

Angela cleans the streets of Acton

Riding in a snow plow

Dan Hillier comes for the snow. "I'm old school. I want to do the best job I can. I want the streets to be plowed and looking good."

Dan, is the man who plows Acton's streets. He'll be 58 years old in June. He's a husband, father, grandfather and retired Town of Halton Hills employee since 2001 but returns to Acton from his new home in his native Newfoundland every November to plow snow for the Town. He takes the job seriously. As he says, "people's lives are in our hands."

Dan started with the former Town of Acton in 1974. He was hired by Alf Duby and his first job was in Fairview Cemetery where John Dunn handed him a lawn mower and a gas can and told him to start cutting grass. Since then he has done a lot including being a garbage man for the town. Now, Dan is part of the town's dayshift where 15 Town staff maintains 896.8 kilometers of road.

Dan's day started at 3:25 a.m. when he got called in for plowing. I was lucky. I got the call at 5:38 a.m. "Are you ready to go for a ride?" asks Bob Clark, Dan's supervisor for the day. I told him I was and he had a truck in Acton, ready to pick me up. I had a date with a snow plow in 15 minutes.

It was a good day to ride. The day before we had got about 10 centimeters of snow and overnight there was freezing rain. It would be a hard plow for the guys. Dan's ideal snow plow day would consist of at least 20 centimeters of snow without the freezing rain. When he picked me up, he was already running late. The truck had blown a hydraulic line at the bottom of Silvercreek hill. He had to return to get a clamp and start all over again.

His first job of the day was to do the Acton salt routes. Following that, and plowing, he would return to the works yard on Trafalgar Road to get sand to do the sand routes. The only sand and/or salt "camp" in Halton Hills is at the Trafalgar works yard. Depending on where in Halton Hills you are, it could easily take an hour to leave where you are, get your new load and get back to where you were.

Right now Dan is in angst. His truck is in for non-scheduled repairs. A problem for snow plows. The wear and tear on the machines usually means at any given time, the Town has two plows in for a problem. His truck, #218, a single axle truck, is the Town's oldest at 14 years but it is his baby. He truly loves it. He mentioned several times how he can spin the plow and work magic. He needs that magic when he enters Acton's



By
Angela Tyler

downtown core. The streets are narrow, parked cars are a nuisance and with the reconstruction and parameters of the commercial end of Mill Street, other Town plow drivers don't want to come to Acton.

"They should be training somebody. All the young guys like the rurals because they can get their torque and speed up," Dan says, noting that he's not sure how much longer he wants to keep doing this. He takes it a year at a time.

He has confidence, patience and experience, all of which are needed with dealing with the numerous headaches plow drivers have to deal with every minute of their shift. Now, he has truck #228. The driver from the midnight shift left him with hardly any washer fluid, a necessity especially for plow trucks. Most people would be upset. He just rolls with the punches. The truck he is using is more modern and has more features, but the controls are different from what he is used to and the clutch works completely opposite to his #218. His likes higher revs; this one needs them low and slow. With the replacement truck, he figures he is running an hour later than what he normally would.

I was on a ride-a-long with a town snow plow. I wanted to know what they go through on a daily basis. When I started thinking about it, they have more than the snow to deal with. After 25 years of plowing Acton, Dan is a seasoned pro. He had been through it all. Of course I asked the obvious questions about cars and traffic. Then I asked how he felt about garbage pick-up day.

"It's brutal. I hate it when

the garbage cans are out," he says. (This coming from a former garbage man.) He says he tries to avoid them but with everyone leaving their garbage cans at the road, it makes his job more challenging.

By then we were on John Street. It was like a roller coaster weaving in and out of the obstacles from hydro poles to parked cars. "They put that pole too close to the road," he offers. I look out towards the wing plow. "Don't be nervous now," he encourages me. I wasn't scared but I was concerned.

Asking him how many rural mail boxes he may have knocked over during the years, Dan says he has never demolished anybody's mailbox. "You know, the wing driver is responsible for anything I hit."

Nice try, Dan, but I was not responsible for you clearing out a vehicle, a mailbox or anything. He has a smirk on his face. "Next time when you are bored, you can come out with me with my truck (#218) and I'll teach you to drive." He had no idea that I don't know how to drive a standard.

It is absolutely mind boggling. He has 14 plow controls to operate while managing six mirrors, a standard transmission, traffic, the computer which tells him about his sand or salt load, weather and a nuisance of a reporter. I could almost feel his aching shoulders and arms as I watch him. He tells me that although the Town has looked at automatic transmissions they choose to purchase standards to save on fuel. It is unbelievable how many controls he has to operate not to mention blowing the air horn to either thank drivers for giving him courtesies or to summon drivers to move out of his way.

"Elgin and Frederick Streets are rough," he told me. I didn't totally understand until we got there. It was really narrow. I had no idea how he could get the plow through let alone the



A BREEZE: Narrow streets and parked cars challenge plow drivers downtown Acton. - Angela Tyler photo

wing. "You have to spin the wing and the plow," he says. Before I had time to worry about that I noticed there was a parked car barely a few feet ahead. Somehow he managed to deke around the car and manage the corner at the same time. He never flinched.

Off to Kingham. I thought it would be a worse nightmare than garbage day. Dan's take on it all was... "do what you can." When we got to Storey Drive we came upon an SUV that had been there for a while. He knew the truck well. "Do you report it?" I asked. He said sometimes he does as he plowed around it. Before I knew it, the other plow driver, a sort of relief driver for Dan in Acton was on the radio. Swack, as Dan calls him, was Brad Swackhamer. Brad's dad, Don, was a Town employee for years before he retired, doing the same things his son does now.

Brad was on the two-way radio telling his dispatch about the SUV. Brad doesn't have the same "old schoolism." He calls in to report the vehicles. I was thinking at the time, I would report them too. It was at a corner and a huge obstacle.

Between the two of them, they figured out what areas where Dan needed help. Brad had to go back to the yard to get sand. Dan was going to continue with salt to finish the load even though he had finished all his designated salt routes. Dan was lucky. His bosses knew he was experienced and trusted him to do what was necessary.

We soon meet up with Brad who told Dan to follow him out Highway 7 towards Georgetown as the road was really bad. "I'll "suck the guts" out of it and you can come behind," he said. I didn't know what suck the guts meant until I realized Brad was basically in the turning lane driving, spreading snow and slush towards the shoulder while Dan fol-

lowed behind pushing the remainder into the ditch.

The idea of a salt route is to lay the salt in the middle of the road. The traffic, although late as it was a weekend, would spread the salt over the road and the ice and snow would start to melt. The plan was working. We were beginning to see asphalt.

It was then we returned to the works yard to get a load of sand. We get a call from Swack saying Highway 7 to Trafalgar Road is really slick. Snow plows, although large, can easily become a victim of winter roads, especially when they don't have a load of salt or sand. Dan tells me more than once he has had the back end of his truck lift off the road with the weight of the plow and the wing at the front. He also tells me if you lift the wing too fast it can come up and break the side mirror or even window. Since I was sitting on the wing side, I was hoping he remembered that every time he lifted the wing.

On the way to the yard, there was an all-call on the radio for anyone in the 6th Line area. The hill north of the highway was icy and it needed attention. Dan calls in and says he still has a bit of salt left and can do it. He tells me that even though it is not his assigned route, he always tries to do the hill when he is coming from Georgetown to Acton to start the day.

At the yard, I was surprised when Dan had to load his own load of sand or salt. I just assumed that the Town had someone assigned to do that. Plow drivers are definitely multi-task employees.

When we returned to Acton, Dan started to do the side streets of the downtown core. "We're going to go around." He tells me, "A lot of accidents happen when you back up. It may take a few extra minutes, but it is better." With that we are doing loops around the streets, almost like a figure eight. Not only does he have to be care-

ful of the obvious obstacles such as pedestrians, traffic and hydro poles, we now have to contend with patched pavement from watermain repairs and gas covers in the road.

"When you have three inches of snow, you don't know what's under there," he says. As we do figure eights, he tells me common sense things that somehow I never really thought about. "Everything needs to be planned so you do a nice job," such as when leaving a side street you need to turn right onto the next road, so the snow goes towards the curb, not into the middle of the street.

We're doing it all. Ten years ago he tells me, Acton had two trucks tending the roads and smaller trucks looking after the cul-de-sacs and dead-end roads. Now, the one truck is doing it all.

By then we were dropping 1100 kilograms of sand every kilometer. The driver can adjust the amount of sand or salt. When it is freezing rain, they up the dosage to 5,000 kilograms per kilometer. The newer trucks like the one Swack was driving, a tandem axle, are able to spread salt, sand and/or calcium.

We pulled over for a minute and he hands me his clipboard and asks me to mark down the time we finished that particular street. "We have to do it, but doing paperwork means that I'm not plowing." He's a bit disgruntled about the paperwork because he wants to plow, bureaucracy is an annoyance but a necessity. "I've been through the courts... you have to have all this stuff documented now."

Things that stop Dan from plowing frustrate him yet at the same time, he just lives with them. On Cameron St. we have to wait for people to move their cars. "Sometimes they just wait in their house and look out the window at me instead of moving their cars," he says. On Hillcrest

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STILL GOING: Dan Hillier is still smiling after six hours of plowing snow roads. - Angela Tyler photo