

Bill Rea ? HomeJames is fun

I drove a 2015 Mercedes the other night, but more about that later.

Volunteering for the HomeJames project has a lot of benefits, some of which are obvious right off the mark.

Volunteering provides people with a safe and convenient alternative for getting themselves, their passengers and their vehicle home if they've overdone it in the drinking department after a night of holiday celebrating; certainly a lot better than the foolish and possibly dangerous option of trying to drive themselves home. It's also fun, if you don't mind staying up late (it was getting on to 3:30 before I got to bed Saturday night ? make that Sunday morning).

The whole thing is operated by volunteers, meaning there's always room for more.

I volunteered myself for the program Saturday night. I was one of several people pitching in various capacities, including driving, navigating, dispatching, manning the phones, lining up food and drink and munchies to last the whole night (no booze, of course), coordinating the whole effort, etc. And that doesn't include sponsors, like Tim Hortons, who provided coffee and many Timbits (I probably consumed more than my fair share of those), and the local car dealers, who furnished the shuttle vehicles that are so very crucial to the operation.

It was the second time I had done this. I put in a shift last year, a couple of days before the infamous ice storm, and was very glad I did.

There are lots of signs posted at the sides of roads all over town, advertising the program, complete with the phone number to call (905-951-9000). People can place the call if they are concerned they've had too much to drink. A team of three is dispatched to their location.

The team consists of a person tasked with driving the client and all passengers in his or her own vehicle, a person to drive the shuttle vehicle and a navigator to make sure everyone knows where they're supposed to be.

Saturday saw me as a member of Team 4 (there were seven teams that particular evening). I was the designated driver, largely because when I arrived at the dispatch centre (at Humber River Hall, which used to be known as the Bolton branch of the Royal Canadian Legion), I was asked what I wanted to do and I volunteered. I also mentioned I know how to drive a standard, although I subsequently learned there was no shortage of that qualification that night. The team navigator was Joan and Simon took on the job of driving the shuttle.

We each had our administrative tasks to perform. Mine included making sure the client's vehicle had a valid registration sticker and insurance.

There were a couple of other rules. HomeJames is not a taxi service. The client has to produce a vehicle that designated drivers like me can actually drive. If you're looking for a hitch, call a cab. And no client or passenger is to ride in the shuttle vehicle. If that means more than one trip, so be it (as long as the owner is in the car for the whole ride). That does make sense, when you think about it. Use of the program normally involves consumption of alcohol, and too much of that carries certain consequences. The shuttles are generously provided for free by the local car dealers (they pay for the gas too), and returning a vehicle reeking of vomit is a very poor thank-you note.

These rules, and a couple of others, were spelled out to all of us early in the evening, as well as tips of how to deal with obnoxious clients.

It is a sad fact that people who have had too much to drink can sometimes be hard to deal with. On the other side, we were told such incidents are very rare. I have talked to many veterans of the program. I have heard lots of interesting anecdotes, but no horror stories. In the two nights I have volunteered, I have transported a grand total of 18 people. Without exception, they have been very polite and extremely appreciative that the program is available.

I picked up a few anecdotes Saturday night.

Being a member of Team 4, I knew we were going to be sent out on the fourth call that came in. Not surprisingly, there was a bit of down time, but lots to do. There were DVD movies being shown throughout the night, as well as plenty of food and munchies.

Simon was involved in what appeared to be a spirited game of euchre. I had brought my briefcase and laptop, so I was able to kill a bit of time typing paragraphs about a proposed plastic bottle manufacturing facility in SouthFields Village (please see page 1 of today's Citizen). Joan, myself and several other people on hand chatted amiably on a number of topics. I heard observations about the composition of the new Town council and the value of roundabouts, among other things.

Then our call came in, with the general announcement that it involved a 2015 Mercedes. Joan, Simon and I left the hall on our way to make ourselves useful. As designated driver, why did I get the feeling there were a lot of envious eyes on me? That's the proverbial luck of the draw.

How did it feel to drive such a new and prestigious automobile? I don't know. In the first place, there were so many switches, buttons, gadgets and toys facing me, I was intimidated as hell.

But I got the three passengers home with little fuss.

One of the other cars I got to drive that night was one that had been made and marketed in the United States, according to the client. I learned the implications the hard way.

Those folks were picked up in Palgrave, and as we headed south from the hamlet, I was bringing the speed up to 80, which is the posted limit on that stretch of Regional Road 50. As I approached 80, I was getting the feeling we were going a lot faster than we should have been. I looked at the speedometer again and saw the prominent numbers denoted miles per hour, with the kilometres in the smaller numbers (the opposite of what you and I are used to). Realizing that Caledon OPP has a reputation for having very little tolerance for what I was inadvertently doing (I was getting close to stunt driving), I slowed things drastically.

I subsequently learned that Simon had been a bit put out with what I was doing. Part of his job was to keep up with me, but part of my job was to not try and shake him.

Things all worked out well in the end.

Incidentally, each client I encountered made financial contributions in appreciation, and they will be going to a local cause involving young people.

Team 4 delivered nine people and three vehicles safely to their destinations Saturday night with lots of smiles all around, and the other teams had similar accomplishments to report.

I'm rather loathed to use this forum to blow my own horn, but it is a fact the volunteer component is an important part of this service, and as I stated above, organizers are appealing for more. Information on how to pitch in can be obtained at www.homejames-caledon.ca

The fact there are volunteers there to provide the service is only part of the benefit. Another important part is there are people in the community with the good sense to use it

