

CORONER'S INQUEST

The noble wishes of an unsung heroine

leisha Simpson tried to save her siblings in fatal fire and served as surrogate parent when her mother couldn't cope



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The question came from Suzan Fraser, lawyer for Ontario's advocate for children and youth. She asked leisha (pronounced Eesha) Simpson what she would do if she had a magic wand.

"What would be your wishes?" the lawyer asked. "What would you do with your wand?"

There was a long pause, then Ms. Simpson said, "I would bring my family back alive, one. I'd put us in a different country, in a big house."

A few minutes later, Ms. Fraser asked if there was anything else. Ms. Simpson, who was wrapping up her testimony at the coroner's inquest examining the Dec. 22, 2007, fire deaths of her mom and two siblings, if there was anything she'd like to add.

"Yes," said Ms. Simpson, that huge rare smile of hers taking over her small face. "I apologize for being late. I never got a baby-sitter."

In those few sentences was all the promise of, and all limits upon, this little bit of a girl who was brought up right, who already has learned the hard lesson of strong black women (as her Auntie Sophia Anderson proudly said once in her testimony, "We endure"), who has suffered too much, whose concrete aspirations never grew as big as her idle dreams, and who, in the end, joins the ranks of young single mothers who need housing.

leisha is the unsung heroine of her family's tragic story in that she three times returned to their burning house in an effort to save her siblings, in that when her mother, Diane Anderson, drank too much or used drugs or couldn't cope, it was leisha as the oldest who stepped up as a surrogate parent to her three brothers and sister, in that though she suffered the loss of the most signif-



leisha Simpson: 'I'm a strong person - I just deal with it' KEVIN VAN PAASSEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

icant father figure in her life (not her biological father, but Leroy Whittaker, the man who was engaged to her mom when he was gunned down in 2005), it was her mother's loss which took precedence.

"I don't have a relationship with my dad," she said once. "He's always been in my life, but ... My dad never showed me things a father should show a daughter. [Leroy] showed me how to love."

But when Mr. Whittaker was shot to death - an innocent target, Toronto Police said at the time - Ms. Simpson's mother fell apart; she couldn't spend another night in the bedroom they had shared as a couple and bought a futon, so she could doze off in the living room. In addition, one of Ms. Simpson's little brothers had been with Mr. Whittaker at his apartment when the killer fired through the front door.

Ms. Simpson's loss was sub-

sumed in the overpowering grief of her mom and brother. As she said of herself, "Honestly, how I grow up, I'm a strong person - I just deal with it." She buried herself in volunteer work after school, anything to get out of the sad house with the shrine for a few hours.

When Ms. Fraser asked if there was anyone she could really talk to, Ms. Simpson said softly, "No one." When she asked why she lived with her best friend, Ms.

Simpson said, "Because I'm on the waiting list for housing" and has been for more than two years.

And when Juror No. 2 - at inquests, the five jurors get to ask their own questions, and they are blessedly un-lawyerly - asked if anyone else but that friend is helping her now, she said no. He asked if she was in school; she said no: "I'm planning to go back in September," she said.

She hasn't finished Grade 11, the inference that when she had her baby, she had to drop out.

"Did anyone ever talk to you about what you could do after Grade 12?" Juror No. 2 asked. It was clear that what he meant was, did she have no mentor, no significant adult who might have nourished her ambition, boosted her confidence, told her how smart and lovely she is?

"No," she said.

Juror No. 3 then asked about her own relationship with Mr. Whittaker. "Like I said," Ms. Simpson said, "he was better than my father."

Her evidence complete, she left the room then, went to the foyer to retrieve her eight-month-old Tayjah, who is named after the sister who perished in the fire. The baby was crying in her stroller when Ms. Simpson came out, but settled quickly in her young mum's arms.

I asked her how she was going to be able to finish high school if she didn't have child care; she had no idea.

Tayjah is gorgeous. She has two teeth, with two more coming in.

When Diane Anderson died more than three years ago, her hard life over, she was 35, with a Grade 9 education and five children, with little real involvement from any of their fathers.

Proud, and private, she was a tough person to help when she was alive - and it's not clear she was ever offered the right kind - and certainly, she is beyond help now.

If I were on that jury, I'd focus on recommendations that might lift up the likes of that baby with the two front teeth and her young mom.