

First Nations woman died by suicide in back of police car, inquest hears

Lena Anderson, 23, died in 2013 in Kasabonika Lake First Nation

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Lena Anderson, 23, was a "caring, loving" mother who enjoyed broomball and square dancing, according to her mom. (Aboriginal Legal Services Toronto)

Cries of anguish filled the cavernous provincial building in Thunder Bay, Ont. on Tuesday morning as Mary Ann Shewaybick prepared to testify at the inquest into the death of her daughter, 23-year-old Lena Anderson.

Anderson died in February 2013 in the custody of the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service in Kasabonika Lake First Nation, about 600 kilometres north of Thunder Bay.

She hung herself using the draw string that she removed from her pants after being left alone in the back of a police vehicle, according to coroner's counsel David Allan in his opening statements at the inquest.

"I wish she was still here with me," Shewaybick told the inquest jurors. "It's very hard on me."

She described her daughter as a "caring and loving" young mother who had a lot of friends, loved to play broomball and regularly won community prizes for her square dancing.

"I still grieve for her," Shewaybick said.

'Opening a wound'

Testifying at the inquest is "like opening a tap. It's opening a wound that I wanted to close down," she added. "I'm hurt inside."

Anderson was taken into custody after "community leaders became concerned" about a "get together" at her home where her 3-year-old daughter was present, Allan told the inquest.

Kasabonika Lake is a "dry" community where alcohol is prohibited by a First Nations by-law.

A child welfare worker went to Anderson's home, along with the First Nations security officers and a Nishnawbe Aski Police (NAPS) officer who was on duty.

When the child welfare worker took her daughter, Anderson lashed out and pushed a security officer. At that point, NAPS took her into custody, Allan said.

With no holding cells in the community, Allan said the NAPS officer kept Anderson in the back of the police vehicle while he went to get the only other police officer in the community, who was off-duty at the time.

16 minutes

In the 16 minutes she was alone in the vehicle, Allan said Anderson freed one of her hands from the handcuffs, removed the drawstring from her pants and used it to commit suicide.

She was taken to the nursing station where she was pronounced dead.

Shewaybick told the inquest that she was concerned about her daughter in the months before her death because two of her cousins had recently died by suicide.

"She said she was seeing visions of them calling to her to come to them," Shewaybick said.

There was little help for Anderson in the small, close-knit community where "no one trusts anyone" not even the mental health workers, she said.

The family, NAPS and Cst. Jeremy Swanson all have standing at the inquest, which is expected to last four days.

The jury of three men and two women will hear from 13 witnesses and may make recommendations to prevent future deaths.

Inquests are mandatory in Ontario when a person dies in police custody.