



# GRAND COUNCIL TREATY #3



## THUNDER BAY POLICING CRISIS AROUND RIVER DEATHS

### 1. Tammy Keeash, North Caribou Lake First Nation

- The body of 17-year-old Tammy Keeash was found in the Neebing-McIntyre Floodway on May 7, 2017. She was living in a Thunder Bay group home and reported missing on May 6, 2017 after missing curfew.
- The Thunder Bay Police Service (TBPS) did not issue a missing person notice. Tammy was a trained Junior Canadian Ranger who was familiar with water safety, but a post-mortem examination found that her death was consistent with drowning. The TBPS quickly announced that there was “no evidence to indicate criminality” in her death.

- The body of 14-year-old Josiah Begg was found in the McIntyre River on May 18, 2017. He was in Thunder Bay with his father for medical appointments. He also went missing on May 6. Volunteer search efforts were organized on May 9 by NAN and the Bear Clan patrol. The TBPS began a ground search on May 10.
- On May 15, 2017, the TBPS announced that there was “no evidence” Josiah had gone near the river, and discouraged First Nation searchers who believed differently. Surveillance footage shows he was near a bridge over the floodway before his disappearance.
- NAN and family members held a press conference on May 17 to express concern with the investigation. The TBPS called in an underwater recovery team and began searching area waterways on May 18.

These deaths are strikingly similar to six previous drownings in Thunder Bay waterways. The deaths of five youth who passed away between 2000 and 2011 were the subject of the Seven Youth Inquest in 2016, which found that causes of death in three of the five cases was undetermined, despite their police files being closed.

### **3. Stacy DeBungee, Rainy River First Nations**

- On October 19, 2015, Stacy DeBungee's body was found in the McIntyre River. Three hours after the discovery, the TBPS stated that "[a]n initial investigation does not indicate a suspicious death". In a second press release, published 25 hours after the discovery, the TBPS released DeBungee's name and declared that "Mr. DeBungie's [sic] death has been deemed as non-criminal". It remains unknown how Stacy DeBungee came to be in the river, and the TBPS is still in charge of the investigation.
- After the investigating officers concluded that DeBungee's death was an accident prior to identifying him, conducting a post-mortem, or taking any meaningful investigative steps, his family and community, Rainy River First Nations (RRFN), hired a private investigator. The investigator's report concluded that the TBPS made determinations about the death in the absence of information a reasonable police investigation would have obtained.
- The death of Stacy DeBungee triggered the systemic review of racism in the TBPS by the Office of the Independent Review Director (OIPRD).

### **Absence of Leadership from Thunder Bay Police Services Board**

- The Thunder Bay Police Services Board has failed to provide leadership during these death investigations and the ongoing OIPRD systemic review of the TBPS.
- The Board ignored repeated requests by RRFN leadership for discussion with the Board and the reassignment of the DeBungee file to another police service, which was eventually refused by the Chief of Police.
- The Board had refused to make public statements to address the fears of the Indigenous community, despite the need for public leadership. The Board Vice-Chair has now broken this silence to announce complete support for police and unequivocally deny the basis for Indigenous concerns. The Board has not given any consideration to the Indigenous perspective, except to deny its legitimacy.
- The Vice-Chair also appeared to predetermine the Board's response to the OIPRD review, stating "there are no facts that there is systemic racism in the Thunder Bay Police Service." Both the Vice-Chair and President of the Police Association denied any need for a change in leadership.
- In the meantime, Chief Levesque has been charged with obstruct justice under s. 139 of the *Criminal Code*, and breach of trust under s. 122. One of the conditions of his release on a promise to appear is to abstain from communicating with the Deputy Chief of Police, the Police Service Board Chair, Vice-Chair or any Board members or staff.
- By aligning itself with officers after months of silence and closing its collective mind to investigative oversights, the Board has failed to understand or execute its role as a civilian oversight body. It has taken an adversarial position toward Indigenous people it is supposed to represent, and used evidence of systemic failures as an opportunity to show solidarity with police, while closing its mind to independent review.
- To maintain that this situation requires no response is an abdication of responsibility, and leaves the Thunder Bay community without adequate and effective policing.