

Unpaid student lifeguards get 4 cents on the dollar

Student lifeguards owed thousands of dollars from a twice-bankrupt Acton businessman are getting four cents for every unpaid dollar they earned while guarding pools across the GTA.

The pittance, which took two years to extract from Peter Check, the businessman, demonstrates the province's difficulties in collecting money from rogue employers and serves as a warning to students beginning the search for summer jobs.

Last summer a *Toronto Star* investigation found Check had been withholding wages to students for years, changing the name of his pool supply company each summer and leaving a trail of at least 68 lifeguards (aged 16-22) who were owed a combined \$63,573.91.

Last week, the ministry sent cheques ranging in value from \$10.22 to \$69.48 to Check's former employees, but the lifeguards remain largely unpaid for their work.

The Ministry of Labour has repeatedly ordered Check to pay the lifeguards and continues to employ the services of a To-

ronto collection agency.

Laura McGraw, 21, began working for Check at his Mississauga office writing up schedules for lifeguards in summer 2007. In September, McGraw moved to Kingston to study nursing at Queen's University only to have her last paycheque bounce.

Angry and in need of cash to pay for tuition and housing, she hounded Check for her cheque until he paid her off in full.

Satisfied, she returned to work for Check again the following summer. But by that time Check had changed the name of his company from Aquatic Pool Solutions to All Pool Solutions. Working inside Check's office in July and August 2008, McGraw remembers angry teen-aged employees from the previous year calling in an effort to retrieve their pay.

By the end of August, McGraw's paycheques again began to bounce. With \$1,585.16 in unpaid wages, she filed a claim against Check with the Ministry of Labour in the fall of 2008. When the ministry told her she could be 50 years

old before she saw any of the unpaid wages, she quickly wrote the ordeal off as a learning experience and took on a part time job at a Pita Pitt to pay the bills at school.

Then last week she got a call from her parents. A cheque from the Ministry of Labour had arrived at her childhood home.

The cheque's total: \$69.48, or four percent of the \$1,585.16.

"I was surprised to get anything," says McGraw of the morsel she received, itself the result of "an investigation carried out by the Employment Standards Program," which, last year, said it was on the cusp of laying charges against Check for violations of the Employment Standards Act.

McGraw and others say the province is now telling them that more money could be on the way, but the ministry won't say when or how much.

Check could not be reached for comment last week.

Last June, the *Star* caught up with the 62-year-old bespectacled Acton resident in the parking lot of a Mississauga auto

parts shop.

When asked why the lifeguards hadn't been paid, Check replied: "It's being looked after."

Check tends to begin advertising jobs for lifeguards in local community newspapers in May, something past employees are advising would-be lifeguards to watch out for.

The ministry placed writs on property owned and registered to Check and his numerous corporate identities in March 2009. However, aside from a 2001 Ford F250 pickup truck, the *Star* could not locate anything registered to Check or to his companies. Five of the six cars parked in Check's driveway were in his wife's name, as was the family residence—a two-storey brick home with detached garage, outdoor pool, and five acres of land in Acton. Even the Timberlea Blvd. property where Check's pool business operated for 20 years was listed in Check's wife's name. As such, the ministry was not able to stop the sale of that property for \$215,000 in May 2009.

—*Torstar News Service*

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