



Linda Chouinard

2016 VTECS Graduate

Linda Chouinard, from Pohenegamook, Quebec, still has clear memories of the difficult experiences she went through as a woman while serving in the Canadian Armed Forces. From Chouinard's perspective, the armed forces felt like a boys' club, a place where male colleagues made the experience awkward and frustrating for women.

Throughout her years of service, Chouinard faced enormous challenges including sexual harassment from her male counterparts. But Chouinard, a passionate fighter for the rights of women and equality, refused to give up. She was determined to break the barriers and become a positive voice for change for other women serving in the forces.



THE ROMÉO DALLAIRE



CHILD SOLDIERS INITIATIVE

DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

"I got a lot of complaints about harassment from other women, but I always told them we should stand up, speak up and continue to fight for our rights," says Chouinard.

Being a woman in uniform was challenging, but it was not the reason she left the forces. She left the army as a Major in 2009, after she suffered Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of her deployment to Bosnia, where she first experienced children used as soldiers. "PTSD left me with cognitive problems and a big self-esteem problem as well," Chouinard says it was not easy, but she made an exceptional step forward by joining the VTECS program.

According to Chouinard, VTECS gave her the right place to think through her own experiences in Bosnia and to recognize that many people will never fully understand those experiences. "I never realized that I met some type of child soldiers while I was in Bosnia, my knowledge was a small part of a bigger reality. The VTECS program broadly opened my mind and my understanding to this burning issue," she says. Chouinard also found the intercultural experiences of the VTECS program extremely rewarding and worthwhile.

Since her graduation from VTECS

in 2017, Chouinard has become an advocate for the program through local media. She has also been given the unofficial title of the Dallaire Initiative's "artist in residence", contributing sculptures and plaques for award ceremonies. Thankful to Wounded Warriors for their contributions to VTECS, she also fundraised for their signature Battlefields Bikeride.

Central to all of this is Linda's ongoing pursuit to helping women, especially in her home of Pohenegamook. There she continues to be involved with other survivors of assault within the Armed Forces and she recently shared her story in a book *Mes Tempêtes Intérieures* by Vanessa Beaulieu featuring stories of individuals living with mental illness.

Based out of the Dallaire Initiative's institutional home, Dalhousie University, the Wounded Warriors Canada Veteran Trainers to Eradicate the Use of Child Soldiers (VTECS) program delivers education and skills transition training for Canadian veterans by combining academic, fully-credited university classes with specialized training that build on Canadian veterans' skills, expertise and experience.