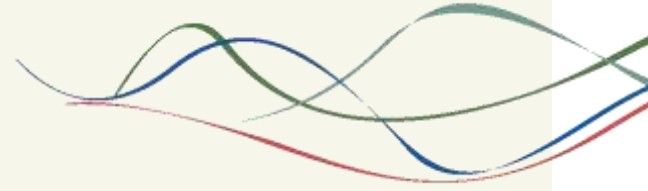




NATIVE WOMEN'S
ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

L'ASSOCIATION DES FEMMES
AUTOCHTONES DU CANADA



Storytelling: Danita'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.

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The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is honoured to work with families of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls to share the story of their loved one. To view all of the stories shared, or for more information this work, please visit NWAC's website at www.nwac.ca.



“It won’t always be like this”: Danita BigEagle’s Story

Danita Faith BigEagle was born in Arcola, Saskatchewan, on March 6, 1984. She is the mother of two children, Cassidy and Talon, and she has five brothers and sisters. Danita has been missing since February 11, 2007.

Danita was a quiet and happy child from Ocean Man First Nation. She loved movies and music and enjoyed watching her sisters dance. The youngest of six children, Danita’s older sisters and brother were always there to ensure her safety; in fact, her two sisters acted like mini mothers to Danita. Beloved by her parents Dianne and Doug BigEagle, Danita was happiest when they were together. She shared a close relationship with her mother. Her father was protective of his little girl. When Danita brought a boyfriend home as a teen her father grilled him, “Do you have a job? Do you have a car?” to which the boy replied, “I’m only 14!” At that, Danita’s father showed the boy the door.

As a child, Danita’s quiet nature caused adults around her to wonder whether something was wrong. Later, Danita was diagnosed with attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder. From the outset Danita’s mother, Dianne BigEagle, did not believe that anything was wrong with Danita and did not want her to take prescription medication. Yet after Danita saw seven specialists, Dianne conceded to the so-called experts and Danita began taking Ritalin. Doctors kept Danita and Dianne in the dark regarding important matters such as the amount of time Danita would need to take Ritalin and methods to get off it.

Danita’s personality changed immediately after going on the medication; she became focused, outgoing and her school grades improved significantly. But not all of the effects of this medication were positive. As she got older, Danita began to express feelings of hopelessness regarding her use of Ritalin. Dianne says Danita “started to change at about 17. She didn’t want to be dependent on the stuff. She said, ‘I could never be this or I could never be that because they’re going to say I’m a drug addict because of these pills.’” Although doctors reassured Dianne that her daughter would have no problems detoxifying, that was not the case. Danita told her mother that she could not live without Ritalin. Dianne is sure that Ritalin is “what turned [Danita] into a drug addict.”

As a youth, Danita encountered other obstacles. Her mother and father separated and her time was split between both parents. Danita was placed in Marival School, one which operated similarly to a residential school, but was quickly withdrawn from the institution by her mother, herself having attended residential school for eight years. At age 17, Danita began to date a boyfriend who was abusive towards her. Dianne believes that their relationship was unhealthy, due in large part to the fact that Danita’s boyfriend was also on Ritalin. Danita had her first child, a daughter named Cassidy, at 18. She was excited about the pregnancy

and formed a bond with her daughter immediately. Although she was struggling with alcohol and drug use, Danita tried very hard to beat these addictions during her pregnancy. Once born, Cassidy became Danita's passion. Although she was still battling addictions, Danita was determined to go back to school and find a place where she could build a home for herself and Cassidy. When Danita was a child and her parents were drinking, her grandmother, who was one of her greatest teachers, would reassure Danita that her parents "will not always be like this." In the same caring and hopeful manner, Danita would tell her little girl, "I won't always be like this." In an attempt to keep her promise, Danita was in and out of treatment centers trying to get better.

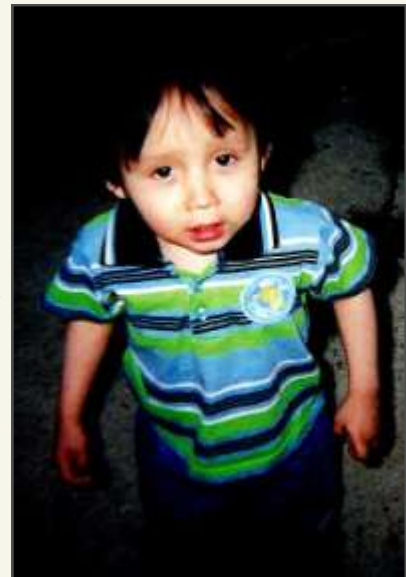


Cassidy, Danita's daughter

Dianne last saw Danita on Friday, February 9, 2007. Dianne was the caretaker to Cassidy and son Talon while Danita fought drug and alcohol addictions. Danita was supposed to visit the following Monday and Dianne was disappointed when Danita did not show up. Dianne checked all of her daughter's usual hangouts and spoke to her peers but no one had seen Danita. Usually Danita would contact her mother when she was away from home and if not, Dianne would be able to locate Danita with relative ease. This time was different.

Dianne's next move was to phone the police. Police gave Dianne what she calls "a rough time" during this conversation. Dianne told the officer more than once that she thought her daughter was missing, but police did not immediately release any information. Finally, the officer told Dianne that Danita was not at the police station and suggested Dianne check the area hospitals. Dianne then "turned the city upside down looking for her."

Dianne reported Danita missing to the Regina Police Service on February 14, 2007. No immediate action was taken. Rather, police told Dianne that it was likely Danita was out partying and that Dianne would find her daughter before they would. It was very clear that they did not believe that Danita was missing. At this point, Dianne was forced to take matters into her own hands and she combed the town speaking to as many people as possible. Two weeks went by before Dianne, fed up with police inaction, marched down to the station and demanded that something be done to locate Danita. Dianne had to convince police officers that Danita really was missing by citing bizarre occurrences, such as Danita not returning home to change, eat or pick up her money. Nothing added up for Dianne. The police responded, "Give us some time or give us a place to look." Dianne replied, "I think I'm doing your job."



Talon, Danita's son

Through personal investigation, Dianne discovered that Danita has been seen at least three times since February 11, 2007. The first sighting was in Winnipeg where a man and woman said that Danita was at the Manwin Hotel for a couple of days, just one week before Dianne arrived in the city to search for her daughter. Danita introduced herself by the name “Tania Duck.” When Dianne thought back to the use of the alias, she recalled that Danita liked the name “Tania” and that Danita’s father’s nickname is John “Duck.” Another two women from Broadview, Saskatchewan, say that they met Danita at the Manwin Hotel and she introduced herself as Danita BigEagle. They did not think anything of the meeting until they saw Danita’s missing person poster at a gas station. Danita was last seen at the Coachman Hotel in Regina. While these tips are encouraging, they take their toll on Dianne who feels the need to personally follow up on each and every one. Equally trying are false reports or rumours that circulate in communities that Danita has been found. When Danita’s missing person posters are taken down, searching is made more difficult for the family and everyone else involved. The search is still on.

Unable to rely on the institution mandated to help, Dianne looked to her own people for support: the Chief of her community, a medicine man and herself. Dianne phoned Chief Connie BigEagle to ask for help and let her know that the police did not believe that Danita was missing. The Chief was aware of Danita’s disappearance and immediately began to collect relevant information from Dianne regarding Danita’s last known whereabouts and the responses Dianne received from police. The Chief took the matter very seriously.

Danita’s father Doug is sick over his daughter’s disappearance. He went to see a medicine man, or healer, who reassured him that Danita is fine. The medicine man could see Danita and he said that she will eventually come home.

More than anything Dianne trusts her instincts as Danita’s mother. When she was searching for Danita, Dianne could feel how close or distant she was to her daughter at different times. For example, when Dianne went to Winnipeg she could sense that Danita was nearby but by the fourth day in the city she knew that Danita was not there anymore. Dianne is occasionally overcome with a feeling of desperation and she thinks Danita is feeling the same thing; it feels like Danita is stuck in something she cannot get out of, like she is caged. But above all, Dianne’s instincts tell her that Danita is going to come home.



Danita BigEagle is still missing.