

A Tribute to Shannen Koostachin

As the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth in Ontario, I wanted to find a way to honor Shannen Koostachen, a First Nations youth leader who was killed in car accident. Shannen was instrumental in leading a national movement to get a school built in her community, Attawapiskat First Nation. It was perhaps the largest child led movement in Canadian history-certainly in recent memory. Some of my staff had the opportunity to meet Shannen and were in awe of her absolute passion to advocate for her community to have a real school.

The essay I have submitted was written by Charlie Angus Member of Parliament (Timmins-James Bay). I wanted to write something to honor her memory but Charlie, who knew her well, has written a far better piece than I could hope to.

*Irwin Elman
Provincial Advocate*

*For more information please visit www.shannensdream.ca
Please visit these two videos in her memory.
[Attawapiskat-Youth1- Shannens Dream](#) [Attawapiskat Youth 2--Shannens Dream](#)*

Shannen Koostachin
FIRST NATION YOUTH LEADER
Killed in a Car Accident May 31
Charlie Angus MP

If Martin Luther King or Caesar Chavez had died when in their teens, the world would never know what had been lost. With the death of 15-year-old Shannen Koostachin of Attawapiskat First Nation we have a glimpse. Shannen was known across Canada as a passionate fighter for the rights of Native children. Her death in highway accident in Northern Ontario created deep grief in youth who saw her as the voice for a forgotten generation of First Nation children.

Shannen was just 13-years-old when she traveled from her isolated reserve on the James Bay coast to confront the federal government in Ottawa over their decision to walk away on a commitment to build a school for children in her community.

For the better part of a decade, children had been going to school in makeshift portables. Their school grounds consisted of a badly-contaminated brownfield. There were no swings, playground equipment, library or science labs. In the bitterly cold winter months, shifting ground left fire doors jammed shut and windows stuck open. In November 2007, the government walked away on its latest commitment to build a grade school for 400 children. This is when Shannen and her fellow grade 8 classmates decided to fight back.

In launching the “Education is a Human Right Campaign”, the children of Attawapiskat caught the federal government completely by surprise. Their campaign, which utilized digital organizing tools like Facebook and Youtube inspired thousands of youth across Canada. Hundreds of schools joined letter-writing and public actions. The campaign quickly became the largest youth-driven, child’s rights movement in Canadian history.

Shannen inspired youth as she stood up to government ministers with fierce pride mixed with childlike vulnerability. At the age of 14, she was nominated for the International Children’s Peace Prize. In December 2009, the government finally agreed to build a school.

Shannen didn’t want to be a leader. She simply wanted to go to school and enjoy the dreams of a young teen. But she couldn’t tolerate the hopelessness of young children in her home reserve. She spoke passionately about the need to offer educational opportunities that other Canadian kids took for granted. Speaking to students in Toronto she explained her motivation:

“I would like to talk to you what it is like to be a child who grows up never seeing a real school. I want to tell you about the children who give up hope and start dropping out in grade 4 or 5. But I want to also tell you about the determination in our community to build a better world. School should be a time for hopes and dreams of the future. Every kid deserves this.”

In Grade 9, Shannen left her isolated fly-in community to attend school in New Liskeard, Ontario. It broke her heart to leave home but she believed that young leaders had to leave and become fully educated so that younger siblings would some day have proper educational opportunities at home.

On May 31st, she was killed in a car accident along with mentor and friend Rose Thornton. In response to the overwhelming outpouring of grief at her passing the Shannen Koostachin Memorial Fund is being set up to inspire young James Bay Cree to pursue higher education.