Women's Memorial March relevant to justice students

On Feb. 14, when the 27th annual Women's Memorial March makes its way through the streets of the Downtown Eastside, students from Native Education College (NEC) will be among the supporters. While all NEC students are encouraged to partake in the event that honours the lives of missing and murdered Downtown Eastside women, it is a cause especially relevant to students of the Aboriginal justice studies (AJS) program.

“The majority of students who take this program are Indigenous students and it gives them a critical perspective into understanding why they are the way they are by examining how colonization and genocide has affected Indigenous nations in particular,” says Tamara Starblanket, the program’s coordinator. “Events like this are not only an opportunity for students to get involved in the community and sometimes help with community organization but they are also part of the healing process.”

AJS is a one-year offering that explores topics related to crime and deviance, the criminal justice system and the role of law, including Aboriginal conceptions and practices of law and policing.

Through theory, case studies and group work, students also examine the challenges Aboriginal people face in the criminal justice system, and how Aboriginal cultural approaches to corrections, policing and courts help to address the result of colonization — which, says Starblanket, is evident in the over-representation of Aboriginal people processed by courts and prisons.

The program, she says, also includes a real world component in the form of a practicum placement that allows students to gain experience working with agencies and organizations related to criminal and social justice.

“We’ve had students working at a range of organizations such as border services, corrections, with police or native court workers and even the Red Cross,” says Starblanket, who is also the author of the upcoming release Suffer the Little Children: Genocide, Indigenous Nations and the Canadian State — a book whose themes she says she incorporates into the classes she teaches.

Because the credits students earn in AJS are transferable to degree programs at Simon Fraser University and the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology, many graduates, says Starblanket, choose to continue their studies.