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Grand Prize Winner Grades 5-8

ESSAY:

One voice. One desperate plea for change at the cost of a life. What was she thinking about during her last moments? Her children? Her pain? Or societal change?

In September 2020, our Canadian history was influenced forever by an event entwined into our historical roots. Joyce Echaquan, a 37-year old Atikamekw woman from the community of Manawan and a mother of seven, died after a gut-wrenching Facebook live-stream. Her last words before her passing became a call for change that was long overdue. Little did she know that her final grueling moments would spark a national movement of outrage, a catalyst for her memory being honoured in vigils countrywide, commemorating her bravery.

Joyce Echaquan had entered the Joliette Hospital in Quebec City for constant stomach pains and a suspicion that she was allergic to previously prescribed medication. The staff at the hospital threw insults at her; ignoring her screams of agony and cries for help. She soon came to a realization: her life was coming to an end. But her dying wish, was to ensure no other Indigenous person would ever endure the same circumstances. Thus she began to record the hospital staff on her Facebook live-stream.

In her video, Echaquan expressed in Atikamekw her reasoning for coming to the hospital and the toxic reception she had received. The racist environment in the hospital had ultimately prevented her from receiving the necessary care to stay alive. Suffering, but not in silence, Joyce Echaquan died shortly after her Facebook live-stream.

Echaquan's final act forced the government to address systemic inequalities that have cost countless Indigenous lives. Even in death, Joyce Echaquan is driving a conversation about racism in Canadian health care. We can hear Joyce's voice, louder than ever.