

# Smoke detectors off in blaze that killed mother, two children



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At its most basic, the story of the raging blaze that killed a mother and two of her children several years ago is about the remarkable strength of ordinary people.

At its most complex, it appears to be a tale of a single mother's struggles, the perils of subsidized housing and the "helping" professions and the difficulties of inter-agency relationships - in other words, a saga of weakness both human and societal.

The Dec. 22, 2007 deaths of Diane Anderson, her nine-year-old daughter, Tayjah, and three-year-old son, Jahziah, are now the subject of a coroner's inquest that began in downtown Toronto Wednesday.

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ond-floor closet.

Ms. Anderson and Tayjah and Jahziah perished from inhalation of smoke and fire gases, Crown counsel Rebecca Edward said in her opening statement, and it appears that when Ms. Anderson fell asleep, two of the boys began playing "campfire" with their mother's "smoking materials" and started the fire.

"Diane Anderson could not be roused," Ms. Edward said. "No smoke alarms sounded."

The 35-year-old mother, who two years earlier had reunited with a long-time boyfriend only to lose him to gunfire, an innocent victim, had turned to alcohol and drugs for comfort, Ms. Edward told the jurors.

But despite that, she said, Ms. Anderson "was a loving mother who tried her best" for her five youngsters "with little involvement from any of the fathers."

This inquest isn't a mandatory one, but discretionary, called, Ms. Edward said, to explore what she called "three areas of concern" - the involvement of the Children's Aid Society of Toronto with the family; the involvement of the Toronto Community Housing Corporation, which owns the sprawling complex, in fire safety, and the role of the Toronto Fire Service in fire prevention, particularly in conducting inspections

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On her final try, returning empty-handed, Ms. Simpson, then just 16, ran up the lane in the Jane Street-Finch Avenue West housing complex and got a neighbour, Dale Bowerbank, to help her.

Mr. Bowerbank charged through that front door into the heart of the fire and emerged with two young boys, Travari and Trevon, one conscious, one unconscious from the toxic smoke. Both lived.

By the time the first Toronto firefighters arrived - within four minutes of receiving the call from their dispatcher - the townhouse was completely engulfed, with temperatures inside reaching between 500 and 600-degrees Celsius and poisonous smoke so thick there was zero visibility.

From the moment smoke was first visible on the video - taken by a surveillance camera - to the first 911 call, two minutes and 15 seconds elapsed.

From the moment 911 passed the call to the fire dispatcher and that dispatcher to the firefighters, another 62 seconds were gone.

From the moment firefighters at the District 14 station got the call and threw on their gear and breathing apparatus and were belted into their trucks, another two and a half minutes elapsed.

From the first sighting of smoke to the firefighters' arrival at the Grandravine Drive townhouse, 437 seconds, or less than seven and a half minutes, had passed, yet it was all over but the weep-

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That's all Ms. Edward said about what the inquest will explore.

But another hint of which agencies have a stake in the proceedings and what relationships and practises will be closely examined is found in the fact that no fewer than nine groups have official "standing" at the inquest, meaning they are represented by a dozen lawyers who can ask questions on their behalf.

Included in those groups are the beleaguered TCHC, the fire service, the Toronto District School Board, the Office of the Ontario Fire Marshal and the Children's Aid, as well as three of its workers, who are separately represented.

The family also has standing, and is represented by lawyer Roger Rowe.

Ms. Simpson, who is now 19, is expected to testify about that harrowing early morning just before Christmas, as is Ms. Anderson's sister, Sophia.

Other witnesses will testify, Ms. Edward said, about what difference a working smoke alarm might have made, and how the Toronto fire department approached the issues of non-compliance.

Homeowners and landlords are required, under a law passed in late 2005, to have working smoke alarms on every level of every home.

Non-compliance can result in prosecution, both for landlords and private homeowners, under the provincial Fire Protection and Prevention Act with maximum