

Supervisor wasn't aware of duty to recruit natives, inquest hears

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Tanya Talaga Queen's Park Bureau

THUNDER BAY—A pre-hearing for the inquest into the death of native teen Reggie Bushie heard Thursday that the bureaucrat responsible for recruiting jurors wasn't fully aware of her obligation to recruit aboriginals.

Bushie, a Grade 9 student, drowned Nov. 1, 2007, in the McIntyre River. He is one of seven First Nations teens from remote northern reserves who went to Thunder Bay alone to go to school and then died. All but one drowned.

The inquest into Bushie's death was stopped by Nishnawbe-Aski Nation in 2009 due to a lack of native representation on the jury.

The Ontario Court of Appeal ruled Nishnawbe-Aski Nation's complaints were valid and said the provincial coroner's office was not "forthcoming about how the roll was established." It also ruled that native families' requests to find out how the jury was selected was reasonable yet they consistently got the "runaround."

Nishnawbe-Aski Nation (NAN) is a political organization representing 49 First Nations.

Janette Sprovieri, the supervisor of court operations for Thunder Bay, told the hearing Thursday that she was unaware of her obligations under the Juries Act to recruit natives.

The Juries Act requires the sheriff of the area to select names from First Nations reserves the same way they do for everyone else living in municipalities using "any record available."

However, NAN lawyer Sunil Mathai questioned Sprovieri as to why she relied on obtaining band lists to find native jurors in Thunder Bay — a city populated with First Nations people and surrounded by 13 reserves.

“So, in fairness to you, you have no idea if you know what you were doing is sufficient or compliant with the Juries Act?” he asked.

She responded she was never told of her obligations or given the proper training on this issue when she took over as supervisor in 2007.

In fact, it wasn't until 2008 that a push was made to recruit natives for jury duty in the Thunder Bay area, the inquest heard.

Sprovieri said letters were sent to local band leaders to request names but by 2010 only two First Nations responded and they contained no addresses.

Most of the others refused to turn over band lists due to privacy reasons. Sprovieri also testified she thought band lists only contained names of those living on reserves.

The hearing resumes Friday.

