

July 5, 2022

Category: Excellence in Feature/Enterprise Reporting (Print)

Journalist: Nancy Macdonald

Title: Traevon's Legacy

To the judges:

When Traevon Desjarlais-Chalifoux arrived at an Abbotsford group home at the age of 17, the Cree boy was supposed to find himself in an Indigenous-centered facility, a place where the staff could empathize with the traumatic road he'd already walked to get to this address.

He received none of those things. Nine months after Traevon arrived, his body was found in his bedroom closet, a suicide. He had been missing for four days but no one had thought to look there earlier.

Moved by the despair of the situation, reporter Nancy Macdonald wanted to find out [who let down Traevon so utterly](#). Through weeks of shoe-leather reporting, Nancy discovered an appalling array of failures: From the workers who staffed the home; to the personal trainer who owned the house and was contracted to provide care; to the delegated Indigenous agency responsible for taking care of Traevon; to the provincial government, which is ultimately responsible for oversight of the agency.

Nancy found an agency which has repeatedly fallen below basic measures, including a failure by social workers to meet regularly with young people in their care or to plan adequately for their care. In some cases, they never met with them at all. Repeated audits into the agency, Xyolhemeylh, and the Ministry of Children and Family Development have shown neither is adequately monitoring group homes to ensure they are safe and secure for the children who live there. No guardrails are in place to ensure that staff hired by group home operators are equipped to care for some of the most vulnerable, high-needs youth in the province. Neither the ministry nor Xyolhemeylh are ensuring the care Indigenous youth receive in group homes like the one where Traevon died are culturally appropriate and safe.

Nancy came to these conclusions through sensitive and dogged investigation. The ministry, the agency and the province's children's commissioner declined to release any information at all due to privacy concerns. All Nancy had to go on were the agency audits, which are public if someone knows where to look, and the address of where Traevon died.

Through land title searches, Nancy managed to confirm the owner of the home was Richard Rees, and saw that someone with the same name had been receiving annual contract payments from the Ministry of Children and Family Development for over a decade.

She managed to find people formerly employed at Rees who were willing to speak on the record.

She repeatedly visited the abandoned Abbotsford group home, gathering information that might lead to people who once lived there. She began the tedious work of scouring social media

feeds to narrow down a list of potential youth who might have been there with Traevon and she found one willing to speak about his time in the home.

Nancy watched online funerals to find relatives of Traevon who would be willing to speak and she tracked down friends of Traevon's beloved uncle. Nancy also managed to find a former ward of Xyolhemeylh who agreed to speak to her about her frustrations with the agency.

Remarkably for a story like this, Nancy's sources were willing to allow their names to be used in the article, an important factor in ensuring our work was transparent.

Nancy's investigation prompted British Columbia's [children's advocate](#) to call on the provincial government to enact urgent measures to ensure youth are being safely cared for in B.C. group homes. Children's representative Jennifer Charlesworth she was "horrified" to read about the conditions in the ahome.

Although Traevon died in 2020, the BC Coroner's Service did not announce a [public inquest](#) into his death until April 29, 2022, less than a week after our story ran on the front page.

Later, Nancy received data that showed the number of [critical injuries](#) sustained by children and youth while in government care in British Columbia jumped by 18 per cent in the first full year of the pandemic.

Nancy's reporting on this story is a masterclass in how to do the job. Her work shone sunlight on appalling failures, forcing a public accounting for all kids in care.

Thank you for your consideration.



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