

Death and questions along Thunder Bay's 'river of tears'

National News | June 19, 2017 by [Jorge Barrera](#)



(The Kaministiquia River in Thunder Bay. “It is a very sad experience. From up here, it brings up the fragility of life.” Lawyer and pilot Julian Falconer. Photo: Jorge Barrera.)

Jorge Barrera

APTN National News

She stood at the spot where her daughter was found dying on a gravel bed by an old railway trestle bridge spanning a waterway in Thunder Bay some now call the “river of tears.”

Victoria Gliddy was lost in memory, the breeze, her hands buried deep in her jacket pockets.

All stilled.

When she left the bridge and sat in the passenger seat of the pickup truck and looked back one last time it all hit with sudden force. Every sob inflicted physical pain.

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” she said.

Gliddy doesn’t believe the police and coroner’s version of her daughter Christina Gliddy’s death.

The authorities said the 28-year-old mother from Wunnumin Lake First Nation died of exposure.

She was found unconscious on the gravel by the bridge at 8 a.m. on March 29, 2016, and died in hospital later that morning.



(Victoria Gliddy stands next to the spot where her daughter Christina Gliddy was found dying on March 29, 2016. Photo: Jorge Barrera)

The temperature dropped to a low of -3 C that Tuesday, according to historical weather records.

“They said nobody did anything, nothing happened to her,” said Victoria Gliddy, in an interview this week at Thunder Bay’s Shelter House where she sometimes stays. “I want to reinvestigate more. I don’t really know what happened to her, I just want to find out more.”

Gliddy said she knows several people who were with her daughter the evening before she died. Her daughter was staying at a shelter building next door to the main Shelter House facility.

She was with a man who also stayed in the building and returned at 7 a.m. the morning she was found, said Gliddy.

“It’s a tough time for me, losing a child like this,” she said.



Christina Gliddy

Gliddy's other daughter Delilah Ostamus also wants to see a reopening of her sister's case.

"Some of her clothes were missing and one of her shoes," said Ostamus. "We tried asking why there were marks on her body, bruise-like marks and her head had two big bumps."

The Thunder Bay police did not return requests for comment seeking a status update on Christina Gliddy's case. According to a press release from March 30, 2016, issued following a postmortem, the Thunder Bay police said the case was a "coroner's investigation" and the force would provide assistance "as needed."

The long-held questions in the death resurfaced for the family recently after the Thunder Bay police came under renewed scrutiny following last month's waterway deaths of Tammy Keeash, 17, and Josiah Begg, 14.



(The body of Tammy Keeash, 17, was discovered in a floodway in Thunder Bay in May.)

Thunder Bay police declared Keeash's death non-criminal after she was found face down in a patch of marshland and shallow water known as the Neebing-McIntyre floodway. Her pants and underwear were pulled down.

Thunder Bay police detectives are still investigating what led to Begg's death in the McIntyre River. He was found just downstream from the bridge where Christina Gliddy was discovered last year.

While Victoria Gliddy stood alone with her thoughts by the bridge, Anishinaabe Elder Sam Achneepineskum walked down to the water's edge to lay tobacco in a river that has known many deaths.

Above the River of Tears



(The McIntyre River in Thunder Bay. Photo: Jorge Barrera)

There is a striking beauty to Thunder Bay from the air as it crowds the edge of Lake Superior spread to the south, the Sleeping Giant weighing down the horizon, as Thunder Mountain (also known as Mount McKay) looms to the city's western edge.

Lawyer Julian Falconer has often taken his Cessna airplane into the sky above the city to trace the rivers that have recently consumed his professional life. Falconer represented the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), the organization that represents 49 northern Ontario First Nations, during the coroner's inquest into the deaths of seven youth who died in the city between 2000 and 2011.

He has been a tireless and vocal critic of the Thunder Bay police's failures in investigating the river deaths. He believes there is more to the story.

Today, he banks his Cessna away from a storm cell sweeping behind Thunder Mountain, swoops around and comes in from the east along the coast and up the McIntyre River over the bridge where Christina Gliddy once lay and where, just upstream, maybe a stone's throw away, Kyle Morriseau, 17, was pulled on Nov. 10, 2009.

The inquest jury could not determine what led to Morriseau's drowning death. The police and coroner said it was due to too much alcohol.

There were rumours of a drug debt. He was last seen wearing a backpack which was not recovered with his body. He was also missing a shoe and his jacket.

On Oct. 19, 2015, Stacy DeBungee, 41, was pulled from the same river almost in the same location where Morriseau was found earlier. Thunder Bay police mishandled DeBungee's death investigation.

Police failed to follow leads that included evidence DeBungee's debit card was used after his death, according to an investigation by David Perry, a former top Toronto police homicide detective.

Thunder Bay police immediately ruled his death accidental and caused by alcohol before the completion of a postmortem. The OPP recently reviewed the case after two requests from Thunder Bay police.

Continuing a short distance up the river is the spot where Curran Strang, 18, was found on Sept. 26, 2005. Strang was pulled from the river with his pants undone and lowered, the sweatshirt he was last seen wearing was also missing. His death was determined to be an alcohol-fueled accident.

Falconer then banks south and west to where the three fingered Kaministiquia River flows into Lake Superior. Jethro Anderson, 15, was pulled from these waters before the first split in the river on Nov. 11, 2000. He was found by searchers from Kasabonika First Nation, his home community, two weeks after he went missing. Police launched a search for Anderson six days after he was reported missing and ruled out foul play before the completion of a postmortem.

Further up river, by the crumbling grain elevators, Jordan Wabasse, 15, was found on May 10, 2011, just downstream from the James Street Bridge that once linked Fort William First Nation to Thunder Bay, but is now blocked to pedestrian traffic following a fire. Two days after Thunder Bay police ruled out foul play in Wabasse's death, an officer received a tip suggesting it was murder. Three different people told Thunder Bay police and the OPP that a local young man claimed to have pushed Wabasse into the river.



(The James Street Bridge in Thunder Bay. Photo: Jorge Barrera)

The inquest jury said in its verdict it could not determine what led to the drowning deaths of Anderson and Wabasse.

"I've flown over the rivers a couple of times," said Falconer. "It is a very sad experience. From up here, it brings up the fragility of life."

Stephan Banning was also found in the Kaministiquia River south of the James Street Bridge. It was July 1990. Thunder Bay police first declared his drowning death to be a suicide and then an accident.

APTN National News met with a man in Fort William First Nation with information about Banning's fate. Behind a long-ashed Du Maurier cigarette, he said a friend witnessed Banning being thrown off the James Street Bridge and into the river.

The story came up one time when he was drinking with his friend who told him he wanted to get something off his chest. His friend was scared and young back then and the individual who threw Banning into the river was much older and threatened him with the same.

There were at least two witnesses to this incident, said the man with the Du Maurier cigarette.

The alleged perpetrator died last month. The alleged witnesses are both in the local provincial jail.

"I don't know more than that," he said.

Thunder Bay police received the name of one witness and the alleged perpetrator in 2010, but nothing came of the investigation. The Banning family wants a review of the case.

The Threat

Thunder Bay faces 'supercharged' racial tensions.

It was June 13 at 11:45 a.m. and Jennifer McKenzie was leaving her office at the courthouse where she works as a Gladue writer—she provides Indigenous-specific context for sentencing hearings by compiling reports on the life stories of offenders—for the Nishnawbe-Aski Legal Services Corporation. Three Caucasian men crossed the street toward her and one focused on her.

"He was average height, about 5'8, 5'9, slim to medium build...mid-40s to mid-50s," said McKenzie. "He stopped and took a step back toward me and said, 'What a perfect place for a murder, right in front of the fucking courthouse.'"



Jennifer McKenzie

McKenzie said she was stunned and felt fear.

“I couldn’t believe what was happening, I couldn’t process it right away,” she said. “At the same time, I was thinking, this can’t be happening. I just have to get out of here.”

She called the police and a cruiser circled the block a couple of times before giving up the search for the men.

This past Friday morning, outside the Victoriaville Centre Mall, which sits about a block from the courthouse, the street commerce bustled. Nai, 42, was standing near the doorway. She said racial tensions were getting worse in the city. She’s friends with Barbara Kentner who was hit by a trailer hitch thrown from a passing car in January. It was classified as a hate crime.

“They’ll throw eggs, pennies, and spoons,” said Nai, who didn’t want to give her last name. “I carry a blade at night when I’m walking around. A lot of people are carrying knives and kids go around in groups because they’re scared.”

Darren Bannish, 48, who passed by on the sidewalk, said his daughter now also carried a knife.

“Even though she could be charged with carrying a concealed weapon,” he said.

Bannish believes many of the young Indigenous men found in the rivers have been murdered—which is a theory raised by Falconer and Perry, the top private investigator from Toronto.

“Look at the murders and nobody does anything,” he said. “We are losing lives here and it’s been going on for decades.”

Andrew S., 30, was hanging around the side of the mall by a parking lot as people swirled about consumed by personal dramas. He said he’d been chased a couple of times by people he believed were Caucasian after he found himself walking alone, late at night.

“It was on my birthday, I ran. If I had someone with me I would have stood my ground,” said Andrew, who didn’t want to give his last name. “I don’t walk around at night because people are out to get you.”

Celina Reitberger, executive director of Nishnawbe-Aski Legal Services Corporation, which provides legal help to band members of member First Nations, described the racial atmosphere as “supercharged” in Thunder Bay.

“It is them versus us now. It used to be simmering under the surface, but now it’s with social media, with people feeling that there is not a problem in Thunder Bay,” she said.

Shelby Ch’ng was the only Thunder Bay city councillor who showed up at a barbeque hosted by NAN to raise money for Shelter House on Friday afternoon. The barbeque was monitored by four Thunder Bay police officers who weren’t there to have the bannock burgers.

She initially didn’t want to discuss the racial tensions in the city.

“Can I say no comment at this time?” said Ch’ng. “There are a lot of layers and a lot of interpretations of what I say as a councillor. I don’t want to alienate people, but I am also not Kumbaya, everything is great.”



(Thunder Bay city councillor Shelby Ch'ng at a BBQ hosted by the Nishnawbe Aski Nation. She was the only Thunder Bay city councillor to attend. Photo: Jorge Barrera)

Ch'ng said there are a lot of pressure points in Thunder Bay that have bruised in the aftermath of the coroner's inquest into the deaths of the seven First Nation youth.

"I believe that things like the inquest are a catalyst for social change. I don't know when things will get better," she said. "I don't know if things will get worse before they get better. That is the reality."

Ch'ng said she's also faced a steep learning curve.

"I didn't know about residential schools until university," she said. "My knowledge gap has to be compressed."

Ch'ng said recent events, including the loss of confidence by the Indigenous community in the police force and the palpable tensions in the city, have weighed heavily on her.

"For me, personally, it does affect me," she said. "I am constantly thinking about it. I am trying to figure out my role."

NAN Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler said he's been disappointed by the reaction from Thunder Bay Mayor Keith Hobbs who has denied the city faces a crisis triggered by the collapsed confidence in the local police.

"It doesn't help when the leadership of the city continues to deny there are very serious issues here in the city," he said.

However, Hobbs has been hobbled by his own political troubles stemming from recent charges against the police chief and blowback from his involvement in giving information to police about alleged criminal sexual misconduct by a prominent lawyer in the city.

Hobbs' name was recently caught up in an OPP investigation that led to Thunder Bay police chief J.P. Levesque facing obstruction of justice and breach of trust charges. According to court records, Levesque disclosed confidential information about Hobbs. Levesque also faced a no contact order that listed Hobbs and his wife along with other city officials. The OPP investigation originated with the RCMP and the alleged infractions occurred between Dec. 14 and Dec. 22, 2016.

On Dec. 19, 2016, a local lawyer named Sandy Zaitzeff, who is facing a multitude of charges, including sexual assault on a minor and possession of unlicensed firearms, posted a YouTube video of a party in his basement that included Hobbs. The video was initially recorded on Oct. 25, 2016. A little less than a month after the video's recording, on Nov. 21, 2016, Zaitzeff was charged with sexually assaulting a minor. He has since faced a barrage of other charges.

Days before the first set of charges, on Nov. 19, 2016, Zaitzeff verbally threatened Hobbs saying he would “bury him.” Hobbs claimed the threat was triggered after the mayor informed the lawyer he would be taking “allegations of sexual impropriety” against Zaitzeff to the police, according to a lawsuit filed by Hobbs against the lawyer for defamation.

Hobbs stated in his lawsuit that he wouldn’t be seeking a third term as mayor partly as a result of the damage to his public image caused by the YouTube video.

For his part, Fiddler is done waiting for the city to implement substantive change and holds out little hope new political leadership at the municipal level would bring an improved relationship. He said NAN is working on a plan to have students attend school in another location if parents no longer feel comfortable sending their children to Thunder Bay. In order to finish high school, students from NAN communities are forced to attend school in the city, hundreds of kilometres away from home.

“We have lost too many of our youth here in the city. There are things we are looking at now. Most of the youth have gone back home, but they will be back,” said Fiddler. “(Parents) shouldn’t be forced to send their kids to Thunder Bay if they have concerns.”

Fiddler said NAN is inviting federal, provincial and municipal officials to an emergency conference on July 5 and 6 to send students to new high schools in municipalities outside of Thunder Bay by September.

“That is how urgent it is,” said Fiddler.

Fiddler said Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne had also struck a four-minister committee to come up with a response to calls from the First Nations leadership to deal with the policing crisis in the city. Fiddler said Ontario Attorney General Yasir Naqvi, Community Safety Minister Marie-France Lalonde, Minister of Children and Youth Services Michael Coteau and Minister of Indigenous Relations David Zimmer are expected to deliver a plan on the issue early next week.

“They were given a short time-frame to do this work. They’ve been given a mandate by the premier to come up with a plan to respond to the call we made,” said Fiddler.

A spokesperson for Naqvi said there **were** no formal structures involving provincial cabinet ministers on the file. Andrew Rudyk, Naqvi’s press secretary, said there were only informal discussions on the issue between ministers.

“As issues happen across the province, ministers will often have conversations to understand topics from multiple positions. The investigation into the issue of policing in Thunder Bay is an ongoing situation and some ministers have held conversations in an effort to stay informed with the developments as they happen,” said Rudyk. “Though these ministers may not be involved in a situation, the welfare of all Ontarians is of great importance to the government of Ontario.”

Fiddler said Ottawa also needed to step up with its responsibility. He was disappointed by Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale's recent statement the federal government wouldn't act unless asked by the municipality or the province.

"Prime Minister Justin Trudeau always says nothing is more important to him than the relationship with Indigenous people," said Fiddler. "For the Minister of the Crown to say, 'I am not going to listen to you, I am going to wait to hear a response from the city or province,' is insulting. It diminishes the urgent call we made for action. It's not just the leadership, it's the families, those families that have lost loved ones in the city."

The Heart of Anishinaabe Country

Thunder Bay is at the heart of Anishinaabe country, according to respected Elder Sam Achneepineskum.

The Anishinaabe migrated east following a prophecy that foretold they would travel until they came to a place where food grew on water—wild rice. That place was Madeline Island, which sits across Lake Superior within Wisconsin's maritime boundary. As the ice receded some people moved north and settled in the shadow of the Sleeping Giant, the island where the one who named the animals, birds, and plants now rests.



(Anishinaabe Elder Sam Achneepineskum. Photo Jorge Barrera)

Achneepineskum said historically the Anishinaabe used the rivers as highways. The people of this land have always been around water, used water, found sustenance in the water, he said.

Now, the local Thunder Bay authorities, from the mayor to the police and coroner want to claim that somehow, when Anishinaabe youth get to the city, water turns into a type of foreign deadly substance.

“These young people lived by the rivers all their lives. I don’t believe in coincidences, not seven in a row, all the same age, same background,” said Achneepineskum. “People say they died accidentally in the river, by the water, what is the mathematical possibility of that happening? You probably need one of those big NASA computers to figure that out.”

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– *Clarification: Nishnawbe Aski Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler said the chiefs organization is looking to send students to new high schools in municipalities outside of Thunder Bay*

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