

## GREATER TORONTO

# Children started blaze, inquest told

Intoxicated mother could not be roused

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It was late at night and with their mother asleep in the living room chair, 3-year-old Jahziah and his 5-year-old brother were playing with school papers on the couch.

But play turned to disaster after Jahziah reached for his mom's lighter and lit the papers on fire. Moments later, the couch was in flames and the boys were running upstairs to wake their three siblings.

That devastating fire on Dec. 22, 2007, gutted the family's two-storey townhouse near Jane St. and Finch Ave W., and killed Jahziah, his 9-year-old sister, Tayjah and their mother, Diane Anderson, 35. It is the subject of a coroner's inquest that began Wednesday.

On Thursday, fire inspector Lonnie Schubert testified that, based on interviews with the surviving children, Jahziah had run into the boys' bedroom to wake his 12-year-old brother. Meanwhile the 5-year-old had run into his sisters' room, where Tayjah and Ieisha were asleep, warning: "There's fire."

The inquest was told the home's two smoke alarms were disconnected. Schubert, the first investigator to arrive at the public housing unit on Grandravine Dr., testified Ieisha told him Toronto Community Housing had been contacted three times about an inoperable alarm. TCH has no record of the complaints, the inquest heard.

In her opening address to the five-member jury, Crown counsel Rebecca Edward said Anderson, who had turned to drugs and alcohol after her boyfriend was fatally shot, could not be roused.

Toxicology reports showed low amounts of cocaine and THC — the active ingredient in marijuana — were found in Anderson's blood.

Tests also showed her blood alcohol content was 278 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of blood, which is the equivalent of nearly eight alcoholic beverages. (It is illegal to drive with more than 80 mg of alcohol.)

Court heard lethal levels of carbon monoxide were found in her system, which caused her death.

Schubert, who interviewed the children a month after the blaze, recalled that when he asked the 5-year-old about what had happened, the boy put his hands on his head and said: "It's bad." He then used



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

A devastating blaze on Dec. 22, 2007, gutted a two-storey townhouse on Grandravine Dr. Among the dead was 3-year-old Jahziah Whittaker, above.

red and orange pencil crayons to illustrate how the fire had started.

Ieisha, 16 at the time, told Schubert she ran downstairs, tried unsuccessfully to put out the flames with water and started yelling for help.

Her 12-year-old brother, who had been woken by Jahziah, said he tried to lift his little brother, but

could not and struggled to get down the stairs.

On Wednesday, video taken by a TCH surveillance camera was played showing Ieisha running in and out of the house three times in a desperate attempt to save her siblings. A neighbour helped her save her two younger brothers.

Outside court, family lawyer Rog-

er Rowe said women such as Anderson — black single mothers on social assistance and living in public housing — are "overrepresented" in Toronto Community Housing.

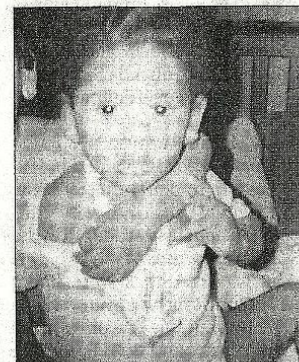
"This is the case of a single mom and five children and a lot of personal and systemic issues. She needed help," said Rowe. "If this inquest is about making recom-



Fire victim Diane Anderson, 35, had drug and alcohol addictions, an inquest has been told.



Nine-year-old Tayjah Simpson was woken by her brother but died in the house blaze.



mendations to address how this tragedy happened and might be avoided, the family would like to see recommendations that are nuanced to address those issues."

Several agencies have standing at the inquest, including the TCH, the Children's Aid Society, the fire service, the Ontario Fire Marshal and the Toronto District School Board.