

Automated eyes on the road

by BROCK WEIR

It's hard to fathom that it has been a decade since children Daniel, Harry and Millie Neville-Lake, along with their beloved grandfather, lost their lives in a devastating car crash just north of Kleinburg at the hands of a reckless driver.

My first encounter with the family actually took place 12 years ago when I had the chance to interview their mother, Jennifer, under decidedly happier circumstances.

Daniel was a member of Aurora's 44 Beaver Scouts and Cub Scouts Group in 2013 and younger brother Harry tagged along, providing a learning opportunity for others in the group.

Harry was born missing his left thumb, part of the radial bone on the same arm, and had a non-functioning thumb on his right hand. To help ease the impact of this condition, Harry became a War Amps CHAMP and the family was eager to have their challenge be a teachable moment for others – particularly as the organization geared up for its 95th anniversary of serving those in need.

‘Daniel didn't realize there was anything different about Harry,’ Jennifer told me at the time, recalling an activity with the 44 Scouts that involved crawling along the carpet. ‘He was just his younger brother, four-and-a-half years apart. After they crawled, Daniel asked me, ‘Why does Harry crawl differently?’ and I explained it is because Harrison can't do that and that is how he figured out how to do it.

‘He started hitching up his brother's pants getting him to crawl properly, so I decided we should ask the War Amps to see if there is something they can do to help Daniel understand that his brother is different, but also that it is okay and not a scary thing, because he was getting upset at night.’

Using their journey to help others, Jennifer noted, enabled ‘Daniel and some of his friends to understand that even if some kids are different, it's not a bad thing. Everybody is different and they all do things differently.’

In their young lives, the brothers had a real impact on their peers in helping them see the world differently, and I often wonder of the myriad ways they would have found to be difference-makers had their lives not been tragically cut short.

In a way, they continued to be difference-makers as their unimaginable fate caused people across the country to sit up and take notice of the real impacts that reckless driving can have not just on the individual, but society as a whole, and spurred a wave of activism to make our roads – and, therefore, our communities – safer.

It is a shame, however, through this lens, that the tenth anniversary of this unspeakable event, one which continues to impact those left behind, coincided with Premier Doug Ford's announcement that automated speed enforcement (ASE) cameras would be banned across the Province.

The ASE network, of course, was an imperfect system where some cameras were, perhaps, a little bit too sensitive in certain cases and places, and in need of adjustment. That said, removing a traffic calming mechanism that actually caused drivers to be conscious of their behaviours and the role they play behind the wheel is not, by my estimation, a cause for relief.

‘At a time when governments at all levels should be doing everything they can to lower costs and make life more affordable, too many municipalities are using speed cameras as a cash grab,’ said Premier Ford in a statement last week. ‘Enough is enough. Instead of making life more expensive by sending speeding tickets to drivers weeks after the fact, we're supporting road safety measures that will prevent speeding in the first place, keep costs down, and keep our streets safe.’

Minister of Transportation Pabmeet Sarkaria doubled down on the Premier's cost-savings argument, adding: "Municipal speed cameras have become nothing more than a tool for raising revenue. Our government is focused on measures that truly protect the safety of all Ontarians and we will continue working with municipalities to ensure Ontario maintains its position as one of the safest jurisdictions in North America.

Alternative road safety measures the Province will support municipalities on our roads?

"Large signs to slow down drivers by mid-November, permanent large signs with flashing lights by next September, and encouraging towns and cities to implement alternative traffic-calming measures such as speed bumps, speed cushions, raised crosswalks, curb extensions and roundabouts."

Oh, and more signs: enhance signage and education and awareness campaigns."

Now, maybe it's just me, but none of these suggestions, if you can pardon the pun, are re-inventing the wheel. Our communities are rife with speed bumps, speed cushions, roundabouts, maybe a raised sidewalk or two, and signs of every imaginable size, shape, and light configurations line our roads. The results of these measures have well, each of us has our own view on how effective these measures have been.

York Region's monthly Council meeting last week coincided with the Province's announcement and many members of Regional Council, although they were waiting for the finer details to be announced, identified a number of issues with the alternatives not the least of which was the practicality of installing speed bumps, humps, and cushions on busy Regional roads and how doing so might impact emergency services trying to get to a call.

There is clearly much more work to be done on this file, so the question I have is: were the cameras simply too successful?

Granted, getting a speeding ticket weeks after the fact if you were clocked going only one or two kilometres per hour over the posted speed limit is probably an overreach, and hence the aforementioned tweaks that were clearly necessary before the program was scrapped altogether. But did it cause the persons on the receiving end of those tickets to be a little more mindful of how they used the road? Unless, they were received solely by the individuals who took matters into their own hands and violently disabled various cameras in Vaughan, I'd wager this was certainly the case.

Both the Premier and his Minister characterised the program as a "cash grab" but, really, the only persons whose cash was getting grabbed were those who were flouting the long-established rules of our roads. One would think this would be decidedly in the wheelhouse of a government that likes to tout itself on being tough on crime and light a fire under other levels of government they don't believe are holding up their end of the bargain.

"ASE is proven to reduce speeding, change driver behaviour, and make our roads safer for everyone drivers, cyclists, pedestrians, and especially children and other vulnerable road users," said the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police in a statement a few days prior to the Government's announcement. "The use of these tools is controlled by municipalities and deployed in areas of the community, such as school zones and community safety zones, where slowing down saves lives and prevents serious injuries."

Let's believe the experts.

ASE cameras, sadly, would not have made a difference for the Neville-Lake family, but effective ways of changing driver behaviour will undoubtedly go a long way in avoiding future tragedies.