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Christie Blatchford: Families crammed into courtroom like an 'afterthought' at inquest into aboriginal students' deaths



CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD | October 5, 2015 9:38 PM ET
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Families of seven deceased First Nation youths are crammed around the outer walls inside the tiny court room during the inquest in Thunder Bay, Ont., on Oct. 5, 2015. Sandi Krasowski for National Post

THUNDER BAY — In a traditional sunrise ceremony held outside the cavernous new courthouse here Monday, the elder Sam POST POINTS | Earn rewards for being a loyal National Post Reader which he meant not just the coroner's inquest that was soon to begin, but also life and the business of the town.

But it didn't and it doesn't always work that way.

Achneepineskum is from the Marten Falls community, which has been living under a boil water alert for, oh, 10 years now in Toronto — and those are just the physical symptoms.

The ceremony was held for the families of seven deceased First Nation youths to attend school in the big city.

One of them, Robyn Harper, lasted just two years.

She got here on Jan. 10, 2007, coroner's counsel Amy Leamen told presiding coroner Dr. David Eden and the five-member jury.

As with other aboriginal young people who come to Thunder Bay for education, Robyn was staying at a boarding home.

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about 100 kilometres northeast of Thunder Bay (people there have never heard of it), which is, in turn, about 1,400 kilometres north and west of Toronto.

Three of them just 15 — who came south from their homes and never made it out alive.

It's a small town on Lake Superior.



Clockwise from top left: Jordan Wabasse, 15, Kyle Morrisseau, 17, Curran Strang, 18, Jethro Anderson, 15, Courtesy of Nishnawbe Robyn Harper, 18, and Paul Panacheese, 21, all committed suicide between 2000 and 2011.

On Jan. 12, she met up with some other young people, ended up drinking and partying and, by 10 p.m. that night, was captured on bus terminal video, staggering. She was picked up about half an hour later in “a heavily intoxicated” condition by a van operated by the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (basically the school board for these aboriginal youth) and returned to her boarding home, where she was placed, passed out, in a hallway.

The boarding parent found her there the next morning; she died of acute alcohol toxicity at the age of 19.

Paul Panacheese, 21, had been going to school here for three years when, in November 2006, his mom moved to Thunder Bay so he could live with her.

On Nov. 11, he socialized with some friends at their house, then went out for a time to drink some beer, but was back by 1 a.m. She let him in, and heard him making something to eat and watching TV.

Then she heard a crash, and came down to find her son face down, and lifeless, on the kitchen floor; he was pronounced dead later at hospital. No anatomical or toxicological explanation for his death was ever found.

Paul’s death, like Robyn’s, occurred at a home; they were the oldest to die in mysterious circumstances.

The other five — Jethro Anderson, Reggie Bushie and Jordan Wabasse, all 15, and Curran Strang, 18, and Kyle Morrisseau, 17 — were all boys, and, as coroner’s counsel Trevor Jukes told the jurors, their bodies were all pulled from various rivers in and around Thunder Bay.

They drowned, usually with alcohol as a contributing factor. Several had met friends at the same local mall, got an adult to buy them alcohol, and gone to parks or woods to drink. Their boarding parents reported them missing, either to the NNEC, or to the Thunder Bay police. Witness accounts appear confused or contradictory.



Left, Julian Falconer, Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) legal counsel, rushes past (right) Michael Heintzman, the Director of Communications with NAN, as the pair scramble to find chairs in adjacent rooms and move them into the small court room to seat the families of the deceased youth at an inquest. Sandi Krasowski for National Post

In one instance, a boy who was with Reggie Bushie, himself “woke up sitting in the water” of the McIntyre River, about 10 p.m. the night Reggie disappeared.

Among the tasks for the jurors is deciding whether the deaths of these seven, so staggeringly vulnerable, were natural, accidental, suicides, homicides (in the coroner’s system, the word means simply a death caused by another person) or undetermined.

The coroner, Eden, and various lawyers with standing at the inquest were respectful and sensitive Monday to the youths’ families.

Most if not all came to the sunrise ceremony. All paid tribute to the families’ terrible grief and long wait for answers.

But despite pleas for weeks for a suitably large courtroom from Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, the political organization which encompasses the youths’ home reserves, NAN lawyer Julian Falconer and even Ontario Chief Coroner Dirk Huyer, the families arrived to find there weren’t enough seats for them in the courtroom.

There were 19 direct relatives — parents mostly, but also grandparents, siblings and aunts — who travelled to the big city and were in attendance, as well as extended family members, local chiefs and support people.

The assigned courtroom had seats for only 10, and it was only with the help of the lawyers and others — who searched dumpsters for discarded coffee cups and briefcases for paper to stuff under the doors as stoppers and physically borrowed chairs from empty rooms — that the families were accommodated.

Christa Big Canoe, from Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto which represents six of the families, was spitting mad.

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“We feel like an afterthought,” she said, as she watched the scramble to ready the room. She said it was hard enough for the families to be here, “let alone be playing musical chairs 10 minutes before.”

“It’s a BYOC inquest,” Alvin Fiddler said. “Bring Your Own Chair.”

These people lost their children in opaque and wretched circumstances. They have waited years. The inquest was announced in 2012, yet the local judges couldn’t manage to organize a proper room.

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It was impossible to imagine the slight was accidental: the Thunder Bay Consolidated Courthouse, brand new last year, is like an old-west ghost town, it's so empty. A cafeteria already has closed for lack of business. Monday, as the families jammed into the tiny room (and ran out, weeping), giant, comfortable courtrooms sat empty and locked.

You could shoot a cannon down the halls; all that's missing are tumbleweeds.

Miraculously, one of those big courtrooms has become available for the inquest starting Tuesday.

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