MACLEAN'S

A river of tears

Seven children, all of them Indigenous, have been pulled dead from Thunder Bay waterways since 2000, leaving a racially divided community searching for answers—and praying for change

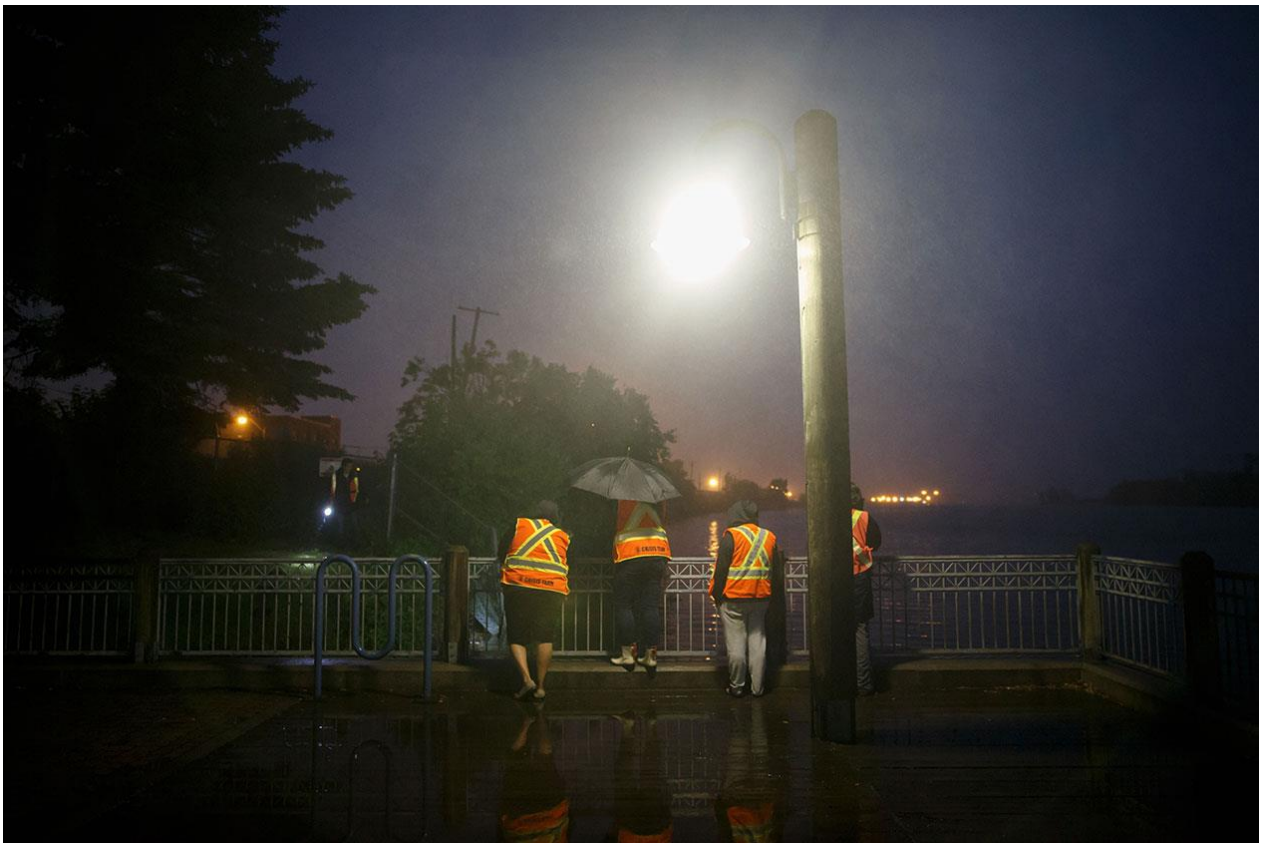
Nancy Macdonald July 7, 2017

On this, at least, everyone can agree.

On the evening of May 6, two children, a boy and a girl, went missing in Thunder Bay, Ont., after dark. It had been a cool, early spring day in the northern Ontario city. Overnight, the temperature dipped to minus one. The boy was 14, a skilled hunter raised on the shores of Hudson Bay who dreamed of becoming a marine biologist. The girl was a big-hearted 17-year-old who liked to read and draw. They were Junior Rangers and strong swimmers. The boy, Josiah Begg, grew up swimming the Winisk, an ice-cold, fast-moving river.

They were later found dead, less than three kilometres apart in the city's mud-brown McIntyre River. The girl, Tammy Keeash, was discovered the day after their disappearance, lying face down among reeds in a couple of inches of water. Her pants and underwear were pulled down; there were markings on her hands and face. It took two weeks to find Josiah, in waters just west of the bridge at 110th Street.

The stretch of the McIntyre that claimed them isn't much of a river. In places it's less than a few feet deep. It's a man-made spillway dug to protect city residents in high-water years. In the past decade, it's been doing the precise opposite, so often in fact that some have begun referring to it by a chilling sobriquet: the River of Tears.



Bear Clan Patrol volunteers look out over the Kaministiquia River in Thunder Bay. *Cole Burston*

With horrific frequency, the bodies of children keep being pulled from the McIntyre and the Kaministiquia, the river that makes up the city's southern border—seven in total since 2000. All of them were Indigenous, aged 14 to 18. And all but Tammy were boys. They were in Thunder Bay for schooling or medical services that were not available in their fly-in, northern Ontario communities.

Just how these children ended up in the water is where people here begin to disagree.

What you believe seems to depend on perspective—that is, whether you grew up drinking water from the tap and going to well-funded schools where your teachers looked and talked like you; or whether you knew from a young age what it's like to feel isolated, out-of-place, vulnerable.

Based on anecdotal interviews, many in white Thunder Bay accept what police have been telling them: that these are tragic accidents. Talk to Indigenous residents, however, and you will hear ominous stories of First Nations men who survived being thrown in the river; of patterns in the gender, ages and dates these kids went missing; and of the cursory way police appear to be investigating their deaths.

The fear among Indigenous residents, where rumours of a serial killer are rampant, is palpable. Many refuse to go anywhere near city waterways. Some parents have been pushed into agonizing decisions: to keep their high school-aged children home in isolated communities, where they may be safe, but cannot attend high school. Fear may ultimately compel Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), which represents the 49 Indigenous communities surrounding Thunder Bay, to keep its high school-aged students out of the city come fall. If past experience holds, almost every other year, one of the 200-odd children NAN sends there will die suddenly, almost always in a waterway.

The question of how they end up there is dividing the city, inflaming racial tensions, pitting white Thunder Bay against members of the small Indigenous community, who feel they can't get police to take these unexplained deaths seriously. Many here count police officers among their daughters, neighbours, friends. The mayor, Keith Hobbs, is a former officer. Many in the community will tell you the real problem is the finger-pointing directed at the Thunder Bay Police Service.

But these deaths didn't drive the wedge between the two communities. Long before volunteers from Kasabonika Lake First Nation pulled 15-year-old Jethro Anderson from the Kaministiquia in 2000, a little over a month after he left for high school in Thunder Bay, the two communities seemed resigned to living the way they always have: siloed among their own. What the deaths have done is sharply outline the divide: the misunderstandings, the mistrust, the deafening silence. And in this, some see opportunity.

What gets lost amid the rancour, however, is a sense of who these kids were, a communal mourning befitting such tragedy. This may help explain why a spoken-word poem about Josiah went viral last month, earning as many views on Facebook as there are people in Thunder Bay (146,000). The poem, by Thatcher Rose, a 21-year-old member of the Fort William First Nation, drove home to anyone of any colour the singular horror of the drowning death of a child. It calls to mind what one local remarked after seeing Josiah's mother visit the McIntyre: "I never knew it was possible for someone to cry so hard." That is where Rose's poem ends:

And as the moon shied away because she couldn't bear to watch
He felt his life leave his young fragile body
And the river hid it, he shook and shivered
I just keep imagining him yelling
help me please I can't breathe
help me please I can't breathe

And a mother came to face her worst fears
A little boy replaced every ounce of water in that river with her tears

---

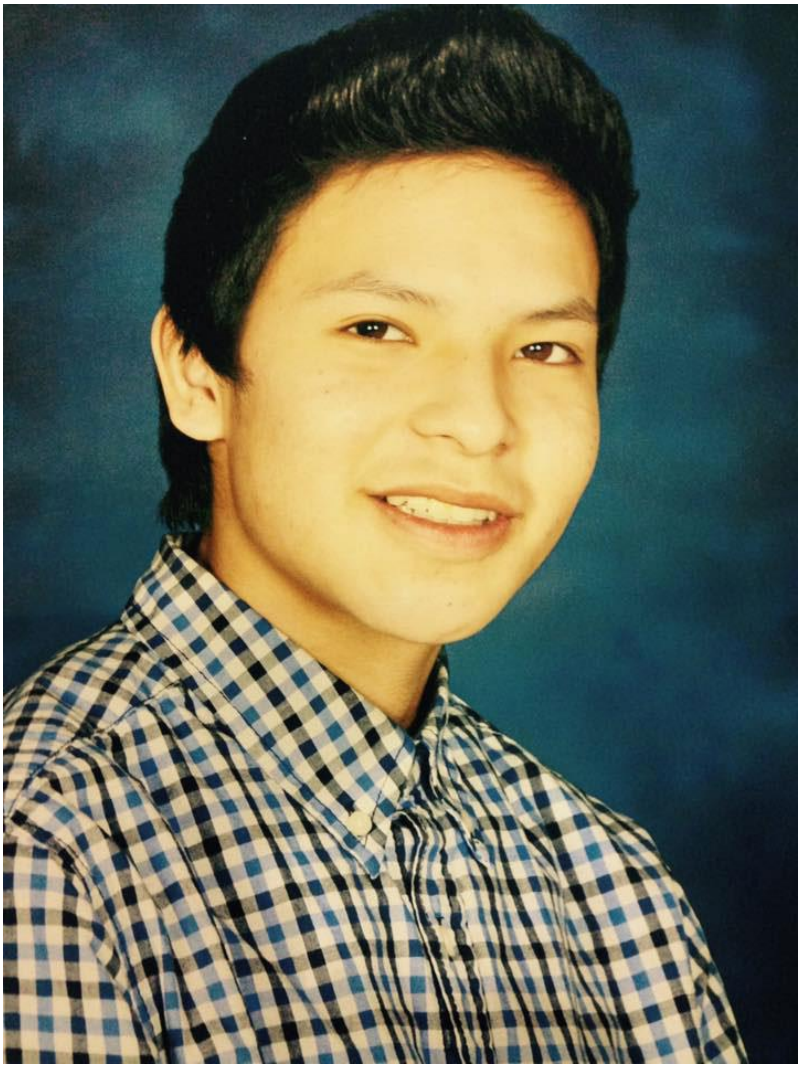
Chapter 1

Thunder Bay city limits. *Cole Burston*

Thunder Bay is actually two towns: Fort William and Port Arthur, a distinction residents still stubbornly maintain. To outsiders, it looks more like three, including the neighbouring Fort William First Nation on the southern bank of the Kaministiquia River, where you will find the best fried pickerel in the area at Bannon's, and a bird's-eye view of the Lake Superior harbour city from atop Thunder Mountain (*Anemki-wacheu* in Ojibway).

It is the largest city in northwest Ontario, and the region's commercial, medical and industrial hub. Pulp mills and government are its two main employers. The city's rugged landscape, isolation

and live-hard vibe help it retain the feel of a frontier town. It is 90 per cent white, one of Ontario's least diverse cities; the growing Indigenous community now makes up eight per cent of the population.



Josiah Begg.

Josiah was visiting with his father, Rene, for a medical appointment. They had flown in from the Oji-Cree community of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug, known here as "KI," but Josiah was mainly raised in Peawanuck, which might be the smallest, most isolated Indigenous community in Ontario.

Josiah had moved to the community of 200 for kindergarten after his parents' relationship ended. His mom, Sunshine Winter, had

fallen in love with a local, James Chapman. It wasn't long before Josiah was calling James Dad; he grew even closer to Michael, James's father, a respected elder in the community, who taught him to trap marten and drive an ATV. When the family, which later grew to include a baby, Sagastao, headed out for a month to their spring camp near the confluence of the Winisk and Shamattawa rivers, Michael and Josiah always rode side by side in the bow of the freighter canoe. He saw his grandpa more like a best friend.

Josiah was nine when he bagged his first bird. He could pluck and cut a goose, smoke moose and track caribou. He drummed and learned to fast with his mom. This summer, he was going to participate in his first sun dance; he already had his red wrap and matching head- and wristbands.

Josiah returned to KI for grade six after Sunshine and James separated. He yearned for the land and wrote vivid stories of stalking caribou and following moose downriver. But he liked the new opportunities in KI, a community five times the size of Peawanuck—the hockey tournaments, the new friends and the chance to get to know Rene.

There was a reason Josiah's Nikes always looked brand-new: he scrubbed them clean with a toothbrush. He buttoned the Oxford shirts he favoured to the chin, refused to hand in his homework until it was perfect and built himself a tidy gym out of a treadmill and a few weights. He rarely missed a daily workout.

Josiah was also a wise soul who looked out for his mom. "Look forward," he'd tell Sunshine, "don't look back."

This winter, he burst through the front door with a wide smile and a bounce in his step. He'd found a job all by himself, he announced, pulsing with pride. Sunshine was still home with Sagastao, and Josiah wanted to help with gas and food money. He'd introduced himself to the owner of one of KI's general stores: "I'm hard-

working,” Josiah told him. “I’m motivated, and if you hire me, I will try my best.” He was made stock boy on the spot.

The night he disappeared in Thunder Bay, Josiah was out with friends; the evening had begun at a skate park near the city’s harbour. The last known security footage puts the boy at a waterfront bus terminal around 9 p.m. The police have not released the cause of his death, which they continue to investigate.

A memorial for Josiah Begg at the side of the McIntyre River. *Cole Burston*

Tammy grew up about 100 km south of KI. She was in Thunder Bay seeking counselling she could not access on the North Caribou Lake First Nation, where she lived with her grandmother, Bella Benson, a Pentecostal widow.

Tammy adored her grandma, but her family will tell you that inside, she was hurting. “She never felt she belonged anywhere,” says her great-aunt Katy Brown, Bella’s sister. “She ached for a family to call her own.”

This may have been what made her so devoted to her dog, Julius Caesar, a husky with a black-and-brown coat and a gentle, cream-coloured face. Wherever Tammy went, Julius Caesar followed, sometimes on the long walks she and her friend, Wuanita Johnup liked to take around Weagamow Lake. While they taught themselves to cook tacos, burritos and spaghetti sauce, there was Julius Caesar, begging for scraps at Tammy's heels. The big dog spent every night curled up beside Tammy in her bed. When sadness overwhelmed Tammy, forcing a hospitalization in Barrie, Ont., and another in Thunder Bay, she ached for her husky.

Tammy Keeash.

When Tammy was 12, her 18-month-old brother, Leonidis, who was being raised in care outside the community, died suddenly from injuries consistent with a 10-foot fall. Not long after, Tammy was riding in the back of her uncle's pickup truck. Her uncle was reversing when a toddler dashed into the path of the truck. Tammy

tried to grab hold of the baby, who was the same age Leonidis had been when he died, but caught only air. A half-second later, he was crushed by the wheel of the truck.

His death haunted her. “I tried to save him,” she told Katy, months later. “I tried to grab him. But I couldn’t.” It wasn’t long before she began talking of hurting herself.

But she fought hard to heal, to understand herself. This spring she began living in a Thunder Bay group home, where she could access daily counselling and be near her mother, Pearl Slipperjack. She’d cut her hair short. She’d started drawing, and was learning to play guitar. She told her family she wanted to be a police officer. She told Wuanita she eventually wanted to run for chief. She hoped to change Weagamow.

The day she died, she visited family before heading out for the night with cousins. She was happy; she was starting to feel whole again. The kids were drinking on a hill overlooking the Neebing-McIntyre Floodway, near Chapples Park, a well-groomed recreation area with a paved trail popular with cyclists, dog walkers and kids on scooters. Tammy’s cousins told police she was with them until 10:30 p.m., when she headed home to meet her 11 p.m. curfew. “I don’t want to get grounded,” was the last thing she told them.

Five days later, police called her death non-criminal, which, to NAN Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler, confirmed their inability to conduct “competent and credible investigations into the epidemic of deaths in Thunder Bay’s rivers.”

During Tammy’s funeral, Julius Caesar twice snuck into the church. Both times, he went galloping right for Tammy’s coffin. The second time, he managed to rest his chin there for a moment before being hauled out.

Chapter 2

Last month, Statistics Canada revealed that one-third of the hate crimes directed at Indigenous people in Canada in 2015 occurred in Thunder Bay. The city had the highest rate of hate crimes reported in the country—more than double that of second-place Hamilton.

Many Indigenous people here have stories that speak to the city's hostile atmosphere. Melissa Kentner, an Anishinaabe city resident, was once soaked by a McDonald's soft drink hurled from a passing car. One man, who wishes to remain anonymous, recounted being beaten and thrown into the water by two white men in a blue truck. He escaped and was later taken to hospital. In 2014, a young Indigenous man was hospitalized in the city after being hit by a brick thrown from a passing truck. In the most widely reported incident, 34-year old Barb Kentner, Melissa's sister, was hit by a trailer hitch thrown from a car, rupturing her small intestine. She died earlier this month.

RELATED READING

Waiting for death in Thunder Bay

Words have left scars of their own. Ardelle Sagutcheway, who left the Eabametoong First Nation as a 13-year-old for high school in the city, says she has never felt as ashamed as the day someone called her a “dirty Indian” in Thunder Bay. “I realized that to them, I don’t wash. I’m not clean. I don’t take care of myself. When you realize that’s how everybody sees you, you start to hate yourself. It’s then you start really noticing the perfect families on TV, in newspapers. You know that no matter how hard you try, you have no hope of ever becoming that.”

Anastasia, a 17-year-old from a northern Ojibway community who preferred to withhold her surname, says she has been yelled at from passing cars three times since moving to Thunder Bay. “Go home!” someone screamed a few months ago. “I can’t,” she says. “There’s no high school on my reserve. I have nowhere else to go.” Anastasia is one of a handful of non-white kids at her school, where, in three years, she has yet to make a single friend.

The rising tensions in Thunder Bay have proven a challenge for police.

When an eight-month coroner’s inquest into the deaths of seven Indigenous students who died in Thunder Bay concluded last summer, one of the more significant revelations was that three of the five river deaths could not be explained. Every time an Indigenous person has been pulled from the river here, the police have made the same assessment, hurriedly classifying them not as crimes but tragic accidents, says Grand Chief Fiddler, sometimes within hours of the discovery of the body. “A post mortem and toxicity report take weeks,” he adds, not “48 hours.” Fiddler, who has been in politics 24 years and lives in Thunder Bay with his wife and two daughters aged 12 and 17, has been accused of picking a fight with the police, and of deflecting blame from NAN communities. He says he is asking the police to “do their jobs: to properly investigate these deaths,” nothing more.

Last month, Ontario's chief coroner announced that two outside police forces, including the York Regional Police, would be brought in to investigate Josiah and Tammy's deaths. In reponse to questions from *Maclean's* about the investigations, the Thunder Bay Police Service notes that it has never used the term "accidental" regarding Tammy's death and that it supports the joint police effort "to work on behalf of Tammy and Josiah's families and their communities."

There is nothing easy about policing Thunder Bay, the country's one-time murder capital, a small town with big-city crime and social dysfunction. It's a place, not unlike Winnipeg or Regina, where the results of Canada's mistreatment of Indigenous peoples are coming home to roost—the intergenerational effects of residential schools, cyclical poverty and addictions—but with even fewer supports. "The fact is, Thunder Bay is not equipped to handle it," says Mayor Hobbs in an interview with *Maclean's*. He believes the provincial and federal governments have abdicated their responsibilities, leaving the city "holding the bag."

But Hobbs says the notion that a serial killer is stalking these kids is "ridiculous." To the mayor, the real common denominator is alcohol: "If you are sitting, drinking at the top of a hill, chances are good that when you stand up, you're going to fall down it," he says.

The mayor told *Maclean's* the river deaths are a "national problem." He says the racist actions of hateful people do not define the city. He has publicly blamed "high-priced Toronto lawyers" for sowing discord between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in his city. And he believes national media are out to make the city look bad.

All of that may be true, but to Fiddler, it also reads like a laundry list of excuses for inaction. "People think this is normal. This is not normal. Families are crying out for answers."

Fiddler, who left the Muskrat Dam First Nation when he was 13 for high school, first in Sioux Lookout, Ont., then Thunder Bay, believes the city's leaders, none of whom are Indigenous, are missing the opportunity to show Thunder Bay that they stand with Indigenous people, that they grieve the loss of these children. "No mayor, city councillor or police chief from Thunder Bay has ever attended one of the funerals for these children. Not one city councillor, not one member of the police services board, not even the chief of police ever attended the inquest into the deaths of seven children in Thunder Bay."

Last month, Danny Smyth, Winnipeg's incoming police chief, travelled to the Bunibonibee Cree Nation in northern Manitoba for the funeral of Christine Wood, a 21-year-old who was murdered while visiting family in Winnipeg. "This is what reconciliation looks like," Sheila North Wilson, grand chief of Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak wrote on Facebook above photos of Smyth shovelling dirt onto Wood's grave with members of the Bunibonibee community. There has been no more vocal and pointed critic of the Winnipeg police than North Wilson.

A spokesperson for the Thunder Bay police, Chris Adams, stresses that the force recognizes the need for reconciliation. "Thunder Bay Police Service acting chief Sylvie Hauth has asked to meet with the Indigenous leaders to improve our relationships," he wrote in an email to *Maclean's*. As for why no officials attended the funerals, he explains that "it's a delicate balance in deciding how far to interject into a family's grief at the time of a funeral . . . Many of us here at the TBPS are parents and we have never lost sight of the impact and void these tragic deaths have created."

Fiddler nevertheless characterizes the current state of the relationship between the city's police and its growing First Nations community as "non-existent." Like many here, he says he's never seen racial tensions in the city so high. To Jana-Rae Yerxa, an

Anishinaabe academic from Little Eagle and Couchiching First Nation, it's like a battle is "exploding in the city."

For a while, the argument played out in the *Chronicle Journal*, the local paper, which alternated perspectives with a daily letter to the editor. One side would urge Thunder Bay to "get behind" their police who "put their lives on the line" for them and "feel criticized and judged." The other side would point out that worrying about the emotional distress of police while children were dying was "obscene," and that the concerns raised by Indigenous leaders were "legitimate."

The low point may have been an anonymous letter from a police officer attacking Fiddler. The officer concluded by saying he was not a "systemic racist." Or maybe it was comments from a Thunder Bay officer, Const. Rob Steudle, who wrote: "Natives are killing natives and it's the white mans fault natives are drunk on the street and its white mans fault natives are homeless... Well let's stop giving the natives money and see how that goes."

One area Crown prosecutor, who asked to remain anonymous because they were not granted permission to speak to the media, said the makeup of the mostly white, mostly male force, which is staffed almost entirely by locals, isn't helping matters: "The police, like the community it draws from, have little exposure to Indigenous culture and lack an understanding of the history. When you don't have Indigenous friends and colleagues and all you see are Indigenous people on the street, it becomes easy to slip into stereotype." Police, like everyone else, make mistakes, the prosecutor adds. In an overheated environment, their every decision gets scrutinized.

The police here have also made some blunders, like the joke press release apparently mistakenly sent out by the force after the murder of an Indigenous man who was known to drink mouthwash. "Fresh Mouth Killer Captured!!" it began. Last winter there was an

incident involving a good Samaritan, Robin Sutherland, who'd wrapped his sweater around the victim of a vicious sexual assault. An officer allegedly told him to "burn" the sweater as soon as he "got the chance." Sutherland had found the terrified, 28-year-old Indigenous woman naked, screaming for help.

Chapter 3

Despite the sense of foreboding that has settled over the Indigenous community, they aren't sitting back and waiting for help. Many are trying to chart a new way forward, hoping to make their city safer and more welcoming for youth arriving from the north. Tragically, this part of the story also begins with a death.

On Oct. 19, 2015, right in the middle of Thunder Bay's youth inquest, Stacy DeBungee, a member of the Rainy River First Nations, was found dead in the McIntyre. Three hours after the 41-year-old's body was found, before his identity was known, the police indicated the death was "non-suspicious." The next day, before an autopsy could be carried out, they deemed his death non-criminal.

At DeBungee's funeral in Rainy River, just outside Emo, Ont., his brother Brad told Chief Jim Leonard he could not get Thunder Bay police to return his calls. Leonard was disturbed. He decided to find out what happened. No lawyer in Thunder Bay would take the case, so he called Toronto's Julian Falconer, who has established a satellite office in Thunder Bay. They hired a private investigator, a retired Toronto homicide detective, who determined that DeBungee's debit card had been used four times after his death; together with witness interviews, this called into question the police conclusion that his death was non-suspicious.

Ontario's police oversight body, the Office of the Independent Police Review Director (OIPRD), is currently investigating the matter, due

to complaints jointly filed by Brad DeBungee and Leonard. It is considering two separate questions: was there police misconduct in the investigation of DeBungee's death; and is there a pattern in the way Thunder Bay police are investigating the deaths of Indigenous people in the city? A decision is expected this fall.

Rainy River First Nations Chief Jim Leonard overlooks the Kaministiquia River in Thunder Bay. *Cole Burston*

Leonard, who has been chief for 18 years, is a straight shooter: He's a family man who buys his clothes at Wal-Mart, juggles two cellphones and works around the clock, often from the cab of his truck, overseeing a long list of businesses run by Rainy River First Nations, a prosperous reserve in Treaty 3 territory, two hours from Kenora, Ont. This includes a sawmill, a solar farm that nets the community $10,000 a day and a partnership with a nearby mine that generated $50 million in contracts last year.

He runs a tight ship. He had seven dogs put down before the community began obeying a bylaw banning unleashed animals. He

brought in mandatory drug testing for employees of all Rainy River businesses. He lives according to a simple philosophy: "You treat people the way you want to be treated." He is everything his father, an alcoholic who abandoned his family, was not. That has always been his goal.

Like Fiddler, Leonard, who is retiring this year, says he is not trying to be obstreperous. "Police need to understand we've been treated this way all our lives—brushed off, ignored. We learn to be quiet about it, to just live with it. It hurts. Maybe these people did all roll into the water and drown. But we need a proper investigation done so we can tell parents, with total certainty, what happened to their children." He thinks what's needed is a change in attitude at the highest level. And he's willing to go first.

"We're like two kids in the playground right now. We need to join hands like Winnipeg did, and acknowledge there is a problem here. There is something going really wrong. I am willing to stand up and acknowledge our role in this, to acknowledge that we are also part of the problem. We're in this together. We need to sit down and deal with it together. Right now, we're working against each other."

People who share this view and want to make things right are not hard to find on both sides of Thunder Bay's divide.

"Boozhoo," someone calls out in Ojibway, greeting a young man slumped on a steel staircase behind a Thunder Bay warehouse. "Cousin?" says Joe Okitchquo, gently shaking the man, who is in his early 20s, dressed in thin pants and a T-shirt on the cold, spring night. "Wake up. We don't want you to sleep outside, bro. It's freezing, and you're going to get chewed up by mosquitoes."

When he wakes, the man, who is shaking from cold, tells the group of four volunteers from the Bear Clan, a group of Indigenous volunteers who patrol Thunder Bay after dark, that his name is Jeremy. He is happy for their help. He is not from the city, he explains; he'd been drinking with a group. It seems they left him

there, asleep. Backup is called, and two Bear Clan volunteers in an SUV pull up. Jeremy takes their advice and decides to go to detox. “Maybe it will work and he can safely detoxify,” someone says. “Either way, he’ll get three hots and a cot”—three hot meals and a bed for a few nights.

The Bear Clan travel in groups of three or four. Their goal is to help protect the vulnerable. They start the night patrolling the banks of the McIntyre River by foot for 90 minutes, carrying rubber gloves to pick up needles and garbage bags to gather trash. By 10:30 p.m., when it’s too dark to see, they hop in cars and drive around the city, looking for people in need of help—under bridges, in darkened parks, along the water.

“I want to do something for this community,” Okitchquo explains. The 34-year-old stay-at-home dad moved to Thunder Bay from the Attawapiskat First Nation for university. “I feel that from the heart. This is one of the greatest cities in the world,” he adds, noting the hot summers on the lake, the brilliant falls and the access to the outdoors. “I’m proud of this city. I want to make it better. Something is very wrong right now.”

Ardelle Sagutcheway looks after her niece Penny, 1, and nephew Scotty, 4, in her Thunder Bay home. *Cole Burston*

When Ardelle Sagutcheway left for high school in Thunder Bay at 13, she cried the entire flight there, staring out the window of a nine-seater Pilatus, watching until her small Ojibway community on Eabamet Lake faded from sight. The culture shock when she landed hit her hard. Thunder Bay might have been Mars.

She longed for the fresh caribou, berries, her kokum's rich soups. At her boarding home, she was taught to sweep and wash the floors. She felt disconnected from her culture, her tight-knit community, her sisters, Renee and Devida, and her three-year-old brother, Max, whom she treated like her "little baby." They'd never been apart. She felt no more connected at Churchill High, a mostly white school where she couldn't seem to make friends. At night, she cried herself to sleep.

She tried to "keep it together," she says. "But it wasn't long before I was coping in a negative way." She discovered alcohol, an elixir for

shyness, loneliness, pain. She joined a group made up of all the "wrong people." She and three or four friends would split a bottle of rum or vodka or whisky. So they wouldn't get caught, they drank it fast and straight. They knew no one in town and had nowhere to go, so they hung out in bus terminals until police chased them out; then they hid out of sight, on old rail bridges or in darkened parks.

Like most of her new friends, she had been exposed early to grief and trauma, she says. In her case, it was the murder of her dad, Max Kakagamic, a funny, gentle man who'd adopted her and her sisters when he married their mom. She calls him the best thing to ever happen to her family. What she remembers most from the day he died was her mother's screams; she was pregnant with Max Jr. at the time. Three years later, Ardelle left for Thunder Bay.

"I knew I had to be there—that education was the key to my success." But at the same time, it was slowly killing her. Alcohol led to drugs. Over time, her depression deepened, and she was hospitalized after attempting suicide.

When she was 17, she sought treatment in Prince Albert, Sask. By 19, she knew what she wanted to do: help kids coming to Thunder Bay adapt to their new environment. She's 26 now and studying sociology at Lakehead University. She is a safe person for students to turn to, and has two boarding students of her own. She wishes she could take in more. She knows from experience how much small things can matter. She makes sure to ask kids how their day went, to have snacks on hand for their friends, to find out what her boarding students ate at home and cook meals that feel familiar.

One of her boarding students is Max. He's 16 now, a quiet, gentle boy who loves to build things and wants to be a carpenter. "He looks and acts exactly like his dad," she says, smiling.

Brandon Esquega, 16, (right) trains with Peter Panetta at The Underground Gym in Thunder Bay. *Cole Burston*

Jab-jab-straight left. That's the combination that won boxer Brandon Esquega his first ever match, at a boxing club in Duluth, Minn., last month. The 16-year-old from the Fort William First Nation was born to fight, according to his coach, Peter Panetta, who runs the Underground Gym, a free boxing club for inner-city youth on Simpson Street in east-end Thunder Bay. But Panetta admits to having doubts after the first round that night in Duluth.

Esquega was intimidated. He was taking on a boxer from Duluth who was in his home club. The entire room was behind him, cheering his name. Brandon's only supporters were Panetta and a friend he'd convinced to come along for the ride.

"I had him sit down. Take some deep breaths. Focus. By the third round, he found his groove. He's a street fighter. He's always going to be able to dig deep. He earned that fight."

And Esquega knew it. He was jumping and screaming, celebrating the win. He said later he had never felt so good. Panetta says he saw a side of Esquega that night that he'd never seen before: a joyful boy.

He showed up one day at the Underground Gym. He'd been kicked out of school for fighting again. A guidance counsellor suggested he try boxing. Panetta had him put on some gloves and start hitting. Panetta, who has been coaching for 20 years, was blown away. His skill level was off the charts. His technique was really good. He was a natural.

"Have you ever boxed before?" Panetta asked. "I'm just a street fighter," Esquega replied. "Stick with me, kid," said Panetta. "I can take you a long way."

"Before, I was smoking and drinking. I've stopped that completely. I've got to get my condition up for my next fight," says the 145-lb. welterweight. He rides his bike to the gym every day, through snow and rain, from the Fort William First Nation. He's got a job at a furniture recycler, and he'll start school again at St. Patrick in the fall. "I was frustrated before," he says. "I'd lose my temper and get angry at other kids. I'm not like that anymore."

About 40 kids are running around the gym, most of them aged four to 12, and they treat him like a god. Later, Esquega will call them onto the mat and lead them though an exercise. He is also mentoring a younger boxer.

Panetta, a retired postal worker, has been running the gym for 19 years now. He built it out of two buildings he bought at auction for $100 each. There was no water, no heat, no electricity. But with the help of friends, he got it running within a year.

The Underground Gym is open from 5 to 8 p.m. every night. At 6:30, Panetta serves a hot meal. He picks up most of the kids in his battered '92 Dodge Ram. Some days, when he was still working, he

used to have to run his postal route to finish in time. The stress of it got to him, and the married father of two retired a few years ago after a heart attack. “I can’t stop,” he says. “I don’t know what would happen to these kids if I do. There is nothing for them to do around here. They’re scared to walk the streets.”

As it is, he’s barely scraping by. He receives no funding from the City of Thunder Bay, and relies on donations to keep the doors open. The gym sits across the street from a crack house. Its next-door neighbour is a Hell’s Angels clubhouse.

Late arrivals make a beeline to Panetta for a bear hug. He’s the tooth fairy to some of the younger kids. He pays them $5 per tooth. “You give it to me. I give it to her,” he tells them. “They believe me,” he says with a laugh. He’s devoted to these kids because he was once one of them. He grew up dirt-poor in Thunder Bay’s inner city and spent time on the street. A karate teacher saved him, teaching him to believe in himself. He’s trying to pay it forward.

Some day there will be more people like Panetta than those hurling insults, and the wall between them will finally fall. Maybe it’s already crumbling. When Sunshine Winter thinks of the days and nights she spent searching for her son, Josiah, what she remembers—because it was so touching and unexpected—was how many non-First Nations people came out to support them and help search.

When Katy Brown thinks of Tammy’s vigil, she is reminded of how meaningful it was to their family to see officials in the crowd. “Every person who’s not in your life, left for a reason, for a lesson to be learned,” Tammy once wrote. Katy hopes that Tammy’s lesson helps improve life, even a little, for kids like her.

The McIntyre River in Thunder Bay. *Cole Burston*

In the end, Sunshine says, the hows and whys of her child's death are eclipsed by a simple, agonizing fact: no matter what happened, Josiah is gone forever. She focuses on what she does know: how kind and generous her boy was, slipping outside on cold nights to pile blankets on the dogs, or letting his baby brother Sagastao climb into his bed, though he knew his covers would be stolen. "I miss Jo," Sagastao still tells Sunshine every night. "I want Jo."

That is how Sunshine wants people to remember her son, not as a symbol of a racial divide, not as a statistic, but as a boy, full of love, who never had the chance to grow up.

And she focuses on this simple but deeply important truth. "I have him back," she says. "Some never have closure," she adds, a nod to the missing, and to the 13 harrowing nights she spent not knowing where he was. "We found him. I am thankful for that."