

Key witnesses in probe of Indigenous man's 2015 death not interviewed by police, fifth estate finds

Thunder Bay Police Service under formal review for treatment of deaths of Indigenous people

By Lisa Mayor, [CBC News](#) Posted: Nov 11, 2016 5:00 AM ET Last Updated: Nov 11, 2016 5:57 AM ET



Brad DeBungee shows the fifth estate's Gillian Findlay where his brother Stacy's body was found in the McIntyre River in Thunder Bay, Ont. (CBC)

Police in Thunder Bay, Ont., never bothered to find and interview two key witnesses who were with an Indigenous man the night before he was found dead last year, *the fifth estate* has found.

The body of Stacy DeBungee, 41, was discovered in the McIntyre River on the morning of Oct. 19, 2015.

His death is one of several deaths of Indigenous people in Thunder Bay's waterways that were quickly deemed not suspicious with little apparent investigation by the city's police service.

the fifth estate was able to track down the two witnesses who say they were with DeBungee on the night of Oct. 18 and used a debit card belonging to him after his death.

More than a year later, those same witnesses have never been formally interviewed by police.



Stacy DeBungee's body was found in the McIntyre River in Thunder Bay on Oct. 19, 2015. (CBC)

"I wasn't aware of that [information]," Thunder Bay's police chief, J.P. Levesque, told *the fifth estate* when informed of CBC's findings. "I don't know what steps recently the investigators have taken. I haven't been briefed on it in a while, so I'll have to look into it."

Sweeping investigation

This case has become a flashpoint in how Thunder Bay police have investigated the deaths of Indigenous people.

The province's civilian police oversight body is doing a **systemic review** of the way the Thunder Bay force investigates the deaths of Indigenous peoples. Terms for the review were released last week.

The way DeBungee's death was handled by Thunder Bay police is central in the OIPRD's sweeping investigation of the force.

Barely three hours after finding DeBungee's body — and before he was identified — Thunder Bay police issued a media release that said the death did not appear suspicious.

Just a day later, before an autopsy had been completed on DeBungee's body, a second release from Thunder Bay police deemed his death non-criminal.

"I think the wording of the press release could've been better," Levesque told *the fifth estate*. "I think it should've been something more along the lines of: 'Based on the evidence we have at hand to date, there does not appear to be any foul play.'"



Thunder Bay police Chief J.P. Levesque says the wording of a media release issued by the service 'could've been better.' (CBC)

"It was a mistake on our part," Levesque said of wording in the release. "There's no question about it."

Frustrated by the lack of action on the part of the Thunder Bay police, Rainy River First Nation Chief Jim Leonard hired private investigator Dave

Perry — a former veteran Toronto police detective who worked homicides and major crimes — to look into the case.

'Alarm bells went off'

Perry quickly learned four people were with DeBungee the night before he was found dead, as well as another crucial piece of information: DeBungee's debit card was missing and it was used six times after his body was found.

There were three withdrawals at ATMs and purchases at a liquor store, a Canadian Tire store and with a taxi company.

"When I found that out, some alarm bells went off because there's potentially a motive here for the crime," Perry told *the fifth estate*.

Perry says this is evidence that should have been easy for the Thunder Bay police to obtain back in October 2015.

"You can't rely on biases," he told *the fifth estate*. "You can't rely on feelings that well it's just another Indigenous person who was intoxicated and therefore drowned."

the fifth estate found two people who were with Stacy DeBungee on his last night alive: Corey Linkletter and Ethel Wapoose. DeBungee's stepdaughter says they used Stacy's debit card after his body was found.



Brad DeBungee says he doesn't believe the Thunder Bay police theory that his brother Stacy DeBungee passed out and rolled into this spot in the McIntyre River last fall. (Nick Sherman/CBC)

They told *the fifth estate* they don't know what happened to him.

Linkletter said that Stacy "said he was going to be OK" when they left that night.

The witnesses say there was no altercation with DeBungee that evening and that he gave them the debit card.

Greater problem

They said they did use his card at the liquor store and forgot to give it back to him afterward. They said they did not use the card at Canadian Tire or for a taxi.

DeBungee's death points to a greater problem the Thunder Bay police are facing. His death happened at the same time one of the largest inquests in Ontario's history was taking place in Thunder Bay. That inquest was examining the **deaths of seven youths in Thunder Bay.**

All seven youths were students who came from remote First Nations to attend high school in Thunder Bay. They died between 2000 and 2011. Bodies of five of the students were found in rivers in Thunder Bay. In each of those cases, the police quickly determined there was "no foul play" involved.

The inquest jury ruled four of those deaths "undetermined."

"What shocks me is that all of this happened — or to be put properly, didn't happen — in the middle of an inquest where the Thunder Bay police were under a microscope being reviewed for the exact same issue that we're sitting here talking about today," Perry said.



Private investigator Dave Perry was hired by Chief Jim Leonard of Rainy River First Nation to look into Stacy DeBungee's death. (CBC)

"It didn't surprise me at all how much lack of investigation the police did," Rainy River First Nation Chief Jim Leonard told *the fifth estate*. "It's built up over the years, the lack of response, lack of investigation, lack of satisfaction that we as native people have been getting and the treatment we have been getting from police."

Levesque says his police force is trying to mend relationships with the Indigenous community in Thunder Bay.

- **Indigenous deaths prompt increase police patrols near river**

"Our relationship within the Indigenous community is not good," he said. "I acknowledge that. I know, though, that we're working very hard to try and change that."

For the DeBungee family, all they want is answers about what happened to Stacy.

"Nothing's going to bring him back," brother Brad DeBungee said. "I need closure, my family needs closure to really