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A glimpse into the lives and issues surrounding the deaths of 7 Indigenous students in Thunder Bay

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Kyle Morrisseau, from Keeywaywin First Nation, was 17-years-old when he died.

His body was found in the McIntyre River in Thunder Bay, Ont. in 2009 after he had been missing for nearly two weeks.

Morrisseau had been living at a boarding home. The boarding parents alerted his family when he missed his curfew the night he went missing.

“Twenty-four hours came along and there was still no sign,” said Christie Kakegumic, Morrisseau’s sister. “It wasn’t like him to not call home. He called almost every day.”

Morrisseau’s family prayed it was him every time the phone rang, but it was never Morrisseau at the other end of the line.



Kyle Morrisseau, 17, from Keeywaywin First Nation died in 2009.

*“In my dream I heard a knock on my mum’s door, opened it and it was Kyle.”
Christie Kakegumic, Kyle Morrisseau’s sister.*

Kakegumic had a dream during the time her family was hopelessly looking for Morrisseau.

“In my dream I heard a knock on my mum’s door, opened it and it was Kyle,” she said. “And he told me, ‘tell mom and dad I’ll be at the river, and tell them to hurry’ and then he shut the door.”

Morrisseau was in Thunder Bay for only a short period of time.

"It was his first year of high school," said Kakegumic.

Morrisseau was outgoing, athletic and loved the outdoors.

He was also an aspiring artist, one who took after the style of his Grandfather, the prominent Ojibway artist Norval Morrisseau, said his sister.

A long awaited inquest set for Oct. 5 will attempt to demystify his death and six other First Nation students who all wound up dead in Thunder Bay while attending school.

The deaths happened between 2000 and 2011.

The youngest teens were 15, the oldest was 21.

All were from communities that make up the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, which represents 49 northern Ontario communities, 45,000 people both on and off reserve.

To this day, family members still do not know the circumstances that lead to their deaths and have been waiting for this inquest to get answers.

Three years ago, Ontario's Coroner announced an inquest into the death of Reggie Bushie, 15, who was found drowned in the McIntyre river in 2007.



Reggie Bushie, 15, from Poplar Hill First Nation died in 2007

"I don't want any mother to go through what my mother did." Reggie Bushie, Reggie's older brother.

But a push to include all seven students in the inquest and a re-investigation by the Ontario Provincial Police slowed the process down.

"Most of the evidence before the inquest will be from the OPP investigation not the Thunder Bay police," said Christa Big Canoe, legal representative for six of the families. "Parts of it had to be completely reinvestigated.

"When a person dies in the custody of the police or in an institution, they try to get police that aren't from the same jurisdiction," she said.

NAN and Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto, for which Big Canoe is the legal advocacy director, pushed for a joint inquest. In 2012, Dr. Andrew McCallum, then Chief Coroner for Ontario, announced that the inquest will encompass all seven deaths, not only Reggie Bushie.

The similarities of each case are astounding.

All students left their communities to attend high school in Thunder Bay.

Six went to Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School (DFC). One to the Matawa Learning Centre.

Both schools are intended for Indigenous youths.

"You're putting kids in a culture-shock situation. It's the first time they leave their communities." Chief Connie Gray-McKay



Curran Strang, 18, from Pikangikum First Nation died in 2005

Each year, hundreds of families in remote First Nation communities are left with no choice but to send their children south to Thunder Bay for school because they lack the resources to have secondary schools of their own.

Some students, as young as 13, are traveling hundreds of kilometres from home, many for the first time.

Boarding homes are supplied to students courtesy of the schools along with guardians who act as their new caregivers.

"The funding the federal government provides for high school off and on reserve is inadequate to provide quality education," said Chief Connie Gray-McKay of Mishkeegogamang First Nation, 500 kilometres northwest of Thunder Bay.

Students are not necessarily ready for such a transition she said.

"When adolescents leave their communities they are not at grade level," said Gray-McKay. "There's a lot of necessity or requirement for them to get that extra tutor they need."

Gray-McKay currently has two daughters currently enrolled at Dennis Franklin Cromarty school and who live in a boarding house. They don't like it.

"They're living with strangers," she said. "They live with people they don't know. You're putting kids in a culture-shock situation. It's the first time they leave their communities."

Gray-McKay thinks there needs to be strong support services for children if they must leave the reserve to attend high school.

"A social history of the child needs to be known because we don't know what kind of issues they have," she said.



Jordan Wabasse, 15, from Webequie First Nation died in 2011

"They're kind of young. 13, 14-year-olds making their own decisions without any guidance from any family member, parents or otherwise." Joe Meekis, Councillor, Keeywaywin First Nation.

Bruce Hyer, MP for Thunder Bay-Superior North and deputy leader of the Green Party of Canada, remembers helping to look for some of the lost children along riverbanks and wooded areas on a few occasions.

"We don't know if these deaths were suicides or murder, or a combination of both," he said. "We do need to ask why is this happening and how can we prevent these kinds of tragedies from happening in the future and how can we best support and integrate youth up here."

Hyer says being far away from home, underfunding of Aboriginal education, residential schools and modern day racism are factors that must be considered.

"We have no provincial plan for the sustainability, development and infrastructure in northern Ontario," he said. "In Canada, we do have second-class citizens due economics, culture and race and inadequate infrastructure."

"If Aboriginal people do well, we're all going to do well up here," he added.

Five youths allegedly drowned — three in the McIntyre River, two in the Kaministiquia River. The two remaining students allegedly died of overdoses.

Robyn Harper, 18, from Keeywaywin First Nation, attended DFC and lived in a boarding house in Thunder Bay. According to her mother Tina Harper, Robyn was only at the school for a week before she died in January 2007.



Robyn Harper, 18, from Keeywaywin First Nation died in 2007

"All they told me was that they rushed her to the hospital that morning that she died in the boarding home." Tina Harper, Robyn Harper's mother.

Robyn told Tina she wanted to come home during that week.

Then she received another phone call one early morning on the weekend.

"It was a pastor David from Keeywaywin and he said, 'we're gonna come visit you.' All they told me was that they rushed her to the hospital that morning that she died in the boarding home," said Tina.

"Joe Meekis was the chief at the time and said Robyn had been binge drinking that night and early in the morning they saw her where she was staying, at the boarding house. I don't even know who she was with that night."

Robyn was introverted and liked to draw and sew, said her mom.

Joe Meekis, now a Keeywaywin councillor, knew Robyn well because she was the best friend of his adopted daughter.

Meekis said he gave his daughter money one morning when she was with Robyn and that nothing looked out of the ordinary.

"I think she drank a little bit too much and died of asphyxiation, she couldn't breathe," he said.

"She was an outgoing, happy young person, he said.

There is only one solution for youths of certain northern Ontario First Nations communities who want an education: leave home.

"Basically, we have no choice," said Meekis. "We have to go out, even I had to go, in order to get education. They're kind of young. Thirteen, 14-year-olds making their own decisions without any guidance from any family member, parents or otherwise. There's a difference between parental guidance and supervisory guidance. You can snuggle up to your mom and cry."

The difference is that when kids are running around the reserve, they feel safe because they know if anything happens someone is looking after them, he said.

Meekis believes there are forms of racism in Thunder Bay that lie in wait.

"When I go to any commercial establishment, I feel it," he said. "It's how I get served, other people get served first."

Meekis believes the reason why there is no secondary school on the reserve is because there are not enough students.

Reggie Bushie was 15 when he drowned in the McIntyre River in Thunder Bay while he was attending DFC.

He lived with foster parents in Poplar Hill First Nation before he went to live in a boarding house in the city.

Reggie had an appreciation for language and music, according to his brother Richie Bushie.

"He looked up to me," said Richie. "He wanted to be like me, but I didn't go to high school."

Richie believes Reggie died because of gang-related activity.

"My brother always wore a bandanna," he said. "I always told him not to wear one in the city. I don't want any mother to go through what my mother did."

Relatives of Curran Strang and Jordan Wabasse could not be reached for comment.

Curran was from Pikangikum First Nation and died at the age of 18. His body was found in the McIntyre River in Thunder Bay.

Jordan, 15, was pulled from the Kaministiquia River. He was enrolled at the Matawa Learning Centre in Thunder Bay.



"Paul always dreamed of going somewhere, of exploring the world." Marianne Panacheese, Paul's mother.

Paul Panacheese, 21, from Mishkeegogamang First Nation died in 2006

Paul Panacheese was from Mishkeegogamang and was 21 when he died in 2006.

During the last two years of his life, Panacheese turned to drugs and alcohol, said his mother, Marianne Panacheese, who will be sitting as a witness during the inquest.

"He was really nice," she said. "People used to call him 'Triple P' because he was polite and pleasant. He was really respectful, I think that peer pressure got to him."

During his last year at DFC, Paul transitioned from living at a boarding house to living in an apartment his mother rented.

"He was going through a lot of stuff," said Marianne. "He was dealing with the boarding home, peer pressure, so I decided to quit my job as a councillor and go look after him."

He also dealt with racism. Marianne said that whenever he would apply for jobs, he would never hear back from employers.

"He never got a phone call for the four months I was there," she said.

He had high hopes of joining the army or becoming a police officer after he completed his studies.

The night he died, Marianne remembers Paul coming home after being with friends and hearing him fall down.

"I went downstairs and looked," she said. "It looked like he was just sleeping, but he wasn't."

"The doctor told me there weren't enough drugs or alcohol that would kill him," she said. "They wanted to know our family history, it had something to do with his heart."

Marianne believes there are several things wrong with the school system.

"Students from the reserve are actually behind when they go out to high school," she said. "Paul once said to me, 'we're never going to be doctors or lawyers with this type of education.'"

"I tried to make it easy for him so he could finish school," she said. "Paul always dreamed of going somewhere, of exploring the world, I guess. He didn't really like the reserve life, he complained that there was nothing to do."

Jethro Anderson, 15, from Kasabonika Lake First Nation was found dead in the Kaministiquia River. He attended DFC, but did not live in a boarding house. He came home instead.



Jethro Anderson, 15, from Kasabonika Lake First Nation was found dead 2000.

"We don't know what happened to him. I guess he just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time." Dora Morris, Jethro's aunt.

Anderson was a nice, quiet, obedient boy who always obeyed curfews, according to his aunt, Dora Morris. He became under Morris' care when he was eight and she treated him as her own.

"It's still a mystery," she said. "We don't know what happened to him. I guess he just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time."

Morris remembers giving Anderson and her own son money to go to the mall. The two got separated, apparently, and Anderson never came back.

"When he didn't come home, I started driving around looking for him," she said. "It was about three in the morning when I finally came home. I knew then that something had happened to him."

Gray-McKay, chief of Mishkeegogamang, attended the funeral of Reggie Bushie.

"It's the saddest thing to attend the funeral of a child," she said.

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