

## First Nation's family rejects Thunder Bay Police explanation for teen's death



Police say Tammy Keeash, 17, drown but family says she was a trained Junior Canadian Ranger and familiar with water safety.

The body of Tammy Keeash, 17, was discovered May 7, 2017 in the Neebing-McIntyre Floodway in Thunder Bay. She was living in a Thunder Bay group home. (FACEBOOK)

By [TANYA TALAGA](#) Staff Reporter  
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The family of Tammy Keeash and northern Ontario First Nations leaders say they are rejecting the premise of the Thunder Bay Police Service that the 17-year-old drowned in a river nearly 10 days ago.

“There are no words to describe how I feel,” said Pearl Slipperjack, [Keeash’s](#) mother, as she spoke to the media at a Thunder Bay press conference on Wednesday. Slipperjack said she also lost her young son in 2010 while he was in care.

Keeash, who is from the remote North Caribou First Nation, was a trained Junior Canadian Ranger, well familiar with water safety and the land. She was a “troubled kid,” living in a group home in Thunder Bay while she received counselling in the city, said Slipperjack who cried that she regretted she did not fight harder to get her children back from provincial care.

There are a lot of questions surrounding Keeash’s death and everyone is having a hard time accepting the conclusion put forward by Thunder Bay Police that “it was simply a drowning,” said Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler. “She knew the waters, she knew something about water safety and how to navigate the land. It was the way she was brought up. The family is asking more questions on what led to Tammy’s death.”

The press conference also addressed the disappearance of Josiah Begg, 14, who hasn’t been seen since Saturday, May 6, the same day that Keeash missed the curfew at her group home. Begg was in town with his father for medical appointments from their home in Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug. The community is upset with the Thunder Bay Police response to the case. His mother, Sunshine

Winter, made a tearful plea for her son to come home. “Josiah, if you can hear this, we want you to come back,” Winter said.

James Cutfeet, the Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nation chief said by continually forcing indigenous people out of their homes for mental health, medical care and other services, the “residential school days are still in practice.”

“Canada will be celebrating 150 years of occupying our lands. Canada continues to determine what it suspects is best for the First Nations. It is time to talk as equals,” Cutfeet said.

North Caribou Lake Chief Dinah Kanate is reaching out to other communities, asking everyone to pool their resources so they can hire an outside investigator into Keeash’s death as relations between First Nations people and the police in Thunder Bay are strained.

“They have a hard time accepting the work and the conclusion of the Thunder Bay Police. The trust and the relationship between the police and the communities is very difficult,” Fiddler said.

From 2000 to 2011, seven First Nations students lost their lives in Thunder Bay while they were far away from their home communities. They were in Thunder Bay for a high school education because their home reserves did not have adequate schools. Five of those students bodies were found in the waters surrounding Thunder Bay and an inquest into all seven’s death wrapped up last June.

Indigenous people living in this city on the shore of Lake Superior have long complained about the racism they face. And, nearly eight years ago, indigenous student Darryl Kakekayash said he was beaten and thrown into the river by three white men. A former Toronto police homicide detective investigated Kakekayash’s case, on behalf of some of the lawyers at the inquest, and, concluded the attack was “racially motivated.”

In November 2016, a provincial watchdog, the Office of the Independent Police Review Director, began investigating the Thunder

Bay police for “systemic racism” when dealing with the disappearance and death cases of indigenous people. The review is ongoing.

Deputy Grand Chief Anna Betty Achneepineskum said the inquest into the deaths of the seven students examined the need for improved protocols surrounding missing children. She added given the history with the many tragic deaths of indigenous children and people in Thunder Bay, this should have been ironed out by now.

Keeash’s death should be under a particular spotlight in light of the coming launch of the national inquiry into the deaths of murdered and missing indigenous women and girls in Canada at the end of this month.

“When I think of Tammy, the circumstances of her death and there have been so many deaths like this where we have lost our indigenous women and it is concluded as accidental. This is a concern I have as an indigenous woman, as a person, and as the deputy grand chief of NAN. This is too frequent and has to be addressed,” she said.

Chris Adams, of the Thunder Bay police, said the post mortem examination results are a matter for the coroner and it is part of an “extensive investigation into Tammy’s death.”

“As stated in the past we will continue to work with the coroner’s office in their investigation. We will work with and pursue any new information that comes forward,” he said.

Regarding the search for Begg, Adams said their investigators are in regular contact with the family and that information is shared only directly between the investigators and the family.