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Long-Awaited Inquest Into Deaths Of Aboriginal Youth Begins In Thunder Bay, Ont.

CP | By Colin Perkel, The Canadian Press

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THUNDER BAY, Ont. — A long-awaited inquest into the deaths of seven aboriginal youths who moved from their remote reserves to go to high school in Thunder Bay, Ont., opened Monday following a sunrise ceremony.

In an opening statement to the jury, presiding coroner Dr. David Eden warned of a difficult road ahead.

"We are starting on a long pathway," Eden said. "During that time as we go through this pathway, there will be differences. It's our job to manage those differences with wisdom, not with anger."

The inquest, expected to last until next spring and hear from about 200 witnesses, will look into the deaths of Jethro Anderson, 15, Curran Strang, 18, Robyn Harper, 19, Paul Panacheese, 21, Reggie Bushie, 15, Kyle Morrissette, 17 and 15-year-old Jordan Wabasse.

All died between 2000 and 2011.

"It's been a long wait," said lawyer Christa Big Canoe, who speaks for six of the families. "But it's important to all the families that are here. The families have a lot of questions."

Six of the young people went to Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School in Thunder Bay, while another went to the Matawa Learning Centre. Both schools are supposed to be specialized in accommodating aboriginals.

Four women and one man were sworn in as coroner's jury. It will be up to them to decide how each of the deceased died and to make recommendations aimed at preventing future deaths. The inquest will not determine any criminal or civil liability or assign any blame.

Julian Falconer, lawyer for the Nishnawbe Aski Nation from whose communities the young people came from, praised the "bravery and courage" of the families for persevering to ensure the inquest was called.

"All institutions that are implicated in this have to be accountable and have to fix themselves so this never happens again," Falconer said.

Eden cautioned Falconer from straying into evidence or making an opening statement during his introduction.

Big Canoe drew attention to the small courtroom, saying the families were not happy with the facility.

"It's terrible that the families of the seven deceased...were put into this tight place," Big Canoe said. "The families didn't want to feel as an afterthought."

Eden said they would be moving to a larger room on Tuesday, but they had no choice on Monday if they wanted to start the inquest.


Ontario's chief coroner announced an inquest into Bushie's death. Like some of the others, he was found drowned in the city's McIntyre River in 2007.

However, the process ground to a halt in 2008 due in part to a legal challenge related to the lack of aboriginal people on juries that went all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada. The issue was also the subject of a report by former Supreme Court justice Frank Iacobucci.

In introducing himself to the jury, Brian Gover, who speaks for the Thunder Bay Police Service, cited words from an elder at the sunrise ceremony.

"We are all in this together," Gover said. "We must all learn together from these seven tragic deaths."

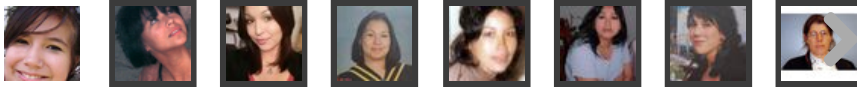
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