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Yesterday at 16:06

Inquest into student death hears from mother of Robyn Harper

INOQUEST



Robyn Harper

NAN/ Photo supplied

By Matt Vis, tbnnews.com

THUNDER BAY – The mother of Robyn Harper says she has learned more about her daughter’s death during the first two weeks of a coroner’s inquest than at any other point in the nearly nine years since her death.

Tina Harper testified as the inquest into the deaths of seven students attending high school from remote First Nations communities resumed Tuesday at the Thunder Bay Courthouse. Robyn Harper, 18, was found not breathing in her boarding home on Jan. 13, 2007 and died of acute alcohol toxicity.

The mother said she was informed by community members Robyn had died because she “choked on her puke.” When Tina Harper arrived in Thunder Bay following Robyn’s death she was not told how her daughter died or had anybody meet with her.

She said she first learned of the circumstances surrounding Robyn’s death earlier during the opening days of the inquest when forensic pathologists and toxicologists testified about the causes of death for the seven youth.

Lawyer Jonathan Rudin, counsel for the Harper family, said while the evidence has been difficult to hear it’s important to understand what happened leading up to Robyn’s death.

“This was a death that was eminently preventable. While it’s not about pointing fingers, it’s about finding out why these things happened. That’s both issues of individual responsibility as well as collectively what needs to be better done,” he said in an interview with Thunder Bay Television during the lunchtime recess.

The Harper family lived in Keewaywin First Nation when Robyn started attending elementary school in Manitoba, moving back and forth while also studying at home. She went to Northern Eagle High School in Ear Falls beginning in Grade 9, later having to change schools after Grade 10 because that was the highest grade offered.

The family received a letter on Dec. 14, 2006 from the Northern Eagle Student Centre, informing them Robyn would have to attend another

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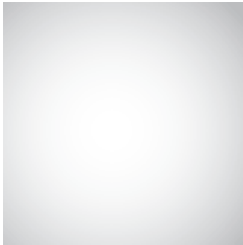
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Northern Nishnawbe Education Council school, with Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School in Thunder Bay the only one that had openings for the spring semester.

"Robyn was a good student while attending Northern Eagle High School, as well as very helpful to the staff of the Northern Eagle Student Centre where she was residing while attending school. We all know that Robyn will fit in very well in any school program she attends as long as she stays focused on her school work," the letter reads.

Tina Harper said Robyn had never really been exposed to alcohol and before coming to Thunder Bay she had told her daughter not to drink.

Robyn arrived in Thunder Bay and began calling home a couple of days after she arrived, describing missing her family and feeling homesick. She started attending DFC on Jan. 10, 2007.

As heard in evidence presented earlier during the inquest, on Jan. 12, 2007 Harper and a group of friends were drinking after the obtained alcohol.

Harper was picked up at the Brodie Street bus station, where video surveillance footage showed her staggering and falling. She was picked up by a Northern Nishnawbe Education Council worker, who drove her to her boarding home where she passed out in a downstairs hallway shortly after midnight. She was checked on within a few hours of arriving home and found to still be breathing. In the morning she was found unresponsive.

While taking the stand is emotionally grueling, Rudin said the families are willingly doing with the hope that history doesn't repeat itself.

"It's hard but she knows it's important," he said of how Tina Harper was coping. "The big thing all the families want is they want something to come out of this that prevents this. If they feel that happens, then the effort is worth it."

The inquest also heard from Chris Kakegamic, the current chief of Keewaywin and former education director, who testified about the process in how students pursue education options, though he was not involved in Robyn ending up in Thunder Bay.

He said Keewaywin only has school from junior kindergarten to Grade 8 and then students have to leave if they want to continue their education.

Another of the seven students, Kyle Morriseau, was from Keewaywin. The 17-year-old died in 2009.

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