



important for me to try and bridge that gap between aboriginal people and the rest of the city," Bear, now 27, said in a recent interview.

He took policing courses at SIAST, the Treaty 4 Citizens' Police Academy and elsewhere. After serving three years in Regina, Const. Bear joined the Saskatoon Police Service (SPS) in April.

Bear and the 51 other aboriginal SPS officers are the most visible sign of the radical transformation underway, but not the only one.

Ten years ago today, Justice David Wright released his explosive report following a 14-month inquiry into Stonechild's death.



Neil Stonechild was 17 when he died in 1990.

There had been criminal trials, inquests and other public forums on these issues, but Wright's report contained the most comprehensive road map for police to earn back the public's trust.

Today, even the harshest critics from that period say things have improved dramatically. From GPS and video surveillance in cruisers to an independent body investigating complaints against police, every one of Wright's recommendations has been implemented.

"There was pain, but something was born out of that pain," Lawrence Joseph, the vocal former Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations chief, recalled in a recent interview. "This process has torn down walls and fences. It has built bridges in our society."

## The beginning

Three years before the inquiry into Stonechild's death, a story in The StarPhoenix on Feb. 16, 2000, contained allegations police had dumped Night in a field near the Queen Elizabeth Power Station in the middle of a dangerously frigid night. The reaction was immediate. Saskatoon streets filled with protesters. Amnesty International and a host of other groups

demanded action.

Joseph, then the FSIN vice-chief in charge of the justice portfolio, met Feb. 19 with First Nations chiefs from across the province. Many were shaking in anger. Others wept.

Joseph tried in vain to set up meetings with Saskatoon's police chief and provincial and federal officials.

"I had a hell of a time even getting a call back from a low-level functionary. I begged them to do something," he recalled.

Already well-known for his acerbic style, Joseph went on the offensive. In every speech, news conference and public appearance, he demanded answers. When few came, he declared police "cannot and should not be trusted by First Nations people and marginalized people."

When he finally met with a senior justice department official, he said the man alternately insisted on calling him "Lawrence," or "asshole" rather than Chief Joseph. His home was pelted with eggs and

paint ball pellets on four occasions. On two others, explosives were set off in his mailbox. He received multiple death threats.

## The inquest

One of the biggest problems was the lack of an independent body to investigate alleged police wrongdoing. Joseph and the chiefs created their own. The FSIN Special Investigations Unit, headed by a former RCMP officer, took more than 2,500 calls in its first few months. It was created for First Nations victims, but many Metis and non-aboriginal people also called.

Ongoing pressure from all directions also provoked a closer look at the 1990 freezing death of Neil Stonechild. The government initially resisted calls for an inquest, but relented in February of 2003.

In his final report, released Oct. 26, 2004, Justice David Wright called the initial police investigation "superficial and totally inadequate." For years, certain officers and their superiors displayed "self-protective and defensive attitudes" around the case, Wright said.

His report then went further than many expected. He concluded Stonechild had been in police custody the night he died, and that marks on his face were likely caused by handcuffs. Wright also accepted the account of Stonechild's friend, Jason Roy, who described seeing a bloodied Stonechild in the back of a police cruiser yelling that police were going to kill him.

"It was an ugly period. A lot of people hated me," Roy recalled earlier this month. His testimony led to death threats and caused him to attempt suicide.

"I like to think I played a role in helping people stand up for themselves," he said.

## Cleaning house

In the aftermath, two officers were fired and another was forced to retire. Earlier inquests into the freezing deaths of Lawrence Wegner and Rodney Naistus had proven inconclusive, but two other officers were convicted criminally in the Night case.

Saskatoon's mayor was defeated in his run for reelection by a former officer who broke ranks and spoke out at the inquiry. The police chief was fired, and for the first time, a First Nations woman was appointed to head the city police commission.

"They really cleaned house. It was significant," Joseph said.

When reached at his Saskatoon home this month, Wright said the facts of the case warranted blunt language and strong conclusions.

"I didn't feel restricted in any way.

I really needed to clearly state what happened," Wright said.

Several officers who testified were "less than forthcoming," but many others acted honourably and helped him to get to the truth, he said.

Joseph and others say the real legacies of Wright's inquiry, and of a broader provincial commission which released its final report a few months earlier, are the deeper systemic changes.

Every single suggestion for policing reform has been aggressively implemented, said Chief Clive Weighill.

"We've put every recommendation in place. These didn't sit on a shelf. We took action," he said in a recent interview.

GPS tracking systems now are standard in all cruisers.

"If somebody were to accuse us of taking them out of the city, I can go back three, four, five years. I can tell you where Car 234 was at two in the morning on January 25th. I can tell you where that car went, how fast it was driving and where it stopped," he said.

An audio-video system now tapes activity in front of the cruiser, and another interior camera is activated when police open the back door to place someone inside.

"Officers have no control over that," Weighill said.

## Building trust

Major changes were also made in the way public complaints against police are handled in Saskatchewan.

A decade ago, complainants had nowhere to go but to the SPS, which would investigate itself.

Since 2006, all complaints about police conduct have been sent to the Saskatchewan Public Complaints Commission — an independent civilian body — for investigation and decisions.

"It's completely hands-off for us. It's probably one of the leading systems in Canada," Weighill said. Police are now educated on issues ranging from Indian residential schools and colonialism to lack of affordable housing, he noted.

On the streets, the number of aboriginal police officers has nearly doubled since the time of the Stonechild inquiry.

"That's a big push for us," Weighill said.



Const. Cody Bear, a new aboriginal recruit, sits in a police cruiser at the Saskatoon Police Station. MICHELLE BERG / SASKATOON STARPHOENIX

An aboriginal summer student program is now in place to entice those considering following in Bear's footsteps.

Against one wall in Weighill's office stands an FSIN eagle staff, given to him by Joseph several years ago to recognize how far the SPS has come.

"We had to earn that," Weighill said.

## New attitude

Roman Catholic priest Fr. Andre Poilievre, who has worked with homeless people and gang members on Saskatoon streets for decades, agreed there's been a fundamental shift.

"The Stonechild inquiry really brought to light the weaknesses in the police force," said Poilievre, who convinced Roy to file his complaint and testify. "The police attitude toward aboriginal people has changed radically."

Aboriginal youth are also more likely to stand up for themselves than they were a decade ago, said Darren Winegarden, a Saskatoon criminal lawyer who represented Roy. A renewed sense of identity and cultural pride, combined with the ubiquity of smartphone cameras and social media, mean they're less likely to tolerate racism and injustice, he said.

Police have improved in many ways, but some still harbour a "good guy, bad guy mentality," Winegarden said.

"It's not quantifiable, but it's there."

## Future challenges

Although the crime rate is dropping, aboriginal people are crammed into overcrowded prisons with few programs, Poilievre and Winegarden noted. Inmates' phone calls are monitored and many can no longer hug their kids or spouses during visits.

Poilievre called Saskatchewan's jails and prisons "the new residential schools."

And Poilievre, Winegarden, Joseph, Weighill and others agree the justice system is only one part of the solution.

"Police should not be blamed for everything negative," Joseph said. "They need help."

Const. Cody Bear said some people still question his decision to join the Saskatoon Police Service "because of the history here."

He knows there's a lot of work ahead.

"I know change can be tough for one person, but I see myself doing this for a long time," he said.

## Timeline

**Nov. 24, 1990:** Seventeen-year-old Neil Stonechild and his friend Jason Roy leave a house party shortly before midnight, in storming, -25C weather.

**Nov. 25, 1990:** Roy is stopped by city police constables Brad Senger and Larry Hartwig in the wee hours of the morning. He said they had Stonechild in the back seat of their cruiser, and Stonechild was bloodied, screaming for help and yelling that the police were going to kill him.

**Nov. 29, 1990:** Stonechild's frozen body is discovered by workers in the undeveloped, industrial 800 block of 57th Street. Sgt. Keith Jarvis of the morality unit is assigned to investigate.

**Dec. 3, 1990:** Neil Stonechild's funeral is held at Westwood Funeral Chapel, where family observe two parallel cuts on the bridge of his nose.

**Dec. 5, 1990:** Jarvis concludes the Stonechild file. His report doesn't address why Stonechild was missing a shoe, how he walked nine kilometres to an industrial area in a snow storm, or how he incurred cuts on his nose. Jason Roy's statement that he saw Stonechild in the back of Senger's and Hartwig's cruiser is excluded from the report.

**March 4, 1991:** StarPhoenix journalist Terry Craig reports Stonechild's mother, Stella Bignell, and sister disagree with Jarvis's report, and suspect foul play.

**June 4, 1997:** In a regular humour column in the Saskatoon Sun, police officer Brian Trainor describes two fictional cops who pick up a drunk man and drop him off on the outskirts of the city, near the Queen Elizabeth Power Station.

**1998:** The original file investigating Neil Stonechild's death is destroyed by Saskatoon police during a routine purge of old files.

**Jan. 29, 2000:** The body of aboriginal man Rodney Naistus is discovered in a field near the Queen Elizabeth power station.

**Feb. 3, 2000:** Lawrence Wegner's frozen body is discovered near where Naistus was found. Aboriginal man Darrell Night tells police that two officers abandoned him in the same area on a recent cold night.

**Feb. 22, 2000:** StarPhoenix reporter Leslie Perreux writes an article that connects Night's allegations with Stonechild's death a decade earlier.

**Sept. 20, 2001:** Two police officers who admitted to abandoning Night in freezing temperatures near the power station are fired.

**Feb. 20, 2003:** Justice Minister Eric Cline announces a public inquiry into Stonechild's death.

**Sept. 8, 2003:** The Commission of Inquiry into the death of Neil Stonechild begins, headed by commissioner Justice David Wright.

**Jan. 9, 2004:** Police officials announce that all city police cruisers will be equipped with global positioning tracking technology (GPS).

**May 18, 2004:** Saskatoon police admit to the inquiry that the 1990 investigation into Stonechild's death was inadequate and that mistakes were made. The former police chief Russ Sabo apologizes to Stonechild's mother.

**Oct. 26, 2004:** Justice Wright releases the final report of the Stonechild inquiry that finds Stonechild was in the custody of Senger and Hartwig on the night he died, and that injuries on his nose were likely made by handcuffs. Senger and Hartwig are suspended.

**November 2004:** Senger and Hartwig are fired.

**Dec. 18, 2008:** Senger's and Hartwig's applications to appeal the Wright report findings are denied.

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