

The indigenous teen who escaped death in a Thunder Bay river

Eight years ago, Darryl Kakekayash says he was assaulted by three white men who hurled racial epithets and tossed him in a river. The incident bears an eerie resemblance to the deaths of five students whose bodies were found in waters around Thunder Bay between 2000 and 2011.



Darryl Kakekayash points to the spot in Thunder Bay where he says he was assaulted by three men and tossed in a river in 2008. (PHOTO SUPPLIED)

By [TANYA TALAGA](#) Global Economics Reporter
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Eight years ago, Darryl Kakekayash says he was physically assaulted by three white men who called the high school student a “crazy native s---” and threw him into a Thunder Bay river.

The incident had an eerie resemblance to the deaths of five male students whose bodies were found in the waters surrounding Thunder Bay between 2000 and 2011.

Kakekayash’s story was never publicly told during the eight-month coroner’s inquest into the [deaths of seven students](#) who were attending school in Thunder Bay because there were no high schools in their northern First Nation communities.

Earlier this year, the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, Nishnawbe Aski Nation and Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto tried to bring Kakekayash’s story to the inquest, but he never took the stand. Instead, lawyers agreed to a statement of facts about what happened to Kakekayash that night.

With no answer as to how the five students wound up in the rivers, a pall has been cast over the case, leaving the parents of Jordan Wabasse, Jethro Anderson, Curran Strang, Reggie Bushie and Kyle Morrisseau without an explanation of why their sons drowned. Two other students did not die in water. Robyn Harper died after being left alone, intoxicated and passed out in the doorway of her boarding house. Paul Panacheese’s death was ruled medically “undetermined;” he died on his mother’s kitchen floor.

Chantelle Bryson, lawyer for the Ontario child advocate’s office, said on Wednesday that her client, along with the office’s Feathers of Hope campaign — an advisory council of nearly 200 indigenous youth who meet to discuss issues such as justice — wanted Kakekayash to tell his story at the inquest. Many indigenous teens have experienced incidents of racism in Thunder Bay, such as having eggs thrown at them from passing cars.

“The coroner’s counsel has the ability to add witnesses to the list,” she said. “After that, people may object to certain witnesses or they may request that certain witnesses be added. In this case, that request was not granted.”

Bryson said Kakekayash, now 25, was willing to testify. “He wanted to hopefully protect other kids.”

The lawyers believed what happened to Kakekayash could help explain how the five boys ended up in the water.

“It was really important to examine all potentials. Especially violence,” Bryson said. “There had been evidence of violence and racial violence throughout the inquest, either by peers or strangers or by gangs, either related to the deaths or just to students. But we felt Darryl’s story was so poignant due to the parallels around the deceased five.”



Dave Perry, right, is a former Toronto homicide detective who has investigated Darryl Kakekayash's story. "It is my opinion Mr.

Kakekayash told the truth about his assault," Perry wrote in a report submitted to a coroner's inquest. (PETER POWER)

Bryson and the Nishnawbe Aski Nation lawyers had Kakekayash swear an affidavit to former Toronto homicide detective Dave Perry, who had acted as lead investigator in the abduction and murder cases of Holly Jones, 10, and Cecilia Zhang, 9.

Perry retired as a detective sergeant and is now in private practice. He is a frequent lecturer and an investigative consultant, often working with forensic psychologists and criminal profilers.

Perry investigated Kakekayash's story and made a considered professional opinion. Perry believes him.

"It is my opinion Mr. Kakekayash told the truth about his assault. That his assault was racially motivated... That this assault could be classified as a hate crime," Perry wrote in his report, which was entered in court and obtained by the Star.

"Mr. Kakekayash told me that when he was in the river, he started to believe that he was about to die. Given the violent and racial (sic) charged actions of the suspects and the level of assault as described above, I find it reasonable to believe that this assault was in fact an attempt (sic) murder," Perry wrote.

The inquest concluded at the end of June, making 145 recommendations, most of which are waiting to be implemented, including a safety audit along the shoreline of the Thunder Bay rivers.

Darryl Kakekayash grew up in Weagamow, or North Caribou Lake First Nation, a 45-minute plane ride north of Sioux Lookout. The remote community lies deep in the northern boreal forest and is accessible only by ice road or small plane.

First, Kakekayash went to high school in Sault Ste. Marie.

In 2007-08, he transferred to Thunder Bay, where he attended Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School for indigenous youth from the Sioux Lookout district, run by the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council.

On Oct. 28, 2008, two months after the start of the school year, Kakekayash went to see *Alvin and the Chipmunks* at the theatres near Thunder Bay's Intercity Shopping Centre.

When it ended, he was afraid he would be late for the midnight curfew at his boarding home. He took a shortcut, beetling through a golf course by the Neebing-McIntyre River. Along the riverbank, he ran into three white men who asked him for a cigarette.

They asked if he was a member of the Native Syndicate because he was wearing that gang's colours, white and black. Kakekayash said he wasn't part of a gang. The men demanded to see his arms to check if he had tattoos. Kakekayash refused.

Suddenly, the men began punching, hitting and kicking Kakekayash. One ran at him with a two-by-four and hit him across the back. Kakekayash fell and another man kicked him in the stomach. As they were beating him, they yelled racial slurs.

Then they threw him into the ice-cold river. But they weren't done. They hauled him out, beat him some more, then threw him back in.

"It was fall time... Halloween was coming around and I remember that the water was shiny reflection, like it was kind of icy... when they threw me, it was so cold, my whole body went into shock," Kakekayash said in his interview with Perry.

"I remember thinking to myself, 'This is it. This is it... Nobody, nobody, nobody hearing us, nobody hearing me,' the only chance that would pop into my mind was to get to the other side... get up and start running for it, that was my intention... I swam at first, 'cause my back hurt, the water up to my belly button, I was able to stand up. I was halfway to the other side, my shoes were stuck," he recalls.

“The ground was slimy. It wasn’t sand or anything but your whole foot would go in... when I stood on two feet, I couldn’t get my feet out, the ground was so strong, I let go of my shoes, I left my shoes there. I remember getting up to the grass, on my belly, I was scratching and crawling getting up as fast as I could, crawling up...” he said.

Shoeless, Kakekayash ran to the road, where he tried to flag down some cars. No one stopped. Then he saw an out-of-service Thunder Bay bus. He stood in the middle of the lane, waved his arms to stop the driver.

Kakekayash begged the driver not to call the police. Kakekayash was petrified that if he reported what happened, somehow the three men would come looking for him.

“I was so scared in that bus, I was nearly crying,” he recalled.

The next day he told the school principal what had happened. The principal told him he needed to tell the police.

When he reported the incident, Kakekayash said police told him that they would get right on the case. But it would be years until he actually spoke to police again.

Kakekayash’s mother flew to Thunder Bay to take her son home. He never went back to complete high school.

No one has ever been caught or charged for the assault.

“Darryl lost his opportunity for a secondary education,” said Bryson.