

Comment ? Experiencing HomeJames from the inside

By Bill Rea

If nothing else, I can be resourceful.

Facing the advent of a couple of days of downtime, and little on TV apart from a James Bond movie, I found something to do the night of the last Friday before Christmas (Dec. 20) that was interesting, enjoyable, informative, etc. There are a whole lot of other positive words that might be applicable. It was also a good and useful contribution. As well, I helped a few people avoid getting themselves into some serious trouble.

True, it wasn't the easiest evening I have ever spent. For one thing, it went well past my bedtime. I am now of the age when one has to give me a very good reason to stay up much later than 10 p.m., and it's not uncommon to find me in bed before 9.

But there were plenty of benefits too.

They included driving some pretty interesting vehicles, including a new Honda product and a 2012 Dodge Ram pick-up truck (I think it was my very first experience with four-wheel drive). I also got to spend some time in the company of four lovely young ladies, as well as a couple of other interesting people. And it was all on the proverbial 'up and up.'

By now, many in the community are aware of the HomeJames program, and the more who know about it, the better. There have been signs promoting it at the sides of roads all over town, and the Citizen has been offering a lot of plugs too, with good reason. Essentially, the program helped people who had been out celebrating the holidays and had maybe overdone it when it came to consumption of alcohol. HomeJames is designed to get these people, as well as their passengers and their vehicles home. It's non-judgemental, and all done by volunteers, with help from sponsors and contributions from numerous local businesses, but more about that presently.

I know a lot more about it from the volunteer perspective now because that is exactly how I spent the Friday night in question. I have written numerous stories for the paper about the program, but I decided it was time to experience it from the other side.

There is a registration process involved in volunteering for the program that has to be addressed a couple of days in advance. I was obliged to fill out a form, as well as provide certain documents, like my driver's licence and car insurance info. And then I had to show up. As things turned out, I was one of the first on hand for the shift that night, meaning I was assigned to Team 1.

The way the program works is people phone the dispatch number if they need assistance. And a team of three is sent out to offer the needed service from the base, which is in the building that used to be occupied by the Bolton branch of the Royal Canadian Legion. The team consists of a driver, who's responsible for actually driving the client's car and carrying all the passengers. I was named the driver of my team. The other team members are the shuttle driver, who is in charge of the shuttle vehicle (they are generously provided by local car dealers) and the navigator. There are some pretty strict rules too. For example, none of the clients or the passengers are allowed to ride in the shuttle vehicle. That makes sense, since a person who needs such a service might have problems associated with drunkenness. If you're going to barf, do it in your own vehicle, not a generously donated one.

My teammates for the evening were Al Williams as shuttle driver and navigator Diane Sawyer.

As I said, I arrived early for my shift. Stan Janes, who heads up the program, needed some volunteers to help him collect the shuttle vehicles from the various dealerships, so I raised my hand, and that's how I got to drive the new Honda.

It's been almost five years since I last did any car shopping, and the gadgets in the new vehicles border on being frightening. Keyless entry is something I have learned to deal with, and even appreciate. But I'm still too much in the old school that I expect to put a key into the ignition and turn it to get the engine to start. I'm not used to the new systems. I spent most of the drive back down into the valley being intimidated.

Then we waited for the calls to come in.

There were about eight teams, including people who have volunteered lots of times, and a contingent from the Rotary Club of Palgrave. There was lots of food and drink and munchies (no booze, of course), a movie disk was being shown, and I saw a couple of spirited games of euchre and backgammon going on. Baffo's supplied the food and Tim Hortons furnished the coffee.

As Team 1, we got our first call shortly before 10 p.m., and it required a lengthy trip to the northwest reaches of the Town of Caledon. The fact that I know where Shaw's Creek Road is proved to be something of a benefit to the team. Always have the local newspaper editor handy, because he (or she) can get you into the farthest reaches, and out again.

It took a while to get there, however (road conditions weren't the greatest, and we all know they got worse in the days that followed).

The clients turned out to be three very polite, well-spoken young men. I think that episode underscored one of the best parts of the program. It's great that HomeJames is available, but it's even better that people out there have the good sense to use it.

So hats off to these three guys for letting common sense govern their actions.

By the time the evening ended, the team had handled three calls and got nine people home safe. Without exception, these nine people were very polite and appreciative that the program was available. And they all offered financial contributions to the program, which goes back to the community.

There have been too many of us who have been impacted by the negative side of drinking and driving. This coming February is going to mark 30 years since I started actually working in this business, and the first night was memorable because I followed a fire truck to the scene of a fatal traffic accident. A 39-year-old father of two was killed by a kid who had a couple of beers before getting into a car and driving it.

It's really nice to be able to be part of the other side of story.

The program's success is due to a lot of factors, including the organizers, volunteers and the businesses who support the effort through furnishing food and drink and vehicles.

And like I stated above, it's also a benefit that there are people with the good sense to use it.



Team 1 for HomeJames Dec. 20 consisted of Al Williams, Diane Sawyer and Bill Rea. Photo by Melissa Cochrane