

The Current

with Anna Maria Tremonti

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Thunder Bay inquest examines death of 7 First Nation high school students

In Oct. 2016, coroner David Eden launched one of the largest inquests in Ontario's history, an inquest into the deaths of seven First Nations students. They'd left their homes, in remote, northern Ontario and travelled to the city of Thunder Bay for high school.

The testimony of nearly 200 witnesses who have taken the stand is filled with stories of loneliness, racism, alcohol and drug abuse, accusations of inadequate police investigations, and a systemic failure to protect these young people.

The Chief of Mishkeegogamang or Mish, as locals call it, has been following the inquest closely. Her two Hannah & Savannah, are currently in high school, in Thunder Bay.

And Chief Connie Gray McKay knows first hand the dangers of being native teenager and in the city for the first time, alone. Like her girls, Hannah and Savannah and her son, Henry, McKay went to Thunder Bay for high school too.

"You want to scare them because you know. So what do you tell them to scare them? Tell them that somebody can throw [you] in a car and kill you."

- Connie Gray McKay, mother of two daughters in high school in Thunder Bay

Julian Falconer, a lawyer for the Nishnawbe Aski Nation — a political body which represents 49 First Nations in northern Ontario, says many institutions failed these kids who died leaving home to further their education in Thunder Bay.

Falconer says the police botched the investigations into the deaths of the students repeatedly and adds it's a common theme, police perform sloppier work for Indigenous people than for anyone else.

"Every institution that had a role in taking care of these kids and making them safe has to strengthen how they do business."

- Julian Falconer, lawyer for the Nishnawbe Aski Nation

As the inquest nears its end, family and friends hope for answers. The jury is expected to make recommendations later this spring.

The documentary, Out There, was produced by The Current's Marc Apollonio and documentary editor, Joan Webber.

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