

Brother hopes for 'truth, justice' at First Nations student deaths inquest

'I'm strong enough now to face this,' Reggie Bushie's brother says after testifying at inquest

By Jody Porter, [CBC News](#) Posted: Nov 29, 2015 7:00 PM ET Last Updated: Nov 29, 2015 7:00 PM ET

Head bowed and sniffing, Ricki Strang testified at an inquest this past week about the night he went out drinking with his little brother, passed out, and woke up in the river where his brother's body was later found.

His story is part of an inquest into the deaths of seven First Nations students in Thunder Bay, Ont. Strang's brother Reggie Bushie, died in 2007. (The pair have the same parents, but use the last names of family members who raised them).

Strang and Bushie came to Thunder Bay for the first time in September 2007 to attend high school. School only goes to Grade 8 in their home of Poplar Hill, a fly-in First Nation about 550 km from Thunder Bay.

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"I didn't know what to expect from the city, it was my first time out," said Strang, who was 17 in 2007. Bushie was 15.

Their mother, Rhoda (Bushie) King, testified earlier in the week that she still has many questions about what happened the night Bushie disappeared, but in the eight years since his death, she hasn't been able to ask Strang about it.

"I would tell her if she asked," Strang told CBC News after he testified. "But it's probably just tougher for her to ask me what I went through. Hopefully she'll come around and ask me. I just hope so now."

Testifying was difficult, he said, in part because he has never received any counselling or support for his grief.

"Sometimes I talk to myself, to make myself feel better," Strang said. "What I went through, what I am going through, it's tough."

Shortly after his brother was reported missing, Strang was questioned by police three times in a single day, without a support worker or any other adult present. Twice on that day, police took him to the river where he'd said he had last seen his brother.

"He went down to the river and put his hands in the water," Thunder Bay Police Sgt. Jim Glenna testified on Friday. "It's one of those moments that touched us all. It seemed like he was reaching for Reggie. We backed off and gave him some time."

On the witness stand, Strang told the story of the Friday night, Oct. 26, 2007, when he and his brother and a bunch of friends took the bus to the Intercity Mall and soon found someone willing to go to the liquor store for them.

"Whoever chips in money, gets to join the party," Strang said of the transaction. A \$77.70 liquor store receipt from Oct. 26 entered into evidence at the inquest, shows the 'party' included a 40 oz. bottle of vodka, a 40 oz. bottle of whiskey and two 40 oz. bottles of Olde English malt liquor.

Strang said it was the first time he drank in the city. The only alcohol he consumed before that was homebrew that he said he made back in Poplar Hill, a so-called 'dry' reserve.

'We made mistakes'

"We made mistakes a long time ago, mistakes that are undoable," Strang told CBC News after his testimony.

The group of about half a dozen students walked along a path beside the McIntyre River to a wooded area where they drank quickly until the bottles were empty. Then they started walking back to the mall.

"We were trying to get some more," Strang said.

They met up with some other students under a bridge between the mall and the movie theatre and "stayed there for awhile to have some shots," he said.

Some of the other students who testified said that Bushie was staggering at that point, his arms around his big brother's neck to steady himself.

"They left us, me and my brother," Strang recalled, holding his head in his hands as he testified. "I was pretty drunk. I think we passed out under there."

Through the alcohol haze, Strang remembered seeing his brother lying on his back by the river. Then Strang woke up in the dark, on his back, "lying in the water."

When he was asked what happened next, Strang testified, after a long pause, "First I shouted my brother's name to see if he was around."

"I didn't see anyone, so I started walking home," he said.

The boarding home where the boys lived was almost two kilometres away. Other people who lived there remember Strang arriving home soaking wet, drunk and covered in dirt.

'The baffle'

Raymond Albert, an adult boarder who rented a room in the same house as the brothers, testified that the whole night was "the baffle" as he tried to alert the boarding home parent, who was at work, that one of the boys had missed curfew, and the other had come home drunk.

Concerned school officials came to the house and Albert muddled the brothers' names, telling them Reggie was at home, further confusing the situation.

At 12:45 a.m. on Sunday Oct. 28 a missing persons report was filed for Reggie Bushie with the Thunder Bay police.

Several searches ensued and eventually, Bushie's body was pulled from the McIntyre River on Nov. 1.

The presiding coroner at the inquest asked Sgt. Glena to advise the jury whether there was evidence to indicate whether Bushie's death was "accidental or non-accidental."

"There was nothing that we can conclude that Reggie caused his own death or someone else caused his death," Glena said. "There's no determination either way."

Despite the painful hours of testimony, Strang said he is hopeful the inquest will help bring "justice, the truth of what really happened."

"When I had to go through all that by myself, controlling myself and my emotions, when I lost my little brother... nobody was there to talk to me about how I felt," Strang said. "It makes me stronger, I guess. I'm strong enough now to face this."

Two years ago, Strang's son was born. He named him Reggie, after his brother.

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