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COMMUNITY

Volunteers have vital role with Halton police

By Howard Mozel
 SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION

All the people featured in this story who volunteer with the Halton Regional Police Service hail from a wide variety of backgrounds, but you'll quickly notice they have one thing in common: a desire to give back to their communities.

Some — like Georgetown husband and wife team Bill and Karen Gerrie — were so impressed with Halton police after being involved in a car accident that they responded to a newspaper ad for help with the Communities on Phone Patrol (COPP) program.

Bill McHugh, on the other hand, had already served his country as an RCMP officer and member of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), but in his retirement he still felt strongly about doing more. Today, he staffs the Acton Store Front, a satellite police office where he helps the public with minor incidents and queries.

"These are all quality people from the community who care and want to help," said Insp. Bob Percy, commander of Community Policing Support, referring to the roughly 170 people who volunteer with everything from Victims' Services to the Auxiliary Unit. (That number also includes the Police Chorus and Pipes and Drums.)

The volunteers range in age from their twenties to over 80, a fact that gratifies Percy since new blood is as essential as life experience in order to keep the individual programs vibrant.

These initiatives include the Victim Services Unit (VSU), started in 1984, which provides immediate emotional support and community referrals to victims of crime and tragedy.

For Jack Elms, who retired four years ago, VSU in Burlington provides the perfect way for him to give back. Not content with fundraising or committee work, Elms said his contributions to VSU are anything but arm's length.

"It is phenomenally rewarding," said Elms, whose son is a Halton Regional Police Tactical Rescue Unit officer and former VSU volunteer. "I'm working for someone at perhaps their darkest moment. I think it makes a huge difference."

Thoroughly trained Victim Services volunteers are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, responding immediately to crisis situations. They work off a rotating weekly schedule, taking turns being the primary person with the rest acting as back-up. The volunteers — 36 as of March — work a minimum three hours a week and schedules are



MAKING A DIFFERENCE: Halton Regional Police volunteers, from left, Stu Johnston (Nassagaweya and Milton community policing committees), Jack Elms (Burlington Victims' Services Unit), Karen and Bill Gerrie of Georgetown COPP and Victims' Services Unit, Tina Small (Auxiliary Unit) and Budd Brown (Oakville Senior Call Back) make a difference in their communities.

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very flexible, although many will put in 15 to 20 hours a week.

In 2005, VSU volunteers donated 3,008 hours providing assistance to 3,306 victims with everything from grief and bereavement, domestic and sexual assault and safety planning to senior abuse, court issues and addiction.

Although he admitted crisis calls are "tough work," Elms encouraged anyone thinking of volunteering to explore the possibilities of VSU.

"It's exciting work too," he added.

The Auxiliary Policing Unit, operational since 1989, is comprised of trained civilian volunteers who, as Auxiliary officers, are used to supplement the activities of police officers at events such as fall fairs, Christmas parades and other large-scale events like the Sound of Music in Burlington, Oakville Waterfront Festival and the Around the Bay Road Race. Auxiliary members often accompany frontline officers on patrol during weekends and together the unit averages 5,000 volunteer hours annually.

"The Auxiliary Unit is an extremely valuable program to the Halton Regional Police Service," remarked Percy. "The civilian volunteer members are highly motivated and maintain an annual training regimen equal to our sworn members. Without the unit's dedication and response many of our community events and festivals would not be possible."

Based on her respect for police and a willingness to help out, Halton Hills stay-at-home-mom Tina Small joined the Auxiliary last August and is now a constable.

"They are a wonderful group of people to work with," she said.

Small admits that danger is a possibility but that the public expects you to be there for them.

"All the training prepares us," she added, explaining that for 99 per cent of their time on duty they work closely with a full-time officer. Use of force training also helps ensure safety.

As of March, the Auxiliary Unit had 38 volunteers with four recruits in training. (Its

authorized strength is 50.) In 2005, unit members spent 2,500 hours at 105 events and donated 5,539 total hours to the service.

"The Auxiliary is an excellent opportunity to learn about policing, especially for anyone thinking of becoming a police officer," said Small.

With COPP, which started in 1997, volunteers patrol assigned areas in their district and report by cell phone any criminal or suspicious activity they see. They don't, however, involve themselves in any way.

Not only have the volunteers helped police discover crimes in progress, such as break-ins to cars, they have assisted in helping search for missing persons and helped out at many annual police community events. In 2005, 68 volunteers donated 4,191 hours.

The Gerries, who have been COPP volunteers for several years, enjoy doing something together while helping out in their community. In that role they have reported potential security breaches and been called

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Tuesday, April 25	Wednesday, April 26	Thursday, April 27	Friday, April 28	Saturday, April 29	Sunday, April 30	Monday, May 1
1:00pm SportsZONE Live	1:00pm Halton Hills Council Apr 24	12:00pm Swap Talk	1:00pm Halton Region Council	6:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	6:00pm Halton Region Council Apr 24	1:00pm Halton Region Council Apr 24
5:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	6:00pm The Bottom Line	1:00pm Milton Hills Council Apr 24	5:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA		8:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	8:00pm SportsZONE Live
6:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	6:30pm - 8:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA	6:00pm Living Healthy	6:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA			9:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA
6:30pm Optimist TV Bingo	8:00pm Swap Talk	7:00pm The Bottom Line				
7:30pm Plugged In! EXTRA	9:00pm Milton Hills Council Apr 24	7:30pm - 9:00pm Plugged In! EXTRA				
8:00pm Auto Experts	11:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA	9:00pm Halton Region Council				
9:00pm Halton Hills Council Apr 24		10:30pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA				
11:00pm - Midnight Plugged In! EXTRA						