

Bill Rea ? HomeJames is great

There are some things in life that are full of positives.

And in such cases, it's hard to think of a downside.

I think the HomeJames program is one of them.

I ought to know. I've put in a couple of shifts over the last few years, volunteering for the program, the latest being Saturday night.

I'm very glad I did. True, I missed watching the Leafs beat up on the Kings 5-0. It was also very late before I got home; on the order of 3:10 a.m. But I also know I did some good in the community.

I helped a number of people make use of an alternate method of getting home after an evening partying and celebrating, other than trying to drive their own vehicles.

Home James is a program in which clients call a number (905-951-9000) evenings the service is operating and make arrangements for their vehicles, their passengers and their good selves to be delivered home in safety. Teams of three volunteers are dispatched to the pick-up location in a shuttle vehicle to collect the client. One person has the job of driving the client's vehicle, usually (not always) accompanied by another volunteer whose job it is to navigate. The third volunteer is at the wheel of the shuttle vehicle, who has the job of getting the team to the location, and getting the members back to base at Humber River Hall (the former Royal Canadian Legion hall) on Ann Street in Bolton when the job is done.

I drew the task of being the driver ? actually, I did a bit of lobbying in that direction. Knowing I would be writing something about the experience, I wanted to have as much interaction with the clients as possible. And if you're of the idea that I'm about to give away secrets, forget it. I had never met any of the clients or passengers I dealt with Saturday night. In most of the cases, what I do for a living came up in conversation. The first client I dealt with said he had seen my face before, but couldn't place where.

What I will say is the clients I encountered Saturday evening were much like those I've met during the previous occasions when I've volunteered for the program (Saturday was my fourth such evening, spanning the last couple of years). Without exception, I have dealt with very polite people, who were very (make that extremely) appreciative that the service is available.

Some of the clients I dealt with Saturday night clearly made the right decision when they called HomeJames. Others seemed to be in control, but then again, they alone were aware of how much booze they had consumed. Considering the hassles they could go through if they're tagged with even being marginally impaired (minimum three-day licence suspension and God knows where the car is towed to), the risk hardly seems worth the point.

Facts are facts. I'm a Caledon resident too. And I probably do a lot more driving around town than most of you. I have no desire to share the road with some person who might cross the centre line of the road and meet me head-on because he or she's had too much to drink.

Besides, volunteering for HomeJames is both interesting and fun. You get to meet a variety of interesting people and, if you happen to be the driver, try out different wheels. The first client my team had Saturday night (we were Team 10, of 13) was a Volkswagen Jetta. One reason why I figured I'd be a good choice for being a designated driver is I know how to drive a standard (every car I've ever bought has had a clutch). But this was the first time I had ever driven a six-speed stick. It took a bit of getting used to. I also got to drive a 2016 vehicle, along with quite a large pick-up truck. I'm generally not too fond of driving big vehicles, but the occasional experience is interesting. I still brag a bit about the fact that one of the shifts I volunteered for last year allowed me to drive a 2015 Mercedes.

There was some down time as we waited for the calls to come in. Team 10 was sent out on its first call at about 10:30 p.m. Saturday night, but there were lots of ways to pass the time. There was food and munchies at the hall, provided by Tim Hortons and Brooks Sports Bar and Lounge. There was a TV with movies being shown on DVDs, and there were a couple of rousing euchre games taking place. I had my brief case with me, and was a little surprised at the amount of work I was able to get done.

As expected, the bulk of the calls came late in the evening, as the festive parties were breaking up and the commercial establishments were starting to wind down. But once the calls really started, we all knew we were making a contribution, and few experiences are more rewarding.

True, I was tired when I got home, but I felt very satisfied.

The program ran 14 nights over the holidays last year, including New Year's Eve. There were 404 calls responded to over those 14 evenings, according to figures provided by program organizers, and volunteers travelled 12,753 kilometres and carried 903 passengers. Not surprisingly, New Year's Eve was the busiest night, with 71 calls. The 41 volunteers on deck that night travelled 2,239 kilometres to get 174 people home.

Over the 14 nights, there were a total of 386 volunteers, working out to an average of 27.6 people per shift.

The most important stat from last year was provided by Caledon OPP.

They reported last year there were no fatalities or injuries resulting from drinking and driving the nights HomeJames was operating. New Year's Eve promises to be another busy night, and volunteers are needed.

So organizers are planning a non-alcoholic party that night for the volunteers, before they get down to the business of getting people home safe.

Dinner will come from the neighbours at the Four Corners Bakery. Door prizes will include \$100 dollar gift cards from Garden Foods, oil changes and tire rotations from Active Green and Ross and Jiffy Lube, dining certificates from The Consulate and Symposium, a gift package from Home Depot and more.

HomeJames is a great program because it offers an enjoyable way to answer a need in the community, and to make a contribution. The people who volunteer are important to making it work, but equally important is the people who have the good sense to make use of it.

There are a couple of ways to sign up. It can be done by going to the website at www.homejames-caledon.ca, or by email to homejamescaledon@gmail.com

