

# Living with questions; seeking answers

It's been nine years since his nephew died and he refuses to believe it was suicide

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Michele Young / Kamloops Daily News

JANUARY 28, 2013 01:00 AM

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Grizzly Warriormen reads the engraving on this tombstone for Mike Wayne LeCamp in the cemetery across from St. Joseph's Church.  
Photograph By KEITH ANDERSON

January is the worst month for Wilf Bennett.

It's the month when, 41 years ago, his nephew Mike LeCamp was born.

It's the month when LeCamp died, at age 32.

It's the month when he began his nine-year search around his nephew's death.

"Every year, this is the toughest month for me," he said.

The coroner and police called LeCamp's death a suicide by hanging. For them, the file is closed. Rural detachment Staff Sgt. Doug Aird said foul play was not suspected and investigators, including senior officers, were involved in the case.

"A thorough investigation was done at the time," he said.

But Bennett, 60, doesn't believe LeCamp killed himself. Nor do three or four people who, in cautious asides, have told him his nephew was deliberately killed.

Those people are too scared to talk to police, he said.

The First Nations elder has collected a five-centimetre thick file folder with the autopsy report, letters and newspaper clippings, searching for the truth about what happened on Jan. 17, 2004.

He finds it difficult to accept what the police and coroner concluded because he doesn't think they got all the answers.

Bennett is looking for those answers - has been for nine years.

Mike LeCamp was born on Jan. 27, 1971, and grew into a brawny young man - a young man who would step up and protect others in a confrontation. His nickname was Grizzly Warriormen.

"He backed everybody up in a fight. He was tough. He held his own ground," Bennett said.

"He was a good guy until someone pissed him off. He was loyal to family and friends. He'd never let anyone hurt his mom."

Bennett has had his own internal battles, fighting to get free of alcohol addiction and succeeding 17 years ago. It's still a day-to-day challenge. The loss of his nephew makes it even harder.

"I've been 17 years sober. To keep this off my mind, I write books, I put CDs together," he said.

"I try to keep myself busy. I hold it inside me that I'm fighting this. I'm still an alcoholic but a sober one."

On Jan. 17, 2004, Bennett was about to go skiing at Sun Peaks when his cellphone rang. One of his nephews was on the line.

"Did you hear the news, Uncle? They found Mike, hanging."

This is what Bennett has been told about the day the Grizzly Warriorman died:

LeCamp was living in a trailer beside a home on East Shuswap Road. A group of young adults gathered, drinking and taking drugs and LeCamp allegedly beat up a man who was trying to hustle a couple of young women.

Bennett saw the police photos that showed LeCamp kneeling on the ground, with a rope around his neck, down his chest and around his knees.

He made a circle of his index finger and thumb to indicate the thickness of the tree branch that LeCamp was supposed to have hung from. He said the tree was chopped and burned days after the death.

The coroner ruled LeCamp died from asphyxiation from the ligature. Rural RCMP know the family isn't convinced it was a suicide, but no witnesses have come forward to prove otherwise. The officer in charge of the investigation has since retired. The file remains closed.

Coroner Barb McLintock said the family was fast in expressing concern about LeCamp's death, so a thorough autopsy was ordered. It showed no evidence of any beating or harm done to LeCamp as would be expected had the burly 32-year-old been forcibly hanged.

He also had no medical history of depression, and there was no suicide note. That's not uncommon, particularly with young men who sometimes impulsively decide to end it all, she said.

"Those are the ones families find hard to deal with," said McLintock, who has seen several similar cases.

Bennett needs to feel certain he knows how his nephew died, whether the facts convince him it was by LeCamp's own hand or by others.

He doesn't believe his nephew was depressed or suicidal. He never saw any signs of it. But if it can be proved, he said he'll accept it.

He has talked to police about his suspicions and what other people have told him - in whispers and tense conversations - about LeCamp's death.

One police officer said something to him years ago that gives him hope: "She said a case is never closed until it's solved."

To him and other members of LeCamp's family, it's not solved.

"I need a witness. Somebody who ain't chicken and would come forward."

"I keep hoping. Every morning when I wake up, I feel it."

At family gatherings around Christmas and New Year's Eve, when January lurks in the background, Bennett signs up for holiday shifts at work. That way, he won't be tempted by the celebratory drinking nor will he feel the pain of noticing his nephew's absence.

"Mike's plate is empty," he said.

Bennett keeps his vigil for his nephew's in his mind and on his back. He wears a black jacket embroidered with "In memory of Mike

LeCamp Jan. 17, 2004" on the back. Below that, stitched in shades of brown, is a grizzly bear head.

LeCamp is buried at the Tk'emlups Indian Band cemetery, with a large wooden marker carved with a grizzly paw print. Bennett has knelt by the gravesite and made a promise to his nephew.

"I told Mike I'm going to keep on investigating," he said.

"I'm not giving up this case."

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