

Carey Smith stepping down from media relations post

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media conference complete with interviews with the victim upon the accused's arrest.

The media however found themselves not able to print much for fear of jeopardizing the accused's right to a fair trial. The accused later pleaded guilty to most of the charges against him but the police found themselves the butt of criticism and received a rap on the knuckles from the presiding judge.

Sgt. Smith said that might be one of the things he would do differently, looking back on his job. Another stumbling block is the lack of media attention the police have been able to draw to one of the newest proactive policing methods — that of community consultation committees, groups of police, business and resident representatives that operate in particular neighbourhoods across Halton.

But Sgt. Smith is not only respected by local media contacts, he is now a well-known figure to the Toronto media as well as that from across Canada and into the Buffalo area.

Much of the media attention came about because of the high-profile "tragedy" cases but Sgt. Smith says additional media attention has never gone away.

When Sgt. Smith stepped into the shoes of media relations officer, part of his job was to facilitate communications with the community and monitor the public's perception of the police. Sgt. Smith was initial-

ly involved in promoting STEP (Selective Traffic Enforcement Programs) and TRACE (Targeted Response Accomplished Through Cycling Enforcement) and other proactive police programs.

"I've given up trying to monitor the newspapers," said Sgt. Smith, admitting now students help to do the job. In fact just about the only "community" oriented job Sgt. Smith has retained is that of the annual citizens awards night. Sheridan College co-op students now even have the job of compiling the annual report.

"What changed? It started with Nina de Villiers (a Burlington teen who went missing and was later found dead of a gunshot in water off the 401). This area was catapulted to the forefront of media attention overnight," said Sgt. Smith.

"I went from regularly dealing with a dozen news agencies to dealing with a minimum of 50, regularly, and those news agencies haven't left us," said Sgt. Smith.

According to the sergeant, not only did the de Villiers murder occur but so too did the disappearance of Leslie Mahaffy of Burlington and the finding of missing St. Catharines teen Kristen French's body locally.

"There were a lot of topical crimes too like the GO train sexual assault. Because the media was already here they realized this was a whole new

venue of news. The large media outfits from Toronto never left," he said, adding, "This is a whole field of news ripe for the picking so they never left."

Now the Halton police media relations bureau gets between 50 and 100 media enquiries each day. "Before it was less than half of that," said Sgt. Smith, admitting one day during one of the big cases, his office took 800 calls — and only those media outfits who could send a reporter in person got their information.



"The job has changed from a P.R. man who dealt with the media to a media officer who deals with the media full-time and occasionally does other P.R. functions," said Sgt. Smith.

For Sgt. Martin coming into the job, there are challenges.

Sgt. Smith spells them out, firstly that Halton has grown over the past year.

"We've got Toronto-style crime happening here," he said. Another is the recession. Sgt. Smith said the recession has claimed several Halton area newspapers while others are operating with much smaller editions than in the past. The officer notes clearly that there's also a clear distinction between news and publicity, the latter coming with a price tag.

But on the bigger picture Halton is being seen. CBC's Market Place has

done a show on the Halton Police and Constable Garry Coles of TRACE was on Canada-AM, as was Sgt. Smith himself.

Sgt. Smith says that U.S. television shows like Rescue 911 and COPS have approached Halton.

"We're still not big enough to warrant a whole episode (on COPS)," said Sgt. Smith, adding shifts here just aren't busy enough, yet. And the officer laughs when he relates how it's been suggested for reporters to ride along in the police helicopter for a night. "As if we had one," he says.

The notoriety has been fun for Sgt. Smith and he's met people he can now call friend, he points to Nina de Villiers' mother Priscilla. The officer said many people recognize his name and he's had the experiences of people in shopping malls relating to him Camaro licence plate numbers.

"One of the things I really liked about the job was probably the monument to the fact that the media and the police can work together," said Sgt. Smith, going as far as to say that the police probably

wouldn't be nearly as effective as they are without the media. "I honestly believe in that," he said.

"It's important to have the media on your side," said the police officer, noting however that the same media is not in the police pocket, and is the first one to deliver a shot.

Sgt. Smith looks to the community papers as important because he says they're read "cover to cover" and their readers can help unravel local occurrences.

Being close up to major investigations has to some degree fuelled Sgt. Smith's interest in criminal investigation.

"During the big ones (cases) I was always part of the briefings. I would be watching the detectives in their briefings, mapping out strategies," said Sgt. Smith.

The officer is also looking forward to dealing with more than just one entity, reporters, to what he calls a "whole spectrum" of people including the victim, the accused, the Crown Attorney, the judicial system and other agencies like the Rape Crisis Centre and the Children's Aid Society.



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