

EDUCATION

# North Van to apologize for slur

## Former student was called 'fag' in his yearbook write-up

**Nathaniel Christopher**

**A BC MAN WILL RECEIVE AN IN-** person apology from the North Vancouver School District on Monday, Oct 22 at 9:30am — more than 42 years after his yearbook write-up was replaced with the word "Fag."

On Oct 4, after Robin Tomlin went public with his demand for an apology, North Vancouver superintendent John Lewis sent him a letter on behalf of the district and invited him to a private meeting. School district spokesperson Victoria Miles says the meeting will be followed by a public statement.

She says the district has also taken steps to amend existing copies of the yearbook.

"Amending the yearbook has been a big part of this, and amending it in a way that respects his needs is an important part of the resolution," she says. "So Mr Tomlin will receive amended copies of the yearbook and we will have amended copies in the library. We will also have copies of amended pages available for anyone else who may have a copy of that yearbook."

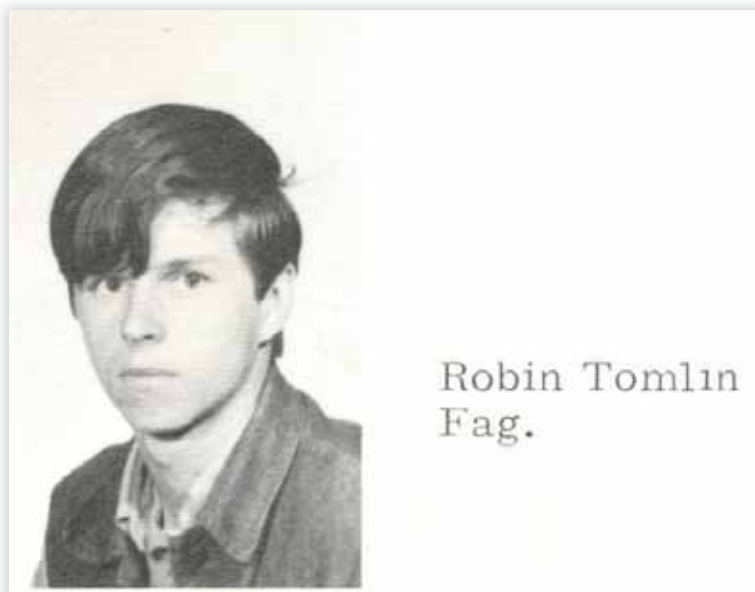
Tomlin, now 60 and living in the West Kootenays, says the homophobic yearbook slur was prepared by a group of boys who bullied him for two years at Argyle Secondary.

"They bumped into me in the hallways and called me faggot if I walked down the hall," he recalls. "I never went to the school first thing in the morning. In fact, I got a late slip every day. In the 1969 annual I was listed as one of the most late students. The most dangerous time of day was the first thing in the morning, when the hallways were crowded and you got bumped and kicked."

He says that at five foot five and 123 pounds, he was an easy target for bullies. "Back in 1970 if you were considered gay you were beat up or killed, so I shut my mouth until I moved in '76, and then it came to light again when my daughter graduated and wanted to see my yearbook and said, 'Dad, you got to do something. If not for yourself, then the kids out there.'"

Tomlin says he made several attempts to elicit an apology from the school district but was unsuccessful until a former classmate, who is now an lawyer, agreed to represent him free of charge.

"They sent me an apology by email. And I said, 'I don't want an apology by email. I want a face-to-face one. I want them to look me in the eyes. Not some apology written by some secretary who took it down from notes you gave her and then emailed. I want a face-to-face apology with my daughter in person and I want it public,'" Tomlin says.



**I WANT THEM TO LOOK ME IN THE EYES.**

—Argyle Secondary graduate Robin Tomlin

**North Vancouver School District spokesperson Victoria Miles hopes the students originally responsible for calling Robin Tomlin a "fag" in his yearbook come forward to take responsibility.** COURTESY OF ROBIN TOMLIN

"The kids will not hear your message in a locked little office," he continues. "I want you to apologize and meet the press and tell them what you're going to do from now on to stop this."

North Vancouver School District adopted an anti-homophobia policy in 2006 following a nine-year legal battle with a former student. In 1996 Azmi Jubran, then in Grade 10, filed a complaint with the BC Human Rights Tribunal after years of unsuccessfully protesting homophobic harassment from his classmates while the district stood by and did little to intervene. The tribunal awarded Jubran \$4,000 in damages and told the

school board to take responsibility.

Miles says the yearbook incident serves as an opportunity to highlight the progress of society since 1970 and notes that district staff and students have created many positive initiatives over the decades. While she stresses that the district is committed to rectifying the situation as much as possible, she also hopes that the individuals responsible will come forward and take responsibility for their actions.

"We are still hopeful that the individuals who actually committed this act and put that word in the yearbook will come forward and become accountable for their action," she says. "That's a very important element in all of this. As an organization, we can apologize to Mr Tomlin and will do so and have been intent on doing so, but this is a very, very important opportunity for individual responsibility to be recognized. We don't want to live in a society where individuals feel they can do this sort of thing and pass responsibility on to an organization."

Tomlin, who is not gay himself, hopes this experience might encourage students to stand up to their bullies. "It's happening to kids in school now, and I want them to get a message that you can do something about it," he says. "Don't hide, stand up for yourself — even if it takes 42 years, it's going to get resolved."

"And I want to reach out to school districts and schools. They are responsible for this because they should be a safe place for kids to go," he adds.

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