

# 7 Teenage Deaths, but No Answers for Aboriginal Canadians

•  
•  
•



Christian Morriseau stands between the graves of his son Kyle and his father, Norval Morriseau (some family members have altered the spelling of their last name), in Keewaywin First Nation, north of Thunder Bay, Ontario. Mr. Morriseau's son was one of seven youths who died mysteriously while attending high school in Thunder Bay.

IAN WILLMS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

**By IAN AUSTEN**  
**JULY 13, 2016**

**THUNDER BAY, Ontario — They were teenagers from tiny indigenous Canadian communities, isolated by a maze of lakes and forest. Thunder Bay, a metropolis by comparison, offered them their only opportunity for a high school education.**

**Instead, the students met death.**

**Starting in 2000 and over the span of more than a decade, the bodies of Jethro Anderson, Curran Strang, Reggie Bushie, Kyle Morrissette and Jordan Wabasse were found, one by one, floating in the rivers that meander past Thunder Bay's grain elevators, shopping malls and rail lines, emptying into Lake Superior. Bodies of two other indigenous students, Robyn Harper and Paul Panacheese, were found elsewhere in Thunder Bay, a predominantly white city of 121,000.**

**Indigenous leaders and parents of the dead had long called for investigations, suspecting the students were victims of hate crimes. But among the broader population, the deaths largely went unnoticed until last year, when the Ontario coroner's office opened an inquest.**

**Despite months of testimony, the inquest's jury, which released findings and recommendations in June, was unable to reach a conclusion as to what had led to the deaths of four of the students, and found the others to be accidental.**

But unlike many tragedies involving indigenous Canadians, these victims were linked by important common denominators: All were young people from remote towns. All were unaccustomed to city life. All were forced to stay in privately run boardinghouses — a lonely, unsupervised life for students as young as 14.



The land surrounding Keewaywin.

IAN WILLMS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The inquest became a window into broader questions over how [Canada](#) handles education for such a vulnerable population. Testimony underscored that despite Canada's national pride over inclusiveness, a racial line often separates indigenous Canadians from the rest of society.

“There’s racism here,” said Sara Brady, an Ojibway teacher who runs a team of workers who assist indigenous students at a high school in Thunder Bay. “You have kids who have never experienced racism before, and that’s a big thing for some of them. They don’t understand what that is until they get here.”

Among the statistics offered at the inquest, a calculation by Dr. David Eden, the presiding coroner, stood out. Two of the students, Kyle Morrisseau and Robyn Harper, came from Keewaywin, population around 300, about 350 miles northwest of Thunder Bay. For Thunder Bay to suffer a proportionally similar tragedy, he said, 700 high school students would need to die.

Kyle Morrisseau’s death offers a glimpse into his failed jump from one world into another, and its devastating effect on his family.

He was a celebrity in Keewaywin, which consists of little more than an airstrip, nursing station, school, general store and post office. He was the third generation of his family to find success in selling art. He and his father, Christian Morrisseau (some family members use a single “S” in the surname), painted aboriginal mythology images sold in galleries in Ottawa and elsewhere. His grandfather Norval Morrisseau was one of Canada’s best-known aboriginal painters.



Sara Brady, a teacher at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School who runs a team that tries to assist indigenous students, said, "It's the best job I've had, but it's also the saddest."

IAN WILLMS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

**Since Kyle's death, Christian Morriseau's marriage has dissolved and his house has burned down. He now lives part time in another house, condemned and filled with mold, in between annual trips to paint in Toronto.**

**When his son started attending high school in Thunder Bay, Mr. Morriseau said in an interview, he had little concern. Two cousins worked at the high school, and an uncle coordinated programs for indigenous students in the city.**

**"We had family there," he said.**

Mr. Morriseau planned trips to Toronto and Ottawa to meet with art collectors so that he could change planes in Thunder Bay and spend time with Kyle.

One night in October 2009, while they shared a hotel room, Kyle told his father that he wanted to return to Keewaywin, only to abruptly reverse himself the next day, promising to “tough it out,” Mr. Morriseau said. Kyle was found dead less than a month later.

Mr. Morriseau said he has agonized over Kyle’s change of mind ever since. “He was just lonely, I guess,” he said.



A painting that Christian Morriseau and his son Kyle had made together in Keewaywin.

IAN WILLMS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

He said the evidence at the inquest showed that there were bruises on Kyle's body, suggesting that his son may have been attacked. The jury also heard how at least one other indigenous student had been assaulted by young white men and thrown into the river. That student, fearing for his life, left Thunder Bay and returned home.

Regardless, Mr. Morriseau said he was convinced that Kyle had not committed suicide. While many Canadian aboriginal communities have exceptionally high rates of suicide and attempted suicide, statistics presented at the inquest showed that hanging is overwhelmingly the most common method.

Drowning is not even a category.

The inquest jury listed the means of Kyle's death as "undetermined."

Asked what he thought had happened, Mr. Morriseau, 46, looked down, replying: "Who knows, man. Only he does — him and the creator knows what happened."

"Somebody else does know something out there," he continued, "but I don't think it will ever come up, or maybe it's too late to come up."

Educating indigenous Canadians has long been considered one of the country's most troubling issues. For much of Canada's early history, native

children were forcibly removed from their families and sent to residential schools largely run by churches. Physical, mental and sexual abuse were widespread. The program was less about education, [a national Truth and Reconciliation Commission found last year](#), than it was about “cultural genocide.”



Josh Kakegamic, a brother of Kyle Morrisseau, prepared a truck rim as an anchor for his boat during a fishing derby last month on Sandy Lake in Keewaywin.

IAN WILLMS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Today, schooling for most Canadians is financed with a mix of provincial and local taxes, and the federal government is responsible for educating only indigenous children who live on reserves.



The result is a stark disparity. The inquest found that Thunder Bay's Roman Catholic French-language school board has a budget of roughly 27,000 Canadian dollars, or about \$20,000, per student. Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, where six of the dead students were enrolled, gets 11,000 Canadian dollars per pupil. Not every high school student on a reserve in northwestern Ontario attends Cromarty, or D.F.C., as it is commonly known. Many attend the Pelican Falls First Nations High School, a boarding school nearer to the reserves.

But Jonathan Kakegamic, the principal at D.F.C., said that he believes its location provides greater learning opportunities and makes it easier to attract and retain good teachers.

The school partly compensates for the budget disparity with fund-raising that helps pay for extra teachers, student meals and after-school sports.

But as he used a stationary bicycle late one afternoon in the school's weight room, Mr. Kakegamic said that what the school really needed was a dormitory.

"When you have 150 kids staying in private citizens' boarding homes throughout the city, that's a difficult thing to maintain," he said. "There's so many injustices at every level."

Mr. Kakegamic's home community is Keewaywin. He taught elementary school there, and is a cousin of Kyle Morrissette's family. As he recalled the school's searches for each of its students who were ultimately found dead, tears mixed with the sweat on his face.

"I don't know if I could handle losing another kid," he said.