

The story of Cheryl M., in relation to Carleen M., Public Volume 59

Cheryl is a Mohawk grandmother, a matriarch of the Kanesatake Wolf clan and is the youngest of four daughters. Cheryl's sister, Carleen, went missing in the early hours of September 4, 1988; her skeletal remains were found in the nearby forest two kilometers from where she was last seen alive.

Cheryl and Carleen's parents are Mohawk; their father was born at Akwesasne and their mother at Kanesatake. Cheryl and Carleen were both born in Malone, New York. When Cheryl was one-year old, the family moved from the McDonald farm at Akwesasne and the sisters were raised in the Onondaga Nation, in the heart of the Iroquois Confederacy south of Syracuse.



The children participated in the longhouse ceremonies, but went to public school where they graduated. They lived in two worlds and visited their parent's families at Akwesasne and Kanasatake during holidays and summer vacations.

Carleen was 14 months older than Cheryl. As Cheryl described her, Carleen “was a rambunctious little spirit; oh God, she used to drive my parents crazy. She was defiant.”⁴⁴ At age 16, Carleen got pregnant and dropped out of school. The baby's father was in the military and was 10 years older than Carleen. He was the love of her life. She had three children with him. Carleen's relationship with her partner became complicated. He was psychologically and physically violent with her and the children, and he drank. “[H]e controlled her, emotionally and physically.”⁴⁵ Their home gradually became an unhealthy environment for the children. Over time, Carleen's parents took two of her children into their home. Cheryl's relationship with Carleen also had many ups and downs. Cheryl never knew what to expect from her sister. She gradually distanced herself from her.

In July 1988, Carleen and her partner separated. Carleen and the youngest child who was still in her custody moved back in with Carleen's parents. In the weeks that followed, Carleen's ex-partner told her he had fallen in love with another woman. Devastated and heartbroken, Carleen confided in her three sisters that losing her first love hurt so much, that she felt like killing herself. At that time, her sisters did not worry too much about what she said; they advised her to move on, telling her that she could find someone better.

Cheryl knew Carleen had spoken on the telephone with her ex-partner before she went to bed the day before her disappearance. Their mother reported that after the phone call, Carleen had been crying, and told her parents he was not coming back for three weeks. The family never knew what they talked about, but Cheryl thinks that Carleen must have begged him to take her back and he rejected her.

The following morning, Carleen's mother asked her youngest granddaughter to go and wake her mother up for breakfast. It was then they realized Carleen wasn't there. She had left a brief handwritten message saying that she was going out and would be back around noon. The family initially thought she went out with her cousins or friends from Akwesasne to try to forget about the breakup. All that seemed to be missing was a bottle of rum she purchased previously. She left behind her jewelry, purse and clothing, but she never came back. No one seemed to know where she was. Her disappearance was reported to the police after 48 hours had passed.

The family had the impression that the police did not make much of an effort to search for her. They told the family that they had searched the woods and found nothing. The family looked everywhere else walking through private and common lands in the cornfields, swamps, fields and wooded areas crossing the international border between Snye, Quebec and New York State. They spoke with individuals who might know Carleen's whereabouts. Soon, everyone was devastated and mistrusted the Mohawk police. The family began to question the police's competence in handling the missing person investigation. They started to fear everyone around them, and they became isolated as a family.



Carleen's body was found seven weeks later, in the woods where the police said they had already searched. Cheryl always believed says that the investigation should have been carried out by the Sûreté du Québec and the New York State Troopers or County Sheriff's police forces to access more experienced investigators. The Mohawk police seemed to believe Carleen's ex-partner's character and his alibi in the first days of her disappearance. Cheryl watched his actions and behaviors and she felt that he was hiding some details and did not seem to help in the foot searches. After Carleen's skeletal remains were taken from the forest floor by the Akwesasne Police and emergency medical responders, members of Cheryl's family were surprised to find all of some of Carleen's scalp hair on a blue blanket near at the spot where her decayed remains body had were found. No photos were ever shared with the family, and the family never saw the missing person's file.

The Akwesasne Mohawk police quickly concluded that the death was a suicide based on the coroner's reported cause of death due to "hypothermia". This fact was difficult for the family to accept, because many of them were suspicious of Carleen's ex-partner. The family always believed he knew more than he was telling about the state of Carleen's mental health at the time of her disappearance and the history and extent of domestic violence she had experienced. Following Carleen's death, the grieving process was difficult. Cheryl and other family members did not reach out for professional supports; instead, they focused on their own families, marriages and work, which kept them occupied and busy. They only spoke privately about Carleen, but never cried and grieved. They each buried this pain from each other only to share in private their own individual theories and conclusions. After 31 years, since Carleen's suspicious death, there are still too many unanswered questions: "Losing a sister, not knowing where she is, what happened to her; finding her body by chance and then grieving and not knowing for sure what happened to her. So we didn't grieve."⁴⁶ Carleen's ex-partner died ten years after Carleen without giving her family any satisfactory answers. Cheryl still believes he held back important details, and they will never know the truth.

In her life-affirming testimony, Cheryl emphasized the importance of talking about our missing or murdered sisters: "So we have to talk about this; I know it's painful to hear about, you know, what's happening to our sisters. But we have to; we have to feel to heal, and I tell you: I cried, a lot."⁴⁷ She also spoke about the problems that affect communities and the importance of regaining pride in their culture as a way toward healing. Cheryl ended her testimony by honouring her sister's memory.

And I have to honour her, honour her for showing me how life ends or life begins; and she was my greatest teacher. And in our traditional Iroquois beliefs, when someone dies, they say, "They came in our lives for a reason, to teach us." And so, she was my teacher; she showed me how to be strong; how to communicate if someone's mistreating me. How to love my kids when I didn't feel like it because I was grieving or feeling angry. The family just shut down the painful memories and tried to carry on, while their parents became parents to their grandchildren and they struggled to make a life despite the anguish.⁴⁸