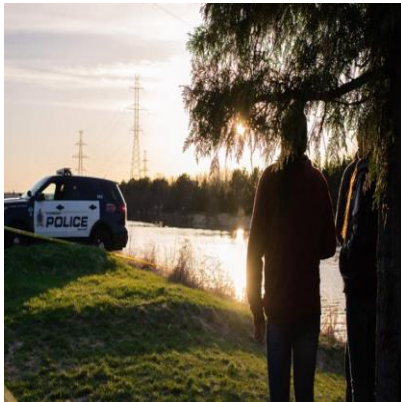


Evidence from First Nation student who survived Thunder Bay river attack resurfaces following eye-witness claim

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His name was never revealed during the coroner's inquest into the deaths of seven First Nation high school students in Thunder Bay, but his story raised the chilling spectre that something more sinister lurks behind the "epidemic" of tragedies that led First Nation leaders Wednesday to call for an RCMP investigation.

It was October 2008 and the young man, who was from an undisclosed northern First Nation, was attending Dennis Franklin Cromarty school—the same school attended by six of the seven students whose 2000 to 2011 deaths were being examined by the inquest. He was walking alone at night by a river in the city when he came across a group of young men who attacked him after a short conversation. The young man was then thrown into the river and forced to swim to the far shore to escape his attackers. He left Thunder Bay for home and never returned.

The young man was never identified during the inquest, [but his story was read into the record during an April 2016 hearing](#). Five of the seven student deaths examined by the inquest occurred in the city's waterways. The cause behind three of the five water deaths were found to be "undetermined." Thunder Bay police closed all the files.

However, this story has taken on added weight following a recent and separate eye-witness account from a Thunder Bay restaurant owner who told *APTN National News* Wednesday evening she encountered a First Nation man on Oct. 22, 2016, who said he had barely survived a similar attack.

Tara Lewis said she was closing up her restaurant, In Common, at about 11 p.m. when she encountered a First Nation man, she estimated to be in his 30s, who was soaked. Lewis said he told her that had just been beat up by a group of white men who were driving around in a blue truck. Lewis said the man told her they beat him up, threw him into a river in the city and then came back for another assault when they saw he had managed to crawl out of the water.

Lewis said she called the police and the man filed a statement with officers. She said she never heard back.

Lewis said the incident recently began to weigh as a result of a resurgence of news coverage triggered by the deaths of a First Nation boy, 14, and a girl, 17, who were found in the city's waterways in May.



A coroner's inquest was held into the deaths of students (clockwise from top): Jethro Anderson, Curran Strang, Paul Panacheese, Robyn Harper, Reggie Bushie, Kyle Morriseau and Jordan Wabasse.

During a press conference in Toronto Wednesday morning, First Nation leaders from northern Ontario called on the RCMP to intervene and investigate three additional deaths of Indigenous individuals who were found in the waters of Thunder Bay.

Nishanwbe Aski Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler, Grand Council Treaty 3 Ogichidaa Francis Kavanaugh and Rainy River First Nation Chief Jim Leonard want the Mounties to investigate the deaths of: Tammy Keeash, 17, who was living in a group home and found dead in the Neebing-McIntyre Floodway on May 7; Josiah Begg, 14, who was found dead in the McIntyre River on May 18; and Stacy DeBungee, who was found dead in the McIntyre River on Oct. 19, 2015, and whose death was immediately declared accidental by Thunder Bay police before conducting any serious investigation.



Posters seeking help in finding Josiah Begg, 14, when he first went missing.



Tammy Keeash, 17, was found dead in a Thunder Bay waterway.

The chiefs said they have no faith left in the Thunder Bay Police or the OPP.

“In the face of the OPP’s refusal last fall to support our communities with an independent investigation into the Stacy DeBungee death, the logical next step is to bring in the RCMP with respect to the three latest river deaths including the DeBungee case. With all that has transpired to date, it is painfully obvious that the Thunder Bay Police cannot credibly investigate the river deaths,” said Kavanaugh.

Ontario’s Office of the Independent Review Director has already launched a probe into systemic racism within the police service as a result of the DeBungee case.

The chiefs also released a letter from the Ontario Civilian Police Commission which announced Tuesday it had opened an investigation into allegations the Thunder Bay Police Services Board was failing to provide adequate oversight of the Thunder Bay Police.

“The river deaths are an epidemic that urgently needs to be addressed by law enforcement before further tragedies occur. Alternating silence, denial, and contempt of evidence-based Indigenous concerns about a widespread and racialized policing crisis is not in fulfillment of the statutory obligation to provide adequate and effective police services,” wrote the three chiefs in the complaint letter to the Ontario Civilian Police Commission.

The city’s police service was recently rocked after its police chief J.P. Levesque was charged with breach of trust and obstruction of justice by the OPP for allegedly disclosing confidential information about Thunder Bay Mayor Keith Hobbs.

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