

Friends to the end: How the suicides of seven Indigenous girls revealed a community undone

By **TANYA TALAGA** Staff Reporter

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WAPEKEKA FIRST NATION—Amy Owen bolted out of her Ottawa-area group home and she ran, headed straight for the train tracks across the street.

It was evening, Jan. 8, 2017.

Clockwise from top left: Kanina Sue Turtle, Alayna Moose, Jolynn Winter, Amy Owen and Chantell Fox. The young girls took their own lives within months of each other.

This was where the 13-year-old planned to die. That's what she had promised her friends, that she would end her life.

Staff at the seven-bed facility in Beacon Hill were running right behind her, and Amy would not be successful that day.

One of Amy's closest friends would be: More than 1,000 kilometres away, in the remote, fly-in First Nation community of Wapekeka, Jolynn Winter, 12, took her life.

Amy would end her life too, but not for another three months.

Two days later, on Jan. 10, also in Wapekeka, Sandra Fox stepped out of the house briefly to get pain relievers for the persistent discomfort in her leg. She came home to a sight no parent should ever see. Her daughter, Chantell Fox, 12, Jolynn's best friend, had hanged herself.

Seven Indigenous girls in all, whose lives had intersected either back home or in group homes or care facilities far away from their First Nations communities, took their lives within a year of each other.

Alayna Moose. Kanina Sue Turtle. Jolynn Winter. Chantell Fox. Amy Owen. Jenera Roundsky. Jeannie Grace Brown.

Some have said the [girls died in a suicide pact](#), says Anna Betty Achneepineskum, deputy grand chief of Nishnawbe Aski Nation, a political organization of 49 northern First Nations encompassing an area roughly the size of France in northern Ontario. “But I call it grief.”

“Kids don’t talk about suicide for no reason, and talk about a pact. They are talking to each other about their trauma. This is children suffering together,” she says. “I can’t believe people are ignorant to that fact.”

A mother and grandmother, Achneepineskum has worked tirelessly to bring mental health-care help and suicide prevention awareness to the epidemic gripping her nations. Specifically, she wants the nations to address the complex, often underlying issue of past and present sexual abuse and its deadly fallout.

It has been a long road, but Achneepineskum is getting there, urging communities to open up and embrace a multifaceted plan aimed at recognition, healing and justice. On March 4, 2018, Wapekeka’s band council passed a resolution, the first step in a plan to address historic sexual abuse in the community.

“We are just waiting for them to give us the green light to begin the rest. We have a financial commitment, the budget is there. This needs to happen,” she says.

Since 1986, there have been more than 560 suicides across Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN). Most are by hanging. The attempts — those who try to take their lives but fail — are even greater. And since 1986, an almost incomprehensible 88 children between the ages of 10 and 14 have killed themselves in this northern territory.

Wapekeka, a community of 430 people about 450 kilometres northeast of Sioux Lookout in northern Ontario, is made up of about a dozen roads that

connect to form the centre of the community. There was a school, but it burned down three years ago. (TANYA TALAGA / TORONTO STAR)

There are no easy solutions to finding a path out of the darkness of suicide in the north. The inherent factors behind what is causing the deaths are layered and complex.

Those complexities begin in the not-so-distant past with a forced disconnection from traditional lands, when the First People were tricked into signing treaties with the federal government. In NAN territory, the treaty was arranged by Duncan Campbell Scott, one of the chief masterminds of the Indian residential school era in Canada. Between the mid-1880s to 1996, 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis people were ripped from their homes, their language, their culture and their families and sent to church-run, government-funded schools so they could be assimilated into Christian-Canadian culture.

Scott was one of three commissioners acting on behalf of the Canadian government in the creation of Treaty 9, the treaty that encompasses NAN territory from the James Bay coast to Hudson Bay to Manitoba. Also acting for Canada was Samuel Stewart. For the province of Ontario, it was Daniel MacMartin.

Scott, who is also known as a poet, became engrossed in the "Indian problem" in Canada in 1895 while he was acting superintendent general of Indian Affairs, and he requested the justice ministry to authorize the forced removal of every Indigenous child from their family so they could be sent to residential school.

After Scott and the commissioners negotiated the first 1905 deal (final adhesions to Treaty 9 were made in 1929-30), Scott became head of the department of Indian Affairs, from 1913 until his retirement in 1932.

It is important to understand that Scott's actions are directly tied to the modern-day youth suicide epidemic facing the north. Not only did he negotiate the treaty that took away the land from the nomadic Ojibwa, Oji-Cree and Cree people living in the north, he penned them into small reserves to keep them away from colonial settlements and

resource extraction. Then he took away their children, placing them in residential schools where they suffered mental and physical abuse, malnutrition and neglect.

When the survivors left the 17 schools that were in Ontario — 15 of them in northern Ontario — they went home to their reserve communities mentally broken, to places often without running water or proper sewage treatment and no nurses or doctors to help heal their broken minds and souls.

This is called intergenerational trauma and the effects can be seen directly in the health of Indigenous people. The infant mortality rate for Inuit and First Nations children ranges from 1.7 to more than four times the non-Indigenous rate, according to the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Diabetes and heart disease plague Indigenous people older than 45. First Nations people are six times more likely than non-Indigenous people to die of an alcohol-related death and three times more likely to die from drugs.

Comparing suicide rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, the differences are off the chart. The suicide rate among First Nations communities is twice that of the Canadian population and for the Inuit, the rate is six to 11 times higher than that of non-Indigenous people. Indigenous youth on reserves are five to six times more likely to die by suicide than non-Indigenous youth.

Without any health support on reserves to deal with the fallout of residential school intergenerational trauma, children born into the communities do not have the health social safety net that non-Indigenous children have.

This was the situation in Wapekeka First Nation.

Add to all this trauma a serial pedophile who flew into 20 remote Indigenous communities in northern Ontario under the guise of administering the Anglican faith to his flock, and you can begin to understand the [suicide crisis facing Wapekeka](#).

“As long as the sun shines, as long as the river flows and as long as the grass grows,” the Queen will take care of those who sign Treaty 9, said the treaty commissioner to the ancestors of the Oji-Cree living in Wapekeka today.

These words proudly grace the webpage that introduces the public to Wapekeka, a community of 430 people about 450 kilometres northeast of Sioux Lookout in northern Ontario. To get there, you have to book a charter flight, and it is expensive. Return passage on a tiny, northern plane run by airlines such as Wasaya, owned and operated by the First Nations it serves, is about \$1,200.

Wapekeka sits nestled between Frog Lake and Angling Lake and is two reserve communities joined as one. The area is rich with wildlife and endless freshwater lakes, and boasts one of the last untouched areas of boreal forest on Earth.

The reserve is made up of about a dozen roads that connect to form the centre of the community. There is a nursing station, an Ontario Provincial Police station and there was a school, the Reverend Eleazar Winter Memorial School, but it burned down three years ago. A plan is underway to rebuild it. There is a small hotel and a grocery store. There is also the foundation of a new youth centre, which sits covered by a large, blue tarp. Building has stalled. Construction can't take place in the winter months.

Wapekeka has three churches and the dominant faith belongs to the Anglican Church. Its history in the community is complex and fractured, mainly because of the one-time presence of Anglican minister Ralph Knight Munck Rowe.

According to a detailed report written by former Ontario Provincial Police officer Don Hewitt on behalf of Nishnawbe Aski Nation, Rowe gave up his career as an OPP constable to become a man of the cloth in the 1960s.

Wapekeka has three churches for its 430 residents, with the dominant faith belonging to the Anglican Church. (TANYA TALAGA / TORONTO STAR)

Rowe was a police officer for five years, stationed much of that time in Wikwemikong First Nation on Manitoulin Island, before he abruptly changed career direction. The OPP would not give any information on Rowe or why he left the service, citing old personnel records and privacy.

Rowe was a trained pilot and after he left the police service he moved to Kenora, a small city in northwestern Ontario, about 200 kilometres east of Winnipeg, where he began to fly small charter flights. He lived in Kenora in 1966-67, flying into remote communities, according to Hewitt's report.

By 1975 he had been ordained by the Anglican Church and given the area of northern Ontario to minister, where the people had adopted the Christian faith after their time spent in residential schools.

Rowe, who ministered in 20 communities, endeared himself to people, even taking the time to learn Oji-Cree so he could easily speak to the elders.

He also had a special interest in boys around the age of 12, taking them on camping trips into the bush. He even became a cub scout leader, starting a program in Wunnumin Lake in 1977. Until the mid-1980s, Rowe engaged in rampant sexual abuse of boys.

It is estimated by Nishnawbe Aski Nation that Rowe's victims could number as many as 500, yet he has only been convicted of some 60 sex crimes and has served no more than five years in prison, due to a plea bargain with the Crown. Rowe currently resides in B.C.

NAN is still waiting for the [Anglican Church to issue a full apology and redress for Rowe's actions](#). On Jan. 20, 2017, after Jolynn and Chantell's deaths in Wapekeka, the church issued a statement saying it was working on a national apology. As of today, there are no details as to when this apology will take place.

Rowe contributed to a destructive legacy of intergenerational trauma in communities not unlike that of residential schools — broken marriages, violence and domestic assault, addiction issues, broken men with low self-confidence and confused thoughts coupled with feelings of having nowhere to turn.

The impact of these cases of child abuse, the residential schools and the living conditions on reserves are the realities that every single person living in Wapekeka has to deal with. In the 1990s, nearly a dozen community members, mostly young men, took their lives. The community rallied and began to host an annual Survivors of Suicide program and yearly conference.

And so, when it was discovered there was a crisis among young girls in Wapekeka, Chief Brennan Sainnawap, who says he was not a direct victim of Rowe's but knows many who were, immediately appealed to Health Canada for prompt mental health relief.

In a memo dated July 18, 2016, the community requested \$376,706 to train and hire mental health workers to provide emergency counselling for youth. The federal government responded that it was an "awkward time" in the budget cycle for the health department and that it didn't have the money to give to Wapekeka.

The door of the gym in Wapekeka. Written on it is a note that says, "I was here." (TANYA TALAGA / TORONTO STAR)

That federal refusal made national headlines, including in the Toronto Star. A [private donor](#) came forward, offering the money, but later rescinded his offer.

And the girls kept dying.

Alayna Moose took her life on Oct. 14, 2016.

One of the Poplar Hill First Nation teen's last Facebook posts was just a couple of weeks before, on Sept. 30, a selfie of her beautiful face, her long, black hair tucked behind her. The photo was tinted red and slightly blurred for effect. It was posted sideways. There was no caption.

Alayna had lost her mom, Sheena, a few years before and at the time of her death she was being raised by a family in Poplar Hill, about 120 kilometres north of Red Lake near the Ontario-Manitoba border, a "good family," community members say, who cared for her well.

On Facebook, where many adolescent girls share every aspect of their lives and emotions with postings full of slang and emojis, the grief and shock felt by Alayna's friends was palpable. One in particular, a posting from Kanina Sue Turtle, 15, was particularly telling.

"I miss u why did u leave so early ... I never had a chance to say sorry for what I did and I said to u ... sorry for everything I did ... I'm gunna miss u rip beautiful."

Within two weeks of that post, which gave no hint as to what it was that Kanina felt she did or said, she ended her own life.

Kanina and Alayna's deaths would set off a devastating cascade of five others.

Amy Owen, who like Alayna was from Poplar Hill First Nation, tried to take her life at the same time her friend Kanina Sue Turtle was trying, in late 2016, says Esther Aiken, who cared for Amy twice at the Beacon Hill group home in Prescott, Ont.

Amy first stayed at Beacon from Dec. 13, 2014, to Dec. 22, 2015. Aiken remembers Amy as a lovely girl who used to come home after school and ask to go to her friend's house to watch TV. Aiken treated Amy like her own child, taking her to dance and gymnastics classes.

Then Amy went home to Poplar Hill and she changed, says Aiken. She was back at Beacon from Oct. 25, 2016 to Jan. 8, 2017. She had cut her hair, and she wore baggy clothes and hoodies. "This way no one will

look at me and think I am pretty,” she told Aiken, also telling her that she had been sexually assaulted by a youth and a man on the reserve back home, twice.

Amy took her life April 17, 2017, in Ottawa, where she was receiving one-on-one care at a residential program known as Mary Homes.

“I saw no note on a suicide pact but she did say it many times. In the evenings, she would say, ‘I have to do this. I have to die.’ She would write it on the walls and on pieces of paper,” says Aiken. “She felt guilty because she was still alive.”

Amy’s father, Jeffrey Owen, read about one of the assaults on Amy in her diary. She had never told him about it. Her father remembers her repeatedly saying in her diary that she was all talked out and weary.

Kanina Sue Turtle of Poplar Hill had long black hair with pink streaks, glasses, and she wore a wide smile in many of her social media posts, posts that documented all of her teenage thoughts and feelings. She posted when she was bored watching a cover of the Cyndi Lauper song “True Colours” that was supposed to send an anti-bullying message, and she listed as her occupation on her Facebook profile that she was a cook at the Krusty Crab restaurant, which exists only on the *SpongeBob SquarePants* cartoon. She also said she studied at: “I didn’t go to college yet.”

On Oct. 27, 2016, two days before she died, Kanina posted to Facebook a FaceTime screenshot taken on her iPod that shows her smiling friend Jolynn Winter doing the dishes at 8:38 p.m.

Kanina is at her group home in Sioux Lookout and her picture is set into the screenshot of Jolynn. Kanina has a warm smile. The two look as if they are sharing inside jokes among friends.

The next day, on Oct. 28, two weeks after her friend Alayna’s death, Kanina tried to take her life. She shot a video of the attempt.

She also posted a picture on Facebook that said, "How do you kill the demon inside you without killing yourself?" She took another video of herself on that day, laughing and goofing around at a local doughnut shop. Tikinagan Child and Family Services, which covers many First Nations in northern Ontario, had taken her out of Poplar Hill and she was getting care in Sioux Lookout.

On Oct. 29, 2016, Kanina killed herself. She took a video of it. It is on her personal device and has not been shared through social media.

Her father, Clarence Suggashie, will not watch the videos. But he does have concerns as to why Tikinagan took his daughter out of Poplar Hill. He said they told him that they were apprehending Kanina and her siblings because "they said we were drinking too much."

"Tikinagan always takes our kids away," Suggashie said.

At the time Kanina died, he had four sons who had been taken away and placed in care. His eldest teenage daughter, Shania, was home.

Kanina would call her parents often and beg them to bring her home. "Tikinagan wouldn't listen," Suggashie said. He added that they kept calling to ask Tikinagan to send their daughter home and they were always told, "we are working on it."

Kanina spent nearly seven years in care, bouncing in and out of Poplar Hill to homes all over Ontario.

Cynthia Sainnawap, whose father is the chief of Wapekeka, Brennan Sainnawap, was Jolynn Winter's stepmother. She is married to Kerri Cutfeet, Jolynn's father, who's 34, tall and lanky, with shoulder-length black hair and freckles. Cutfeet has come to the Wapekeka band office to talk to Ontario Chief Coroner Dr. Dirk Huyer and deputy chief Achneepineskum, who are giving a briefing on a review he is holding into the deaths of 11 youth in the care of Ontario children's aid societies from Jan. 1, 2014, to July 31, 2017. The review will also look

at the death of Azraya Ackabee-Kokopenace, 14, from Grassy Narrows First Nation.

All 11 had a history of mental health challenges and seven were Indigenous. Of the 11, seven died by suicide, one by homicide and the remaining three died of “undetermined causes.” A death is deemed undetermined when a full investigation shows no specific cause of death.

Huyer believes a review is faster and more efficient than an inquest. He’s holding it for a number of reasons including the alarming number of children who have died when they were taken out of their communities and flown hundreds of kilometres away for mental health care. All seven of the Indigenous youth in the review were in placements outside of their home communities. The parents of Jolynn, Kanina and Amy say their daughters are all part of the review. The other names are protected by privacy laws.

Chantell Fox, 12, left, died by suicide on Jan. 10, 2017, two days after her friend Jolynn Winter. Here, Chantell is pictured with her twin sister.

The review will also dissect the method and rationale for placement selection, the availability of placements to meet the youths’ needs, the number of times youth are moved around to different placements, and the training and qualifications of the caregivers.

Cutfeet says his daughter met Kanina in care and that when Kanina died “she took it really hard.”

Jolynn did not grow up with her dad. It was not until near the end of her life that he discovered he was her father. It was then the two connected, and with wife Cynthia’s support he went to Thunder Bay, where Jolynn was living in care, to take her out and bring her home to Wapekeka. “When she got here, she was spoiled right away, even though I wasn’t supposed to do that, but she was my baby.”

“She had her own room, her own bed, own TV,” he says. She had access to Xboxes and Xbox Ones, he even got her an iPhone5. Cutfeet says Jolynn was getting bullied by a girl on the internet who told Jolynn that “she was ‘ugly’ and should kill herself.” She told her dad about it just before Christmas, on Dec. 20. After that, she became quiet and started to hang out in her room, says Cynthia. Three weeks later she would be dead. The OPP cybercrime unit has been involved and they came to Wapekeka last summer to discuss it but he hasn’t heard anything else. “I have no idea as to the result of the investigation,” he says.

“But Jolynn never said she wanted to hurt herself. She never actually said it.”

Cynthia’s sister is Sandra Fox, mom to Chantell Fox. Chantell and Jolynn, Cynthia’s stepdaughter, were best friends, says Cynthia, adding they were always together. Cynthia was also Chantell’s godmother.

Sandra and her family are coping as best as they can. Chantell is not part of the coroner’s review as she was not in care.

The family still has so many questions as to what happened. Sandra Fox says her daughter was also being bullied online and that they have been speaking to the OPP.

The entire community still feels the loss of all the girls. Nearly every single adolescent and young teen living in Wapekeka is being monitored for suicide risk.

Much has happened in the 15 months since Alayna, Kanina, Jolynn and Chantell’s deaths. The community of Wapekeka has tried to cope as best it can, but the loss has been felt deeply.

On June 13, 2017, eight months after Alayna’s death, Jenera Roundsky, 12, took her life. She was found by the outdoor hockey rink in Wapekeka by another youth. Jenera, who was also in Tikinagan

care, had been flown out of Wapekeka for mental health care and she had been back for just a few weeks, living with her grandparents, when she died.

On Sept. 5, 2017, Jeannie Grace Brown, 13, also took her life in Wapekeka. According to a band member, she was quiet, kept to herself, but she was friends with the other girls.

In Wapekeka, after all the immediate extra help left the reserve in the wake of the deaths — from the Junior Canadian Rangers who were called in to walk the small, confined streets to check door to door on the youth, to trauma and mental health workers — the community has hired four long-term mental health workers, another four youth workers and four recreation support workers.

NAN deputy grand chief Achneepineskum says the multifaceted plan to address suicide and sexual abuse in Wapekeka begins with focus groups with elders to get at historical trauma, then more focus groups with women and men.

The plan also includes training band councillors and front-line workers in sexual boundaries and sexual trauma, and processing trauma and developing protocols on how to handle traumatic events. For instance, she says, when a young person loses a friend, where is the plan or the protocol to deal with the loss?

“The answer is not to send the child out of the community,” she says, adding that is what children’s aid societies have been doing and it clearly does not work.

“Any protocols Tikinagan or anyone else has don’t work because our children are preyed on every day and no one does anything about it,” she says, adding justice also needs to be examined because sending offenders out of a community to serve “30 days in jail” doesn’t rehabilitate them. They just come right back.

“In a small community, you just can’t isolate yourself from trauma.”

If you're experiencing emotional distress and want to talk, call the First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line at 1-855-242-3310. It's toll-free and open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.



About the series

The Atkinson Fellowship awards a seasoned Canadian journalist with the opportunity to pursue a yearlong investigation into a current policy issue. The award is a project funded by the Atkinson Foundation, the Honderich family and the Toronto Star.

Tanya Talaga won the 2017-18 fellowship to explore the causes and fallout of youth suicide in Indigenous communities.

*Talaga is an investigative journalist for the Star who specializes in Indigenous affairs. A two-time National Newspaper Award winner, her 2017 book, *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death and Hard Truths in a Northern City* (House of Anansi Press) won the RBC Taylor Prize. It examined the deaths of seven Indigenous high school students while they were away from their families attending school in Thunder Bay.*

Her Atkinson Fellowship stories will appear occasionally throughout the year.

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Exhibit: National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

Location/Phase: Part 3: Toronto

Witness: Tanya Talaga

Submitted by: Christa Big Canoe / Commission

Add'l info: P03 P03 P03 01

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