

First Nations student deaths inquest: Testimony from Robyn Harper's mother

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The coroner's inquest into the deaths of seven First Nations students, who died after leaving their home communities in northwestern Ontario to attend school in Thunder Bay, resumed Tuesday.

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Jurors heard testimony from Tina Harper, the mother of Robyn Harper. The 18-year-old had only been in Thunder Bay for a few days when she died in 2007.

Harper is one of two teenagers from Keewaywin First Nation to die while attending school in Thunder Bay, and the only female student among the group being examined at the inquest.

Jurors have already toured Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School in Thunder Bay. Six of the seven young people were students there when they died.

The inquest will examine each of the seven deaths individually until the new year.

Recommendations from the inquest are expected in March 2016.

Here is a look at some of the proceedings from the CBC reporter in the courtroom.

Back at the First Nations student death inquest in [#tbay](#) today. Mother of Robyn Harper, who died at 18 in 2007, to testify this am [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Inquest was scheduled to start at 9 am, problems with the court audio system causing a delay [#cbctb](#)

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Tina Harper, mother of Robyn Harper, will give testimony through an Ojibway interpreter, Temius Nate [#cbctb](#)

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Robyn was a quiet, artistic child 'she just wanted to stay home with her dad', her mother Tina says in mix of English and Oji-Cree [#cbctb](#)

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Like Paul Panacheese, Robyn Harper went to Northern Eagle First Nations high school in Ear Falls before coming to [#tbay](#).

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'I didn't want her to come here,' Tina Harper says of Robyn's decision to come to grade 11 in [#tbay #cbctb](#)

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Tina Harper says she had heard First Nations students were not well supervised in [#tbay #cbctb](#)

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Tina Harper says she told Robyn to 'behave, not consume alcohol, focus on education' in [#tbay #cbctb](#)

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'I just want to come home,' Robyn called her mom to say two days after arriving in [#tbay](#), Tina Harper says [#cbctb](#)

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'She called every night. She was homesick I just wanted her to come home,' Tina Harper says of Robyn, 18, away at school in [#tbay #cbctb](#)

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Tina Harper says no officials talked to her about options for her daughter's schooling or about what life might be like in [#tbay #cbctb](#)

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Tina Harper says she didn't get a call from her daughter the night that she died. She says her pastor called the next morning. [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Tina Harper says the chief told her Robyn 'choked on her puke, that's all he said' [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Tina Harper says no one in [#tbay](#) met with her or talked to her about how Robyn died. [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Tina Harper says she first learned about the details of her daughter Robyn's death, years later when the inquest was called [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Tina Harper says she herself left Sandy Lake to come to high school in [#tbay](#), but went home b/c of her dad's safety concerns [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Translator Temius Nate strokes Tina Harper's arm through the difficult testimony about Robyn's death. Nate knew Robyn as a child [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Tina Harper says Robyn told her dad, who used a wheelchair, 'when I come home I'm going to take care of you.' [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

On why Pelican Falls First Nations school in Sioux Lookout is better than Dennis Franklin Cromarty in [#tbay](#), Harper says: [#cbctb](#) 1/2

— [@cbcreporter](#)

'I see other students that go to Pelican - they come home. Robyn didn't' [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Tina Harper says no police, coroner, only [@gcfiddler](#) and NAN staff have ever talked to her about what happened to Robyn [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Coroner Dr. Eden asking Tina Harper about the residence she stayed in when she came to [#tbay](#) for high school as a teen. [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Tina Harper says she liked living with about 10 other First Nation students b/c 'I felt not alone' [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Chris Kakegamic, education director from Keewaywin First Nation at time of Robyn's death, current chief now taking the stand [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

'There is no option. If you want an education, high school or post-secondary, you have to leave the community,' Kakegamic says [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

'We do have internet high school, but funding is always a challenge,' Kakegamic says [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Kakegamic: 'Our students are getting younger and younger. Grade 8, we know them as children, all of a sudden they're away from home.' [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Some years grade 8 students travel 100s of km to visit the high schools they might attend. But not always \$ for field trips, Kakegamic says

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Chief and council are promoting Internet high school for grade 9, 'because they are too young to go out,' Kakegamic says [#cbctb](#)

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Kakegamic: Our community has been impacted by 2 of our students coming out for high school and not coming back [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Coroner Dr. Eden: 2 in a community of 300, if I do the math that's equivalent of ~ 700 students dying from a city the size of [#tbay](#) [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

'That's the reality of us Native people up north. We have all that challenge,' says Chris Kakegamic, chief of Keewaywin.

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Kakegamic says there is only one \$\$ pot for First Nations students. Nominal roll must pay for tuition, travel, all support services [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

For First Nation student living on reserve, attending a provincial high school is equivalent of a private school \$ arrangement [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Kakegamic says he'll never forget the racism he experienced in [#tbay](#) as a student while attending Lakehead University [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Kakegamic recalls sitting in a crowded lecture hall where no one would sit beside him. 'How would you feel as a brown person?' [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Inquest resumes after lunch. Keewaywin Chief Chris Kakegamic remains on stand. Among many careers, he taught at Hillcrest in [#tbay](#) [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Kakegamic also chair of board of Northern Nishnawbe Education Council, which runs the First Nations high schools in [#tbay](#) and Sikt [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Kakegamic says a residence with a 'father and mother figure' on site in [#tbay](#) would help keep students safe [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Juror asks Kakegamic if grade 8 students who go on field trip to see high school in [#tbay](#) fare better. Kakegamic says yes

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Same juror asking about how to improve attendance at Internet high school. 'That's tricky...'
Kakegamic says [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Kakegamic says important to talk about challenges faced at elementary schools on reserve, b/c it's the foundation for all education [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Coroner Dr. Eden praises jurors question about improving attendance, says it would be valuable to ask other witnesses as well [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Coroner Dr. Eden asks if provincial legislation enforcing school attendance are apply on reserve 1/3 [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

'May or may not apply but it's not enforced,' Chief Kakegamic says 2/3 [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Not like before when 'my dad was threatened if I didn't go to school assistance would be cut off,' Kakegamic says 3/3 [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Dr. Eden offers condolences and 'commitment to do whatever we do to prevent this from happening to other families' in Keewaywin [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Katie Anishinabie now on the stand. Her friend and relative Robyn Harper was 18 when she died in 2007. They went to school together [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Anishinabie says she chose Dennis Frankin in [#tbay](#) ahead of Pelican Falls in Sioux Lookout b/c Pelican is 'too in the bush' [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Anishinabie breaks down crying on the stand as she remembers how she encouraged Robyn Harper to come to [#tbay](#) too [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Anishinabie says Robyn was a 'happy, jolly' girl and had started being her regular 'friendly self' after the 1st week at school in [#tbay](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Anishinabie says Robyn had problems with her new cell phone on the Friday she died. She didn't show up to meet her after school [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Anishinabie says the freedom of being in the city allowed her to experiment with alcohol when 'nobody was around to say something' [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Students would ask 'random people' at the mall or the bus depot to buy alcohol for them, Anishinabie says [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Anishinabie says friends = family and are safer when they stick together in [#tbay](#) 'especially with close friends you grow up with' [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Robyn Harper wasn't much of a drinker and 'didn't drink the hard stuff,' her friend Katie Anishinabie says

— [@cbcreporter](#)

First Nations students meet up at the mall because boarding homes often don't allow visitors, Anishinabie says [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Anishinabie: I don't think students should use alcohol to make friends. I think that's what happened to Robyn [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Juror asks Anishinabie whether alcohol is allowed in Keewaywin First Nation and how it is kept out. Keewaywin is a 'dry' community [#cbctb](#)

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Alma Hastings on the stand now. She was dispatcher for school vans that tour city to look for First Nations students out past curfew [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Hastings was dispatcher on night Robyn died, took the call to pick Robyn up. Says [#tbay](#) police never asked her for incident report [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Hastings also drives a van looking for students, says she has 'found a lot by the river, if we can't wake them up, we call 911' [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Hastings says she has seen police be 'rough' with intoxicated students, saw 1 student's face smashed into door of police car [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Jury excused while lawyers discuss whether Hastings can be questioned about statement she made to police about gangs in [#tbay](#) [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

'What I'm hearing from you is that you have technical concerns about quality of the police investigation,' Coroner Dr. Eden says. [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Lawyer Chantelle Bryson responds no, her concern is about unlimited evidence on students' drug use, but limits put on ?s re: gangs [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Jurors return, lawyer Chantelle Bryson resumes questioning of Alma Hastings. Hastings says she had 'a bunch' of training for work [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

Hastings recalls call from Robyn Harper's boarding home parent the a.m. she died, says she

said Robyn was 'just fine when I checked' [#cbctb](#)

— [@cbcreporter](#)

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— [@cbcreporter](#)

Lawyer for [#tbay](#) police now questioning Hastings, asks 'if police are dealing with students it's b/c you needed them?' Yes, she says [#cbctb](#)

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No more questions for Hastings from lawyer for police service.

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Inquest is adjourned for the day. I'll have details on today's testimony on [@UpNorthCBC](#) at 5:10 [#cbctb](#)

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