STAYING ALIVE
THE RESIDENTS OF A SMALL COMMUNITY IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA WANTED TO SAVE THEIR TOWN BY BUILDING A PRESTIGIOUS GIRLS’ HOCKEY SCHOOL. INSTEAD THEY FOUND THEMSELVES EMBROILED IN CONTROVERSY
A CLUTCH OF TOWNSPEOPLE HAD GATHERED AT the edge of a parking lot next to the hockey rink in Warner, Alta., in 2001. They stood like the faithful, witnessing a crew smooth the concrete that would underlie their renovated rink, which had been fashioned out of a Quonset hut at the edge of Township Rd. 41G. The town, comprising 373 souls living on 286 acres of bald southern Alberta prairie, was founded by homesteaders in 1908. Today, it acts as a service centre for nearby farms and is part of a triad of towns along Highway 4 just north of the United States. Warner, Milk River and Coutts form a widespread but tight-knit community for the surrounding area. Services are divided among the three: Milk River has the hospital and golf course, Coutts operates the border crossing, and Warner, the oldest of the three, has the hockey rink. Near the highway in Warner, there’s a small gas station attached to a roadside paleontology attraction. There’s a Chinese food restaurant and a hotel, trafficked primarily for its bar. Following the Canadian Pacific Railway tracks southeast of town is elevator row, a collection of three historic, wood-cribbed grain elevators built between 1913 and 1960. (Two were demolished in 2014.) In 2001, with the rink under renovation and 20 per cent of the town’s homes up for sale, the faithful had gathered to watch the work on a building that had come to represent hope for survival.

The principal of nearby Warner School, Mark Lowe, was worried there would be no school at all. Representatives from Alberta Infrastructure had visited the year before, noted low enrolment and recommending $1.8 million in repairs. The Horizon School Division was considering sending middle and high school students down the road to the neighbouring town. Sandra Nelson, a grandmother of 17 who worked for the town, didn’t like the prospect of local kids being shuttled away from Warner’s streets to far-off schools. As she stood watching the work that, among other fixes, would expand the rink to NHL-standard size, she and the others discussed what they could do to save the town. They could hardly have known at the time the melancholy ways their rink would come to represent the school, the town and the struggle to keep a small community alive.

I GREW UP ON AN ACREAGE JUST OUTSIDE WARNER, but I went to school in Milk River, which had separate elementary and junior-senior high schools and just over 100 students. Warner, meanwhile, housed all of its students in a small, brown building. There are about 15 streets in town and, while the school sits on the western edge, it is the central hub from which the spokes of daily life stretch and revolve.

Since leaving this area for university, I have met plenty of people who tell me that they too grew up in small towns— that they are small-town people. But they mean towns with stop-lights and a Tim Hortons. There is not a single traffic light in Coutts, Milk River or Warner. I spent my youth keeping watch for deer on my hour-long drives home from the mall on the weekend. In this sense, life was wistful. When I looked out my bedroom window, three-quarters of the view would be blue sky and billowing clouds in all their formations. When the sun beamed at a particular angle, you could see the rolling hills of Montana on the horizon. A friend lived on a farm down the road, and in the summer we’d meet to jump on her trampoline or lounge on my deck. I babysat the boys on the other side; their father supplemented his income with work in Fort McMurray. Mine was a town family who bought land nestled between two legacy farms. When we first moved there, my parents couldn’t sleep for the deafening quiet.

School here is not like school in larger centres. There are teachers for core subjects, but there are no optional courses because there are not enough students to support them. Most of us would pack our schedules with the required classes and take one or two distance learning modules that were administered in quiet rooms with a teacher’s aide. There is very little space in towns like this to shape your own existence, to find your people. There is simply fitting in and carrying on. Group sports were, and still are, the foundations of social structure in school and out— sports events were where you went to see people, in the hallway or in the bleachers, running the 50/50 fundraisers and taking tickets. There were often three or four generations of a single family present at basketball or volleyball games.

But these are distractions. By the time a town’s decline is apparent in a school’s sports culture, it’s probably too late to save it.

Between 1996 and 2016, the number of farms in Alberta decreased by 31 per cent. That doesn’t mean less land was being farmed, but that the farms simply got bigger, increasing by an average of about 400 acres and displacing smaller family homesteads. In Alberta, there remain many small farms (under 10 acres) and large-scale operations requiring massive capital, but the middle is vanishing. The kids I grew up with who moved away after high school rarely returned to become the next generation farming their family land. In town, they are often replaced by older “snowbird” residents who
“We had one of the most interesting social experiments of the time going on.”

want to take advantage of low housing costs and proximity to the U.S. border.

The health of a village school, Mark Lowe told me this past summer from his current office at Picture Butte High School, can often be gauged by last name. Towns this small frequently have dynastic family structures that have been in place since European settlers first arrived. Lowe had lived in Warner since 1999, and knew that so long as there was a Pittman walking the hallways of Warner School, as there had been since 1914, the town was doing OK. “When I got there, I marvelled at how strong a nuclear community it was,” he said. “Around 40 to 50 per cent were long-term community, meaning that they’re from Warner.” But only a few years later he could look down the line and see far fewer students. “We lost a lot of families,” he said. Quietly, the rest of the town began to panic. “By the time I left Warner [in 2014], I think it was down to 25-ish per cent long-term community.”

Sandra Nelson, who worked in human resources at Horizon’s head office, knew the community would have to work fast if it wanted to survive. Today, no one remembers whose idea it was, only that they all thought it was genius, a saving grace. They would start a hockey school, expanding their student population through an immediate influx of athletes. And although the town was home to the county’s South County Sabres, the school would take another tack by becoming a female hockey academy. As they all stood watching the concrete get poured at the new rink, it seemed like the best – and maybe the last – hope.

ADAM DOENZ, THE OLDEST SON OF LAURA-MARIE Doenz and her late husband Bruce, wanted to stay in Warner and take over the family farm, but couldn’t imagine it happening without a school in town. Todd Coverdale, who supervised the rink renovation, agreed. “Without a school,” he said to me over the phone from his home, “why would people want to live in a community? But the hockey school was going to change that. Bringing in a cohort of athletes would raise the school’s population by about 25 students, and it would do it in one fell swoop.

It had been done before, notably in the village of Wilcox, Sask., six hours east of Warner, which in 1990 started a female hockey academy at the Athol Murray College of Notre Dame. Further rationale and enthusiasm for the idea came in 2002, when Canada’s women’s hockey team won gold at the Salt Lake City Olympics. Nelson, back at the Horizon head office in Taber, had sensed there was a gap in the market for high-performance girls’ hockey training and it would now be in demand. The girls would need somewhere to prepare them for the rigour and competition of college and professional hockey, as opposed to simply being the anomaly of a girl on a boys’ team. In October 2002, the notional Warner Hockey Society, essentially a booster club, held a town-wide meeting to pitch the idea; 152 people were in attendance, and 152 voted to try to start the school. The society was formed and included Coverdale, Doenz and Nelson, key members of stalwart local families who raised funds and lobbied for the school to gain permissions and status, which it did. The society secured coverage of the school on national Hockey Day, in local media and on the CBC. And they hired Jamie Wood as their first coach. Wood had been the head coach of a women’s hockey program at Elmira College in New York state, and had made a name for himself as a recruiter.

Wood travelled to Warner to meet with Mark Lowe and the society. “At that point there wasn’t very much opportunity in women’s hockey in Canada,” Wood told me in a phone call. He was given the same benefits as a teacher, and his wife was hired at the school. But even early
on, he remembers a disconnect between the ambitions of the society and reality. “I remember them saying they had 10 players ready to sign up, but when I got there, there were two,” he said. Still, it only took Wood a month to fill out a roster in a town no one had heard of.

For the first two years, the “hockey girls” stayed with local billet families, including farm families around the bend from where I lived. They were placed in tiny classes, often with only a handful of fellow students from the town itself. Eventually, a dorm was built from a refurbished Latter-Day Saints church, and “dorm mothers” were hired to live on-site and cook for the players. The dorms would play a key role in the events that unfolded.

“We had one of the most interesting social experiments of the time going on,” said Lowe. His office in Picture Butte still holds Warner memories. A framed poster, made by former Warner School students, leans against the wall. Also visible are various notes from supporters at Warner. “Everyone wanted you to be principal!” says one. “YOU built the hockey school,” says another. The social experiment he was referring to was clear: would welcoming young women whose parents could afford to pay $30,000 in tuition each year — into the humble hallways of a school that rarely sees new students save a town?

The Warner Hockey School’s early days were energized. “It was a special atmosphere, the rink was full. We were part of the community,” said Wood. In the world of high-profile hockey schools, the coach is the draw. Players and parents select schools based on staff and coaches’ connections, and Warner, especially in that it was new and located in a deeply rural location, was no exception. The town worked hard to welcome new residents. Girls were greeted on the streets and invited over for family dinners. “Welcome home, Maggie Wood,” read the town’s highway sign, when coach Wood returned to Warner with his newborn daughter in June 2006.

By the time Wood left in 2007 to found the Maritime Hockey Academy in Nova Scotia, and eventually coach at the University of Minnesota and University of New Hampshire, close to 80 per cent of his players had gone on to full Division 1 scholarships at large U.S. universities. Some had been recruited for Team Canada, and almost all had played for their provinces. A pair of sisters went to Cornell University and, in 2015, Bailey Park signed with Yale. Sarah Davis became the first player from Newfoundland to ever be drafted to Canada’s women’s hockey team.

Before Wood left, he hired Mikko Makela to take over as coach. Makela had played eight seasons in the NHL, having moved to the United States from Finland at 20. He’s known as the “Flying Finn.” In 1987, he met his wife, Janice, when he was playing for the Finnish national team at the Canada Cup. For years, he bounced between the NHL and teams in Europe and, after his playing career ended, he coached in Finland and Canada before being hired in Warner. He had never given much consideration to coaching girls hockey before then. “But I would have a hard time to coach boys now,” Makela told me over the phone from Banff, where he now coaches. “They’re boneheads.”

“I was quite happy that he was willing to take over,” said Wood. “When we first started, there was no way we could have got somebody of that calibre.”

Makela was as much of a draw as Wood had been. “We didn’t sell a program with big city, big lights,” Makela said. When he wanted to recruit a student to Warner, he’d court their parents.

“Originally it was my dad that wanted me to go,” said Kelly Watson.* After Becky Cornell had toured Warner’s facilities with her parents and expressed interest, Makela sent them a box full of Warriors sweaters, hats and jackets. “Once we got that it was kind of like, oh we’re in,” she said. Cornell entered the Warner Hockey School the following September, moving into the dorm rooms. “At the start I didn’t really like it,” she said. “There wasn’t much to do.” Sarah Stuehr remembered the sound of tires on the town’s dirt roads. “You didn’t really see too many people out and about. I thought that was strange,” she said.

“The saying is that there’s nothing to do in Warner but kill yourself,” said another player, who wishes to remain anonymous.

Of course, small-town life is open to stereotypes — friendly, quirky, gritty, stoic, safe. Many of these are based in reality. But small towns can also be isolating and ruthless to outsiders who haven’t come from the land. Once the school’s novelty factor began to wear off for new recruits every year, it was impressions such as these that began to emerge.

“My first seven years in that environment were very enjoyable,” said Mikko Makela. Over the years, he and Lowe had settled into a process to run the hockey academy and school in tandem. They were a team — not always an easy team, but a team. “He kind of understood me and he was really, really good for me,” said Makela.

Lowe said that working closely with Makela was sometimes like a game of chess. “There were certain ways you had to make things happen to make them happen,” he said.

*Certain names in this article have been changed for privacy reasons.
But then challenges began cropping up. In 2008, an athletic centre, with luxury changing rooms, training rooms and offices was built with “a dressing room that rivals any in the NHL,” according to Doenz. The team changed leagues after Wood left, transferring in 2007 into the more competitive Junior Women’s Hockey League, which required extensive and expensive travel around North America. It also meant fewer home games. They won the league in 2010, but in the midst of a recession, some parents were second-guessing the choice to send their kids to a school with such high tuition.

In 2013, due largely to its success, the Warner Hockey School stopped receiving start-up funding from the Rural Alberta Development Fund. “When that dried up, we continued to act like a big funded school, but we weren’t,” said Lowe. “It was a real beast to manage financially.” The students were paying tuition, but the school started falling into debt. A number of new hockey academies for girls had also opened across the province, and Makela began to have trouble filling the team’s roster. When he arrived, he said, “there was one female sports school in Canada. And then a few years later there were 25, three in Alberta.” Recruiting-wise that was a huge challenge. There was a lot of pressure to fill the team, Lowe said, to make sure there was enough students in the school to keep it there. “I needed to go crazy and find players.”

Lowe couldn’t imagine a time when the school would be in the black. In 2014 he was offered a position as principal at a school in a town just over an hour away, and he took it – over Makela’s protestations. “Do I feel I dodged a bullet?” Lowe said. “I would say yes I did, in that I didn’t have to go through that nasty situation.”

Stepping in after Lowe left was David LeGrandeur. He’d served as vice-principal at an elementary school in the city of Lethbridge, but he was taking on a powerful role that required a delicate touch. He was to be the link between the school, the town and the players.

**ON LEGRANDEUR’S FIRST DAY AS PRINCIPAL, WARNER**

School had a fire drill. Becky Cornell remembered standing in a group with other players. When everyone was instructed to go inside, the hockey players walked back in, talking as they went. Cornell said someone told them to stop talking and directed them to go back outside and file in quietly. “Right then we were like, ‘Who is this guy?’” she told me.

That guy was LeGrandeur. And it wasn’t just fire drill procedures he began closely managing. Some former hockey school students said they were called into LeGrandeur’s office one by one for discussions about their hockey futures, something that had never happened with a principal before. One player told me LeGrandeur was preoccupied with encouraging them to play hockey at his alma mater, the University of Lethbridge. Others allege that their academic schedules became more rigid, and their assignment schedules were determined without considering their tournament or game schedule. “It’s not like he was a principal of normal students,” says Kelly Watson. “He was the principal of elite athletes, which I don’t think he was ready for.”

Going into the 2014-15 school year, the program was suffering financially. A number of students had withdrawn, and with them went their tuition. For Makela, things began to change at multiple levels. Whereas in years past coaches worked out of a small office in the school, making them symbolically part of the bigger picture, Makela was moved at the start of that year to an office at the hockey rink. In an emailed letter to parents dated March 28, 2016, Horizon School Division superintendent Wilco Tymensen said this was for renovation purposes. There were other, small challenges. Makela had been entrusted with disciplinary measures against players, but he, players and parents alleged that that power was taken away under LeGrandeur, who started issuing what Makela calls “letters of direction.” (I reached out to David LeGrandeur in my reporting, but he declined to be interviewed or comment for this article.) When players were heard swearing in the residence, for instance, Makela was told not to chastise them. Matters came to a head in 2015, when parents and the team’s assistant coaches requested that a bullying player be removed from the team. Makela said he was told by Horizon that removing players from the team and school was not his job.

Over the years in which the Warner Hockey School operated successfully, the hockey girls and Warner students developed separate ecosystems in the school halls. The hockey girls ate their lunch, delivered by their dorm mothers, in one particular hallway, every day. They were subject to strict rules compared to their peers: they had curfews and rules around who could visit the dorm; they were not allowed to drive; at lunch or during spare periods, when their classmates were permitted to leave, the Warriors were not.

“I was just raised to respect authority,” said a former player, Anna Evans. “But in my 12th-grade year, things kind of hit the fan, so to speak.”

After LeGrandeur started, some Warriors alleged that the hockey girls were instructed to eat lunch in the hallway with the “town kids,” across from his open
office door. If the Warriors complained about anything, one former player alleged in an interview, town kids would pipe up that they were rich and should keep quiet. Multiple former Warriors and some parents told me that LeGrandeur was harsher and more inflexible than Lowe when it came to assignments and tests that were due when the team was on the road. A former player said LeGrandeur took away perks, like being allowed to swim during a team-building camping trip. Some players also claim that he didn’t attend their games as often as Lowe had.

In April 2015, the hockey parents convened a meeting with the school division, ostensibly to discuss their concerns surrounding player discipline and poor communication from the school division. Various parents have alleged that during this meeting, the Horizon School Division assistant superintendent Clark Bosch appeared to almost scold Makela at one point, telling him: “Be quiet, I will tell you when you can speak.”

It is difficult to know what was behind this rumoured antagonism. (The Horizon School Division also declined to be interviewed for this story.) In interviews, two players speculated that LeGrandeur may have wanted Makela’s coaching job for himself. More than one parent believed Horizon may have been looking to close down the hockey academy so that the school itself would be forced to shut, thereby conserving on infrastructure costs by merging rural schools. “Right from the start, it was like he didn’t want a hockey program there,” Cornell’s father told me.

Whatever the motivations were, one thing was beyond doubt: a power struggle was suddenly playing out on the streets of a small community. “It pitted people against people,” Jon Hood, Warner’s chief administrative officer, told me over the phone last summer. “It left a hole in our community.” One of the hockey parents wrote a letter to superintendent Tymensen and said of the April 2015 meeting that it was “clearly an attempt to intimidate and discredit Mikko in front of his families.” In an interview, another parent was even more blunt: “Somebody should have given him [Bosch] a licking.” A number of parents co-signed an additional series of letters to Horizon School Division and Alberta Education at this time, expressing concern that the board was treating Makela, and by extension their children, unfairly, noting that their concerns were continually ignored. Into the spring of 2015, Warrior parents sent individual letters to provincial and federal politicians, outlining their concerns with Horizon School Division. In one, a parent expressed dismay that their daughter’s hockey experience has faltered “for no apparent reason, other than perhaps the arrogance on the part of [Horizon School Division] leaders.”

IN THE FALL OF 2015, THE PARENTS OF SOME WARRIORS players began to notice their daughters were falling ill. Towards the end of October, one father called Janice Makela to say he suspected the residence might contain mould; his daughter’s symptoms were similar to what they’d once experienced in their family home. After an inspection, the Horizon School Division confirmed the presence of mould in the residence, and asked a trustee and maintenance worker, Derek Baron, to clear it out, which he did by sponging the walls with bleach while the team was away at a weekend tournament. On October 26, superintendent Tymensen responded to Janice Makela, who was working as a cook at the dorm at the time and had raised concerns about her health in returning after the cleanup. Since test results on the residence wouldn’t be available for at least a week, Tymensen said, he couldn’t provide a guarantee of safety. Students were sent to billet families during testing. Janice emailed her concerns that it was an unsafe workplace and gave notice that she refused to enter the building.
A few months later, Mikko Makela was summoned to attend a meeting at the Horizon School Division offices in Taber, where he was given notice that his contract wouldn’t be renewed in the spring. “They were saying that I wasn’t seeing things the way they were and they didn’t see me continuing,” said Makela. Even after winning another JWHL championship in 2015, disagreements between Makela and LeGrandeur had, Makela told me, made both jobs difficult. “But it’s always a surprise when someone doesn’t appreciate your work.”

Makela was instructed to discontinue recruiting. Many Warrior parents were upset about the change. They told the school board that they’d sent their children to Makela, not to Warner. In January 2016, these parents held a meeting with the board and trustees to air their concerns. They also submitted a request for review of the decision not to renew Makela’s contract.

During this time, the atmosphere surrounding the Warner Hockey School was souring its relationship with the town. At one point, a rumour swirled around town that Makela was attempting to move the entire team to Kimberley, B.C. A news story from the Kimberley Daily Bulletin suggesting as much was printed and put up anonymously in Warner’s post office. Kelly Watson, who was a Grade 11 hockey student at the point, noticed that her rapport with town kids was changing. “They all thought we were rich B-I-T-C-H-es,” she said. “If we complained they’d say there were 20 other girls ready to take our place at this school. But in reality, it’s like, no girl in the hockey world is jumping to come to this small town.” Suggestive and inflammatory graffiti was discovered above some of the dorm bunk beds. At times, Becky Cornell would drive the eight hours home for the weekend, telling her dad that she wanted to move home.

The Warner Hockey School met its end, fittingly, at the rink. Makela had been told he would be employed in Warner until the end of the school year, but in March 2016 he and his assistant coaches were called to a meeting at the rink. As Makela tells it, they were met there by LeGrandeur, Horizon employees and an RCMP officer. “I felt a little bit criminal,” said Makela. He and his staff were let go immediately (he alleges without cause) and asked to vacate the rink – and town – as soon as possible. Makela remembered a member of Warner’s council standing outside the rink apologizing, saying they were “so ashamed of how this was done.”

Back at the school, players began getting text messages from a classmate present at the rink meeting saying their coaches were being fired. They left class and went to reception: did anyone know what was going on? One student remembers the receptionist ignoring the incessant ringing of the school’s telephone. A group of players ran to the rink where they found staff members in tears. The school board had arranged billet families for the players, but many simply drove away from the town that day. Only three players finished the school year in Warner. One assistant coach was a temporary foreign worker and had nowhere to go. She simply packed her things into her car and drove north.

“We went to Warner for Mikko, to play hockey for Mikko,” Becky Cornell told me. “We didn’t move to Warner to go to school.”

IN THE SPRING OF 2016, A GROUP OF 10 PARENTS, UPSET about how everything seemed to come apart so quickly, met with a lawyer to discuss possible legal action against the Horizon School District. LeGrandeur and the Warner Hockey Society continued to insist that they would find a new coach who could ice a team the following year. The hockey school did eventually name a new coach, Bruce Bell, but efforts to restart the program would prove unsuccessful, no doubt due, at least in part, to the new rumours, soon to go public, that were circling around the school.

It turned out that in early 2016 a set of 27 complaints
was submitted to the Horizon School Division about everything from the conduct of Horizon employees to workplace-safety issues. The most serious of the allegations were against a Horizon trustee and the Horizon superintendent, accusing them of sexual harassment against players and staff.

According to Cornell, at a school Christmas concert in December 2015, Derek Baron, the Horizon trustee who had removed the mould from the dorm, approached her and another hockey player and remarked on the size of their breasts. In another instance, Baron responded to Cornell’s chances of getting a “full-ride” scholarship to a university by asking what else she was “going to ride.” In both instances, she remembers laughing off the comments or walking away. “Because what the heck did this old man just say to us?” Cornell said.

Baron and his wife, Wendy, lived near the dorms. The pair were given keys and Wendy was often there, helping to clean or fix things. “She put her heart into the place,” said Janice Makela. Baron, too, was a fixture at the Warner Hockey School, not only because he was a high-ranking member of the school board, but also because he was a town resident present at community events. The couple had children enrolled at the school. “Sometimes he would come over and just hang out, or if we had an event at the school he would always be there,” said Watson. “He was just always around.”

Baron was also accused of entering the girls’ dorm early in the morning and asking a small group of players why they were awake so early. When one replied that they were working on homework, he suggested to them that “the other girls’ vibrators are better than yours.” In a story for Global News published in November 2016, assistant coach Naomi Meier confirmed hearing Baron say these words, and noted that she made the allegations against him because she “wanted to stand up for what was right.”

Baron responded to requests for an interview with an email stating simply, “No comment.” In an investigation into the matter, conducted by a private investigator hired by the Horizon School Division, he denied the claims, telling the investigator, “I treat them as my daughters.”

The investigation, however, held the accusations to have, Horizon just kept quiet,” said Todd Coverdale. “I think they wanted the nightmare to go away. And it died out, but it killed our program in the process.”

Speaking about the accusations, Cornell’s father broke down in tears. “When we brought it up and tried to talk to the school division, they wouldn’t listen to us. And then I’m feeling guilty because I left my kid there all year. Finally, he [Baron] wasn’t supposed to be around the girls,” he said. “But at the end, when we picked them up, he was at the school.”

The harassment allegations made against Baron were treated with varying levels of significance, even within the team, staff and parents. “Derek made comments all the time,” said one employee. “But … how could I say this. He’s just a dirty old guy, you know what I mean?” One athlete who spoke to me referred to him as “an old farm guy … they do that.” Another shrugged it off, saying, “That’s just Derek,” while a teammate regarded the whole episode as “just a joke … Why would you ruin this man’s life?” One parent felt Baron wasn’t “a bad guy.”

For her part, Cornell saw it a different way. “I’m glad that it happened to me and not anyone else. I wouldn’t want that to happen to my teammates. I’m a bit stronger.”

“Any interaction with Derek Baron, usually something uncomfortable was said,” said Anna Evans. “You were taught to laugh it off because he’s been here since the beginning of the school and he’s a good guy and the community rallies around him, and stuff like that.”

Perhaps it’s unsurprising that many players chose to shrug off words; many people who experience harassment do so. And in small towns, prominent and long-standing community members are often treated with leniency. But near the time of the Warner Hockey School’s demise, a larger shift in the public conversation was taking place. It was on the cusp of the #MeToo movement, in which people were starting to call out public figures for harassment or abuse. What was once assumed to be acceptable by a small community was no longer so.

**ANOTHER COMPLAINT, LODGED AT THE SAME TIME AND ADDRESSED IN THE SAME REPORT AS THE ALLEGATIONS AGAINST BARON, ACCUSED FORMER HORIZON SCHOOL BOARD ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT CLARK BOSCH OF INAPPROPRIATELY TOUCHING A HOCKEY SCHOOL EMPLOYEE’S THIGH DURING A MEETING. THIS ACCUSATION WAS EVENTUALLY DISMISSED, DUE TO THREE FACTORS: THE LONG DELAY IN REPORTING THE INCIDENT, THE INCONSISTENT MEMORY OF THE COMPLAINANT, AND THE INVESTIGATOR’S DOUBT THAT TOUCHING OF A SEXUAL NATURE WOULD HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN A SMALL AND CROWDED MEET-
ing room. In a leaked version of the final report, it was revealed that private investigator Dev Chankasingh found 24 of the 27 complaints to be unsubstantiated and had no finding on one more. (The other two findings related to the actions taken against Baron.) Chankasingh stated in his report that he thought the complainants were working together to get LeGrandeur, Bosch and Tymensen fired.

Janice Makela believed the investigation was compromised because it was paid for by the Horizon School Division, noting that the independent investigator took only statements and did not request to look at documentation or correspondence that might prove allegations. In a response to Janice’s repeated letters and complaints about the school division between 2015 and 2016, Alberta Education Minister David Eggen referred to the troubles at Warner as a “human resource matter.” In her response, she argued that it was instead a matter of human rights that caused trauma. One Warner hockey player has not put on skates since.

In a written statement provided for this story, Alberta Education noted that, while it was aware of concerns brought forward about the Horizon School Division by parents and hockey school employees, Horizon – as a public school board – is governed by an elected board of trustees. “We expect all local school authorities to ensure students and staff are supported in … safe environments,” the statement reads.

Horizon School Division has consistently turned down all requests for comment about the Warner Hockey School. LeGrandeur made a statement to Global News in November 2016 saying that the Chankasingh report exonerated the board and that the accusations “were proven to be unsubstantiated, and that’s all I have to say about it.” And it remains true that Baron has never been criminally charged for any of the allegations against him recounted in this story. In a final request to Horizon for an interview, I noted that my story would likely contain details about the demise of the hockey school that might portray the division in an unflattering light, and that it would be fair to have the story contain their point of view. In response, I received a letter from superintendent Tymensen in October 2018, in which he reiterated the division’s commitment to privacy, discretion and due process surrounding the details of the hockey school’s closure. After writing out a legal definition of defamation, he closed by informing me that the “board and all employees targeted within your article or by your comments will be made aware of the accusations levelled against them so that they may take appropriate recourse to protect their reputation and seek compensation for any damages incurred by reckless, false and defamatory comments.”

**IN 2016, WARNER TRIED TO ICE A NEW GIRLS’ HOCKEY team with a new coach, but they couldn’t recruit enough players. Parents researching the school were undoubtedly not reassured; even today an internet search about Warner Hockey School immediately brings up news stories about the accusations against Baron. “What I heard is that they said they started it before me and they can start it again” said Mikko Makela. “And that’s the ignorance that we dealt with at the time. It was unbelievable.” In 2017, the school attempted but failed to relaunch under a new name and as a sister school to an academy in Devon, Alta. Warner has lost its provincial designation as a sports school. And the story is far from over – on March 8, 2018, Mikko Makela filed a statement of claim against the Horizon School Division, suing it for wrongful dismissal and seeking compensatory and punitive damages. On July 20, 2018, the Horizon School Division filed a statement of defence, denying the validity of Makela’s claim and asking it be summarily dismissed, and seeking to have Makela pay for the cost of the proceedings. The matter has yet to be resolved before the court.

Not that any of this means people in Warner have given up. “Looking to the future, we hope once again to offer a program aimed at young athletes,” Laura-Marie Doenz wrote to me earlier this year. “Our dream continues.”

A dream that is, in the end, less about hockey than it is about keeping a small town alive. In 2018, three students graduated from Warner School. According to Warner’s current mayor, Tyler Lindsay, the high school was hit hard by the closure of the hockey academy. There are, he said, numerous elementary school students. But it’s a high school the town wants and needs, a high school that can draw families with parents willing to commute to Lethbridge for work but who want their kids to grow up in a small town.

I lived around Warner for almost 10 years, all of them formative, but my family has since scattered across different cities. It is where I am from but not a place I go back to. In this, I am not alone. Kelly Watson said that when she graduated from Warner Hockey School, her packed car was waiting outside the ceremony. She got in and drove away, telling herself to not look back. It hit Becky Cornell a similar way. “Everyone saw Warner and how cool it was being this ghost town that just rose up, and the girls were winning,” she said, the last time we spoke. “And now it’s nothing again.”

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