

Coroner's inquest into deaths of indigenous students provides recommendations but few answers

Biographies of seven indigenous students who died in Thunder Bay between 2000 and 2011



Bernice Jacob, mother of Jordan Wabasse, 15, breaks down as she addresses reporters outside the Thunder Bay Courthouse. Wabasse's death was ruled undetermined by the inquest jury. (TANYA TALAGA / TORONTO STAR) | [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#)

By **TANYA TALAGA** Global Economics Reporter
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THUNDER BAY—The five-year-long painful wait for answers in the [deaths of seven indigenous students](#) became only more raw after a coroner's jury ruled four of those deaths were "undetermined."

Three of the four students — Jordan Wabasse, Kyle Morrisseau and Jethro Anderson — were found dead in the waters surrounding Thunder Bay. The families of the three were left with the fact that they might never know what happened to their loved ones unless police reinvestigate their deaths.

The fourth student, Paul Panacheese, collapsed and died on his mother's kitchen floor but an autopsy could not find the cause of death.

"The issue of the finding of 'undetermined' sends a clear message that what the Thunder Bay Police did in terms of investigations did not even meet a benchmark that permits a conclusion," said Toronto lawyer Julian Falconer, who has acted for Nishnawbe Aski Nation, the political organization representing 49 northern First Nations across northern Ontario. NAN Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler is credited for pushing for an inquest into the deaths of northern students eight years ago.

"What we are talking about, in essence, is the tragic reality that as matters stand today in respect of those three kids, Kyle, Jordan and Jethro were killed deliberately and we will never know. Now that is a tragedy," Falconer said.

Thunder Bay Police Chief Jean-Paul Levesque told the Star that the inquest jury did not recommend the cases into the three boys' deaths be re-examined. "That could have been one of the recommendations but it wasn't," Levesque said.

"With any inactive investigation, if there is any new evidence that comes forward, we'd make it active again. The Ontario Provincial Police looked into all seven (cases) on behalf of the coroner and they didn't find anything that the Thunder Bay Police didn't find," Levesque added.

The seven students died between 2000 and 2011. All died hundreds of kilometres from their home communities, after leaving their reserves because there were [no adequate high schools](#) for them to attend.

The Ontario Coroner's Jury of five people unveiled a sweeping list of 145 recommendations on Wednesday that took more than two hours to be read into the court record. Families, friends and teachers of the seven held each other in support and silently wept for their losses inside the packed Thunder Bay courtroom. The inquest was presided by Dr. David Eden.

The recommendations echoed those in the recent [Truth and Reconciliation Commission report](#) by Justice Murray Sinclair.

They made the point of saying that Jordan's Principle should be followed — that all children in Canada not be subject to jurisdictional arguments as to

who should pay for what service and are treated equally regardless if they are indigenous or not.

The recommendations included basics: Schools for every single northern First Nation community that wants one. Early childhood education, daycare and schools funded equally to every single other Ontario school. Clean water and working sewers for all northern First Nation reserves. Gymnasiums, music and art class, cafeterias that serve three meals a day to students.

And some of the inquest recommendations were simply heartbreaking: The ability for impoverished students to be given the means to phone their parents while they are away at school in Thunder Bay. The opportunity for these students to fly home in the fall, at Christmas and March Break. Basic standards and inspections in boarding homes for students, including criminal records checks of boarding parents. The removal of asbestos and boilers and a new heating system for Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, where six of the students went to school.

Bernice Jacob, mother of Jordan Wabasse, spoke of how hard the inquest has been on her family.

"I have three other sons back home. Two of them are in high school. I didn't allow them to come out to the city to further their education. We have a high school in our community of Webequie First Nation but I'm glad the recommendations recognized we need better funding in our own communities so our kids don't have to leave until they are older and ready to be on their own," Jacob said before she broke down into sobs.

"We want everyone to be treated equally as we are all human."

Christa Big Canoe, lawyer for six of the families, called the recommendations a "watershed."

"It is on the death of these seven youth that there is a watershed of change and we can never forget that. We have to give it meaning," said Big Canoe, of Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto.

Josh Kakegamic, younger brother of Kyle Morrisseau and both grandsons of famed Ojibwa artist Norval Morrisseau, spoke outside of the courthouse on behalf of their father, Christian, who called the seven students "fallen feathers."

"I thank God the creator for sending me my son for 17 years to see him grow. I am proud of my son Kyle and I am proud of the six other students and . . . the strong teachings of love and sacrifice for generations to come. I believe all seven students were looking down and shining on all of us — the families, the coroner, the jury, the lawyers," said Kakegamic. His younger brother will be coming to Dennis Franklin to start high school in September.

Racism in Thunder Bay was an overarching constant throughout the proceedings. The inquest heard overwhelming evidence that indigenous students are victimized by racism in the community, Falconer said.

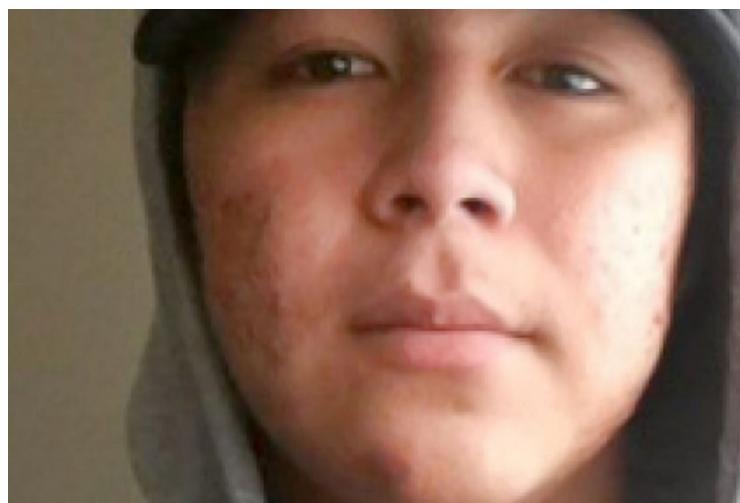
Current students testified of having rotten food thrown at them by passing cars or of constantly hearing racist taunts by strangers.

"I don't think there is any doubt at all that racism, in its many forms, is a huge factor in the lives and deaths of these children," Falconer said.

"I very much worry that one of the forms racism takes in this city of Thunder Bay is that kids aren't necessarily safe at night by the rivers.

"Truthfully, it is a hard reality for us to face that there might be people out there, an evil out there, that would be prepared to put life at risk by throwing kids in the river, vulnerable kids who are intoxicated, into the river. I think the ruling of 'undetermined' says it all," he added.

Jordan Wabasse, 15



Jordan Wabasse

A Grade 9 student and star hockey player from Webequie First Nation, got off the bus at the stop near his boarding house late on Feb. 7, 2011 and he disappeared into the -20C night. A massive three-month search for Wabasse, led by his parents and members of his community, ended when his body was pulled from the Kaministiquia River. Questions of how Wabasse ended up across town, in the river, after he was last seen near his boarding home and the testimony of a student who said he heard Wabasse had been in a fight and then pushed into the river, fuels the call for a renewed police investigation into his death. The inquest ruled his death as undetermined.

Kyle Morrisseau, 17

Kyle Morrisseau

The grandson of the famed Ojibwa artist Norval Morrisseau, who is often referred to as the "Picasso of the North." Morrisseau was said to be blessed with his grandfather's talent and by the time of his death, he had already shown his art professionally in galleries. His body was pulled from the McIntyre River on Nov. 10, 2009. Thunder Bay police say his death is still "an open file" as they have three possibilities as to what happened to Kyle, reported the CBC: The man he was last seen with had something to do with why he was in the river; the girl he was last seen with is responsible for him ending up in the river, or Kyle accidentally or "otherwise" ended up in the water. The inquest jury ruled his death as undetermined.

Curran Strang, 18

Curran Strang

Had been near a local floodway on Sept. 22, 2005, and was said to have been drinking earlier with friends. His body was found four days later with "evidence of drowning," the inquest heard. Strang is from Pikangikum First Nation, a reserve struggling with unemployment, no drinkable water and one of the highest youth suicide rates in the North. The coroner's jury ruled his death as an accident, drowning.

Robyn Harper, 18



Robyn Harper

From Keewaywin First Nation, is the only girl of the seven students. She died alone in the doorway of her boarding home after being dropped off by a patrol team from Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, who picked her up because they found her drunk on the street. She had been at the school in Thunder Bay for only one week. The inquest jury ruled her death as accidental.

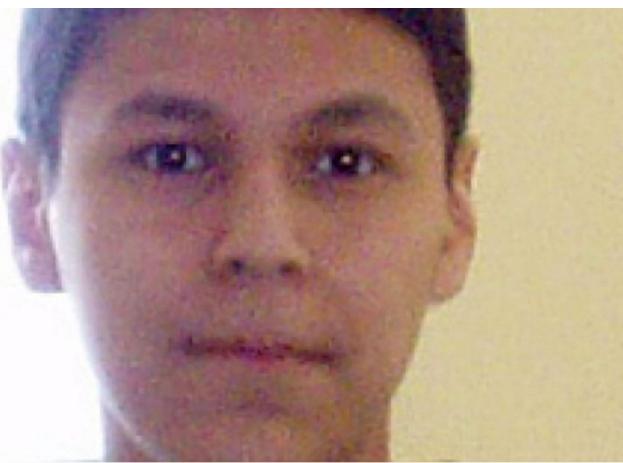
Jethro Anderson, 15



Jethro Anderson

Was found dead on Nov. 11, 2000, less than one month after his 15th birthday. Anderson, who spoke only Oji-Cree until Grade 7, called the remote Kasabonika First Nation home. Kasabonika is 400 km north of Sioux Lookout in northwestern Ontario. His mother, Stella, reluctantly let her son go to school in Thunder Bay alone so he could realize his dream of becoming a police officer. His death was ruled as undetermined by the inquest jury.

Paul Panacheese, 21



Paul Panacheese

The oldest of the seven, lived in 10 different boarding houses when he first came to attend high school in Thunder Bay. Lost, he moved from house to house. At one placement, above a Chinese restaurant, six boys were crammed into the apartment and the owners put padlocks on the fridge and cupboards if the boys missed suppertime. Panacheese's mother, Maryanne, finally moved from her home at Mishkeegogamang First Nation to live with her son so he could safely go to school. The coroner could not find an anatomical reason why he died on his mother's kitchen floor on Nov. 11, 2006.

Reggie Bushie, 15**Reggie Bushie**

Was last seen at the McIntyre River with his older brother, Ricki, on Oct. 26, 2007. Bushie's body was found in the river, days later, on Nov. 1. Originally, the inquest into his death was stopped by lawyers for Nishnawbe Aski Nation due to a lack of indigenous representation on the jury. This sparked a greater, provincial review on indigenous participation on jury rolls led by former Supreme Court of Canada Justice Frank Iacobucci. The inquest ruled his death by drowning.

