

Boushie family moves from anger to political advocacy in wake of acquittal

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Colten Boushie's mother Debbie Baptiste addresses demonstrators gathered outside the courthouse in North Battleford, Sask.

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BATTLEFORD, SASK.

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Two days after a wrenching acquittal for the man accused of killing Colten Boushie, his mother travelled to Ottawa determined to get justice.

On Friday evening, a jury in Battleford, Sask., found Gerald Stanley not guilty of second-degree murder. The furious reaction in the courtroom reverberated throughout the country as disbelief and outrage spread across social media. About a thousand people took to the streets of Saskatoon the next day and there were demonstrations in Mr. Boushie's name in many cities across Canada.

"I can't imagine the grief and sorrow the Boushie family is feeling tonight. Sending love to them from the U.S.," Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tweeted on the weekend as he

was wrapping up a trip to California. Justice Minister Jody Wilson-Raybould made a rare comment related to a criminal case, saying she felt the family's pain, and added that "Canada can and must do better."

Mr. Stanley acknowledged causing the death of Mr. Boushie, a 22-year-old Cree man who was shot at close range in the back of the head, but said the shooting was accidental. He testified that he thought his gun was empty and it just went off, the result of a roller-coaster scenario that began when he believed Mr. Boushie's companions were trying to steal his ATV.

Boushie's mother Debbie Baptiste, her brother, Alvin, and Mr. Boushie's cousin, Jade Tootoosis, are planning to meet with Ms. Wilson-Raybould and other ministers. A news conference prior to a meeting with Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale and Ms. Wilson-Raybould was scheduled for Tuesday, according to Saskatchewan's Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN). The Prime Minister's Office said on Sunday evening that it could not confirm whether Mr. Trudeau is planning to meet with the family.

The government's position on the verdict was criticized by political opposition in Ottawa. Conservative Indigenous affairs critic Cathy McLeod said the justice process should be allowed to unfold without political interference.

For the Boushie family, the trial's aftermath marks a rapid shift toward political advocacy.

Ms. Baptiste said the injustice that First Nations people are facing needs to stop. "This racism is dividing us," she said on Sunday before boarding a flight at Saskatoon's airport. "Trudeau says we're supposed to be all happy Canadians. We're not all happy Canadians. The whites are happy Canadians. We're just getting by."

Ms. Baptiste and her family will call for an end to peremptory challenges in jury selection, which were used in Mr. Stanley's trial to block every potential juror who appeared to be Indigenous. They also want to address a number of systemic problems in the justice system, as well as specific complaints arising from the way Mr. Boushie's death was investigated and prosecuted.

Alvin Baptiste said he met with Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe for more than an hour Saturday evening. He said Mr. Moe expressed his eagerness to work with First Nations people to achieve greater unity.

Mr. Baptiste, who was joined at the meeting by chiefs from Treaty 4 and Treaty 6 territories, said he pressed the Premier to take action.

"I must have been like a pebble in his shoe because I wouldn't give up, telling him I want an inquiry done, I want an appeal. He wouldn't give me an answer right away," Mr. Baptiste said. "He said, 'What we're going to do is we're going to look into it.'"

At demonstrations across the country and in their public statements, First Nations leaders rallied behind the Boushie family, expressing their frustration with the verdict and the Canadian justice system.

The leadership of Mr. Boushie's home community, Red Pheasant Cree Nation, issued a news release calling the verdict "absolutely perverse." The FSIN said it was "disgusted and angry" and called for an immediate inquiry into what it described as "a gross miscarriage of justice."

The chiefs of Saskatchewan were joined by many others from all over the country, including Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler of Ontario's Nishnawbe Aski Nation, who said it was "outrageous" that Mr. Boushie could be shot in the head and no one held accountable. Mr. Fiddler has advocated for changes to the jury system for years.

Senator Murray Sinclair, who co-chaired the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry in Manitoba that called for an end to peremptory challenges in 1991, published a poem that begins, "Today I grieve for my country. I grieve for a family that has only seen injustice."

Chris Murphy, the Boushie family lawyer, said they wanted to speak up after the verdict.

"Colten's family wants to deliver a compassionate message about the systemic injustices uncovered by [his] death," Mr. Murphy said. "While we are also on Parliament Hill to listen carefully, we expect to return to Saskatchewan with a list of commitments from parliamentarians outlining the specific steps the government will take to remedy these injustices."

Speaking at a news conference in Saskatoon on Saturday, Mr. Murphy said it would be relatively easy to amend the Criminal Code to alter or end peremptory challenges for jury selection. He also said it's important to insure that First Nations people can take part in the jury system. In Saskatchewan, for example, jurors are not compensated for travelling to jury selection, so in many rural areas with concentrations of First Nations population and vast geography, many people can't afford the time and expense.

Ms. Baptiste sat in the airport in Saskatoon on Sunday wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with her son's face and the words "Justice for Colten."

She thought back to the moment when she heard the verdict. She carried a pink Bible in her hands, as she did every day of the trial. It had grown twisted with the tension of the trial.

"When they said "Not Guilty" I went into shock. I kept thinking, not guilty, what does that mean?" Ms. Baptiste said. "I already knew it was a kangaroo court. They had made their decision from the beginning, they were going to let him walk."

She shouted "murderer" at Mr. Stanley, and she said that as security rushed him out of the courtroom, she momentarily locked eyes with him. And then he was gone. She was initially devastated, but had been expecting this result, she said.

The public response, the rallies and the support she has received from across the country made her realize now is not the time to break down, she said.

"Seeing the rallies lifted me back up, it got me up to fight," Ms. Baptiste said.

As he stood at the airport gate in Saskatoon, Mr. Baptiste held the fan of eagle feathers that he raised in court to honour the judge and jury. Just two days earlier, he stood alone at the end of a long night after the verdict, his eyes red.

"They knocked me down on my feet tonight, but I'll get back up and gather strength," he said that night.

An elder came up to him with tears in her eyes and gave him a hug. She whispered a word in Cree in his ear. It means "keep going," he said. That's what he intends to do.

"Things need to be changed," Mr. Baptiste said. "Justin Trudeau asked for reconciliation. North Battleford has destroyed that. ... All the Indigenous nations throughout Canada felt that. They felt the injustice. Instead of taking two or three steps forward, now we're [set] back again. What do we do about this?"