the people that have come to camp have come and they feel they feel it's a safe space to share their story, and that they feel like they're going to be listened to by actual other people. And you know, like, you know, I really commend Robyn and Richelle and for actively helping these people, for giving them that hope, and for, for allowing them to have that, that little bit of light at the end of the tunnel they can show them a little bit. And you know, even one of the, one of the ladies that comes to camp, she, when she first came to camp, you know, she was very down and, and like I, I, I saw her and you know, like it was her spirit had totally changed and she was so happy, and her partner had told me that she was getting help, and like now the, the, the system is working with her instead of against her, and that's given her so much hope. And you can see it on her face, you know. And just, I think the camp has done a really good job of bringing people together, and you know, making people feel, have that safety to come and share their stories because, you know, they're not all good stories. And a lot of people just do come and vent and you know, that's fine too. And if they feel safe enough to do that at camp, that's, you know, that's good too. You know, it's better than venting in negative ways. So yeah, I'm really proud of what my cousin has accomplished with the camp and her drive and determination, and the had to have everybody with a camp is really inspiring. And that's what I want to come, that's what I want the city to see. That's what I want everybody like, everybody to see, you know. So it's, it's been a very positive experience.

Hannah (Host): You refer to, to sort of different people having different roles. Is there any other kinds of work being done in the camp that we haven't talked about yet?

Richelle: So Prescott, one of our main campers and top guys here, he gets a lot of stories. People come in and talk to him and vent to him because he's sitting here with the fire. People want to come around the fire and they should feel that it's a safe place and they'll tell their stories, and they feel comfortable enough to, to come in. And so Prescott, he is our ears at the fire, and he does a good job of it. He's our fire keeper and we're all so proud him and love the guy.

Robyn: One thing that's pretty amazing about Prescott too is that I think he has a secret feminist agenda of his own and he has facilitated that this camp has been open to trans issues, to issues about gender and sexuality. And he is, is helping a lot of macho Indigenous guys know that actually the way that we express gender and sexuality, currently is very colonial, and very problematic, and very harmful for all of us. And so he chips away at a lot of those stereotypes that the, that some of our men have. And also some settler men too, so it's a pretty amazing space

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

to be. But as you can see, perhaps we have some flags flying. And there's five flags, one of them is the trans flag So it is, it's a beautiful space.

Hannah (Host): And that speaks so much to how all of these questions always intersect. Like you can't talk about gender and the oppression of trans people without talking about the colonial inheritance of the gender binary. You can't, you know, you've got to, you've got to bring these conversations together, and it sounds just so central to have a space where those conversations can happen. We're at a really great length, but is there anything?

Robyn: So we have two fundraisers that we're actively doing right now. One is the Haven Dubois Memorial Fund, which will be giving a scholarship to Haven's classmates this year. He would have graduated from high school this year. He was a very intelligent young man, and I think Richelle and the rest of her family and the people that know her have no doubt that he would have, he would have been there with his graduating class. So there is a fundraiser for that and donations can be made to havenmemorialfund@gmail.com. So e-transfers can be sent to that. And then also for the camp itself, we have a, a space for e-transfers. And that's a colonialismnomore@gmail.com. We do not go through Go Fund Me anymore, as we know they had a pretty terrible stance on the Stanley Go Fund Me and we will not use that platform again. And so yeah, those are the two places that you can send e-transfers to. The money will go to very good things.

Hannah (Host): That's really wonderful. Thank you all so much for your time today. Thanks for speaking with me and to all the people on the other side of this mic. Everybody's really, really gonna appreciate getting to hear about the work you're doing. [Music: "That's Alright" by Laura Mvula]

Hannah (Host): You can find show notes including those email addresses for donating, as well as all the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor. And you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. Also, you can rate and review the show and you should. The podcast's theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album *Chub Rub*. You can download the entire album on freemusicarchive.org, or follow them on Facebook. Robyn, Richelle, and Satin, and Gaylene's theme song was "That's Alright" by Laura Mvula. *Secret Feminist Agenda* is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh first nations, where I'm grateful to live and work. This week's episode was recorded on Treaty Four territory. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans].