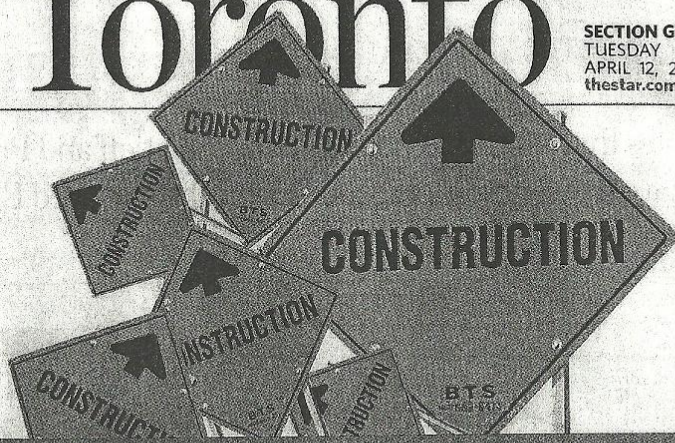


Greater Toronto

»TORONTO STAR«

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TUESDAY
APRIL 12, 2011
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'I was screaming my mom's name'

With 'burning hot' staircase collapsing beneath her, teen tried to save two brothers, inquest told

ISABEL TEOTONIO
STAFF REPORTER

In a desperate bid to save her brothers from a blaze as it spread through her family's home, 16-year-old

leisha Simpson ran back inside the smoke-filled building and bolted up the stairs.

Unable to see, she reached for the boys, aged 12 and 5, with hands singed by a doorknob and dragged them down the "burning hot" stairs as they were beginning to collapse beneath her bare feet.

Simpson testified Monday at an inquest into the Dec. 22, 2007, fire that gutted the public housing unit and killed her mother, Diane An-



leisha Simpson, 19, survived a fire which claimed the life of her mother and two siblings.

derson, 35, sister Tayjah Simpson, 9, and brother Jahziah Whittaker, 3.

The petite 19-year-old recalled being awoken by her "scared" 5-year-

old brother, who told her there was fire in the living room. He and Jahziah had been playing with school papers and lit them with a lighter that belonged to their mom, who was asleep in a nearby chair.

"It was extremely hot... My pillow was completely soaked in sweat," recalled Simpson, who dashed to the living room, where the futon was engulfed in flames.

"I was screaming my mom's name... screaming at the top of my

lungs," she recalled, adding she couldn't enter the room because of the fire. She tried to douse the flames with a jug of water and then ran outside and screamed for help.

She then ran back into the house, with thick smoke billowing from the windows, and darted up the stairs where she found her two brothers. A neighbour ran to the house and helped get the boys out.

FIRE continued on GT4

TRANSIT

Campaign

Teen ran into burning home three times

FIRE from GT1

A surveillance camera at the Toronto Community Housing complex, near Jane St. and Finch Ave W. captured the heroic efforts of the teen, who ran in and out of the house three times.

Simpson said she had no recollection of the neighbour or how many times she entered the house. Nor could she remember if she had heard a smoke alarm.

Simpson testified the home's smoke alarm would go off without provocation and that her mother had complained about it to TCHC, but that it wasn't fixed.

Court has heard that the home's two smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detector were disconnected sometime before the fire.

Simpson testified her mother, who struggled with alcohol and drugs after the 2005 murder of her fiancé, had been drinking the night of the fire.

Simpson, the mother of an 8-month-old, testified that the murder marked the beginning of her mother's "downfall." After that, Anderson fell into a depressive state, unable to handle the overwhelming stress of being a single mom of five.

She would retreat from her family — sometimes locking herself in the closet and disconnecting the phone or refusing to answer the door — and turned to drugs and alcohol.

The inquest is examining services provided to the family by various agencies, including the Children's Aid Society, the Toronto school board, TCHC and Victims Services Toronto. Court has heard Anderson did not receive adequate support from some of these agencies.

Family lawyer Roger Rowe brought forth a motion to also explore Anderson's relationship with the city's social services agency, but it was denied.

"As upsetting or difficult or systematically challenging as a person's life may be, an inquest does not look into the whole life of the deceased but focuses on the circumstances surrounding and lead