

Bill Rea ? How to drive in the message

Sometimes, one just has to give their head a shake.

I was thinking such things last week when I saw a news item that indicated there's been an increase in the number of impaired driving cases dealt with by York Regional Police.

According to a press release from the police serving York, the number of charges that have been laid of late is 'alarming.' They report that between April 15 and May 15, 139 people were charged with offences dealing with driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. It has also been reported that 16 of those arrests were the result of traffic accidents. Another 107 of them were nabbed at Reduce Impaired Driving Everywhere (RIDE) spot checks. It's also nice to see that another 16 arrests occurred because concerned citizens spotted driving behaviour they thought was suspicious and called 9-1-1.

There was an interesting YouTube video making the rounds Friday, made by a person with a Dash cam in the car. It was travelling along Eglinton Avenue in Toronto near Leaside, where I used to work (part of that stretch of Eglinton was the route I used to take to and from the office every day). There was a man and woman in the car (it's not clear who was driving) and the vehicle they were following was being driven by a person who at least seemed to be impaired. The vehicle was doing almost a slalom course in its lane, took out some pylons and a temporary road sign, then crashed into another car. All the time, the man in the vehicle with the Dash cam was calling 9-1-1. He and the woman with him were keeping up a steady commentary on what they were seeing.

It should also be pointed out that these people were assuming they were watching the activities of an impaired driver. It is possible the strange driving was the result, for example, of some medical condition. But at least they were alerting the authorities, enabling them to do their jobs.

There is a school of thought that would say people should mind their own business. On the other hand, hazards on the public roadways are everyone's business. The people in this video acted appropriately, and so did the other 16 referred to by the police in York.

The scary part is the 139 figure coming from York represented just 30 days of activity. And those were the impaired drivers who were caught. How many more were able to complete their journeys without encountering the police or arousing suspicion? That figure mystifies me. It should mystify us all.

Granted, we're talking about York Region, but that's not too far from here. If you live in Bolton, then you're not too far from the municipal boundary with King Township, which is part of York. I ought to know. I edited a newspaper there for many years. Besides, there's a lot of commuter traffic crossing that municipal boundary. Many of you reading this would travel through King regularly to access Highway 400 (I did Saturday), and there's a lot going on in Caledon to attract people from King.

I also know that Caledon OPP is busy cracking down on impaired drivers.

I get a lot of press releases about how the local constabulary have apprehended another person driving under the influence, sometimes with the help of members of the public who have alerted them.

And there are spot checks. My job usually requires me to work late Tuesday nights, meaning it's not uncommon for me to be driving home around midnight. Twice in the last couple of months I have been stopped by spot checks enroute to my Sandhill area home.

No sweat. I had been working, not drinking. But it did tell me the local cops mean business.

Good on them!

I say that because it's clear there are a lot of people in York who don't seem to be getting the message that impaired driving is dangerous. And it doesn't make sense to think that people in York are all that different from people in Peel, or anywhere else, for that matter.

It also doesn't make sense that so many people don't seem to be getting the message. It certainly can't be the result of a lack of publicity on the issue of drinking and driving, because it draws tons of attention. In the last year, world-wide attention has been drawn to the tragedy that occurred in Vaughan, in which three beautiful children and their grandfather were killed by a drunk driver. The company for which I work covered that case, and owing to a shortage of bodies, I found myself volunteering to be in court to cover the victim-impact statements from the parents.

I think anyone who was in court to hear the words of Jennifer Neville-Lake (the children's mother) would almost certainly have vowed to think twice before ever getting behind the wheel with too many drinks in them. The experience was nothing short of gut-wrenching. The sounds of sniffing could be heard throughout the courtroom, and I confess I made a few contributions to that. It will be an experience no one who was there will ever be able to forget.

In my work, I have been able to see plenty of examples of what's wrong with drinking and driving. Indeed, the first night I was interning with a paper in Caledon, I followed a fire truck to the scene of a head-on crash. The 39-year-old father of two young girls

was driving home from work one Friday night and never made it. It was all because some kid had too much to drink before driving. There have been other such incidents that I have covered over the years, as well as other accounts I have heard or read about. Many of us take a drink, myself included. Indeed, in this very spot in the paper two weeks ago, I described my efforts (not terribly successful) to make a mint julep in honour of the Kentucky Derby. The one point that I didn't stress in that column is I waited until well into the evening before making the attempt. I was home for the night, was not planning to go out again. Thus the only real victim of my drinking at the time would have been my liver, and my taste buds (that was quite possibly my last mint julep). There are many ways to make sure you avoid driving if you've had more to drink than you should, such as finding other transportation, getting someone else to drive, finding some place to crash, etc. At certain times of the year, HomeJames is available. I've put in a number of shifts with the service. It's a lot of fun, and you know you're providing a valuable service. There are some who would argue the solution is to make the penalties harsher. I don't think that's the answer. A person caught drinking and driving now is in for one hell of a mess. If they haven't got the message now, I'm having trouble figuring out what more sanctions are going to accomplish. Maybe introduce them the families of people who have been killed by impaired drivers. That might help.

