

REGIONAL AFFAIRS: Snowmobiler wasn't drinking in fatal crash, his Bradford family says

Mom on crusade after son's death

BY LISA QUEEN
STAFF WRITER

Jimmy Purnell was a popular young man who loved to have a good time with his friends, including swigging back a beer or two.

But there was one thing he just wouldn't do — mix drinking with driving. He'd learned about the deadly results as a student a couple of years earlier, during a presentation at Bradford District High School.

That's what makes his death all the more tragic, say his devastated parents, Jim and Mary Purnell.

On Jan. 24, 1998, Jimmy was killed in a head-on snowmobile collision at Soldier's Bay on the Holland River. He was 20. Jimmy, a couple of buddies and Dave Hibbitt, a 38-year-old neighbour who lived two doors down from the Purnells, had spent the afternoon snowmobiling.

They were taking one last run before calling it a day. But something went terribly wrong. Hibbitt and Jimmy smashed into each other and were thrown from their machines.

Jimmy slammed head first into Hibbitt's chest. He died of a broken neck, while Hibbitt died of massive internal injuries.

Toxicology results showed Hibbitt had 1-1/2 times the legal limit of alcohol in his body when he died.

But Jim and Mary had to wait nine months for the results of Jimmy's tests, which proved what they had always known in their hearts — Jimmy hadn't had a drop to drink.

Mary has pieced together what happened from police reports and eyewitness accounts.

"They were calling it a day. They were calling it quits because of Dave's condition. He was being silly and everything like that. They just had one more run and this hap-

pened," she said.

"We're not saying Jimmy never drank but he was very opposed to drinking and driving."

Believing something positive has to come out of her son's death, Mary now wants to start a Bradford chapter of Against Drunk Drivers and take an anti-drinking and driving campaign to local high schools.

After all, that's where Jimmy learned the message. But Mary's crusade will have a different twist.

While most anti-drunk driving programs are geared to cars, Mary wants people to be aware of the deadly mix of alcohol and recreational activities.

It can be just as fatal to mix booze with snowmobiling, boating, dirt biking or dozen of other activities.

Jim and Mary also hosted the second annual Jimmy Purnell memorial birthday bash in honour of what would have been his 22nd birthday.

Money raised from last year's party, held just a month after Jimmy's death, is being used to paint a mural downtown.

"I sometimes question and wonder why (he had to die), especially when there are people like Paul Bernardo. Why do you have to take Jimmy? Why can't you take a scum bum like him?"

Funds from this year's bash will be used for a community project in Jimmy's memory. Jim and Mary are toying with the idea of buying playground equipment for a park.

They insist they can't let Jimmy's memory die.

"I can't lose my son. There has to be a reason. They say there's a reason for everything," Mary said.

"I sometimes question and wonder why (he had to die), especially when there are people like Paul Bernardo. Why do you have to take Jimmy? Why can't you take a scum bum like him?"

Jim and Mary know their son wasn't perfect but he was a special young man.

"Jimmy was friends with absolutely everybody. Young and old," Jim said. "It's not fair. Only the good die young. How many times have you heard that?"

Mary agreed her son was unique.

"With Jimmy, you could meet him once and it felt like you knew him your whole life. He just had that special way about him. Everybody was special to him in some way, regardless of who you were."

She remembers her son picking up a young hitchhiker, who explained before falling asleep in Jimmy's truck that he had travelled north to see his mother. But the woman turned the teenager away.

Although Jimmy was only going as far as Bradford, he ended up driving the sleeping youth to downtown Toronto and buying him breakfast before returning home.

B.J. Babin, Jimmy's best friend, was snowmobiling with Jimmy, Hibbitt and Hibbitt's brother-in-law Ralph Kinsella when the collision occurred.

He held Jimmy in his arms, unable to do anything but wipe the blood from his nose as his friend died.

"At (Jimmy's) funeral, there were more people there than at some Stones concerts. This guy knew more people than you could shake a stick at," said Babin, also a friend of Hibbitt and Kinsella.

"He was always doing something. He hardly ever slept. His exact words were, 'There will be plenty of time to sleep when you're dead'."

Babin has had a difficult time dealing with his best friend's death.

"He wants to get the message out there, 'Don't let your friends drink and drive,' because nobody should go through what he went through, seeing your friend die in your arms," Jim said.

Jimmy's parents and brother Bob are also having trouble coping with the loss. "You feel you're going on and people see you going on," Mary said.

"But it's on the outside. You feel like you should walk around carrying a sign saying, 'I'm still grieving'."

But the Purnells stress they don't hate Hibbitt.

"I have no hatred toward Dave," Mary said.

"But I just don't understand why. Why did this have to happen?"

"He (Hibbitt) paid the ultimate price," Jim added. "I blame bad luck. We would have been angry if Dave had lived, but we have no one to be angry at."

Jim and Mary hope the anti-drunk driving campaign and memorial birthday bash will keep Jimmy's memory alive.

"One of my biggest fears is I'm afraid people are going to forget him," but people keep saying you can't forget him," Mary said.

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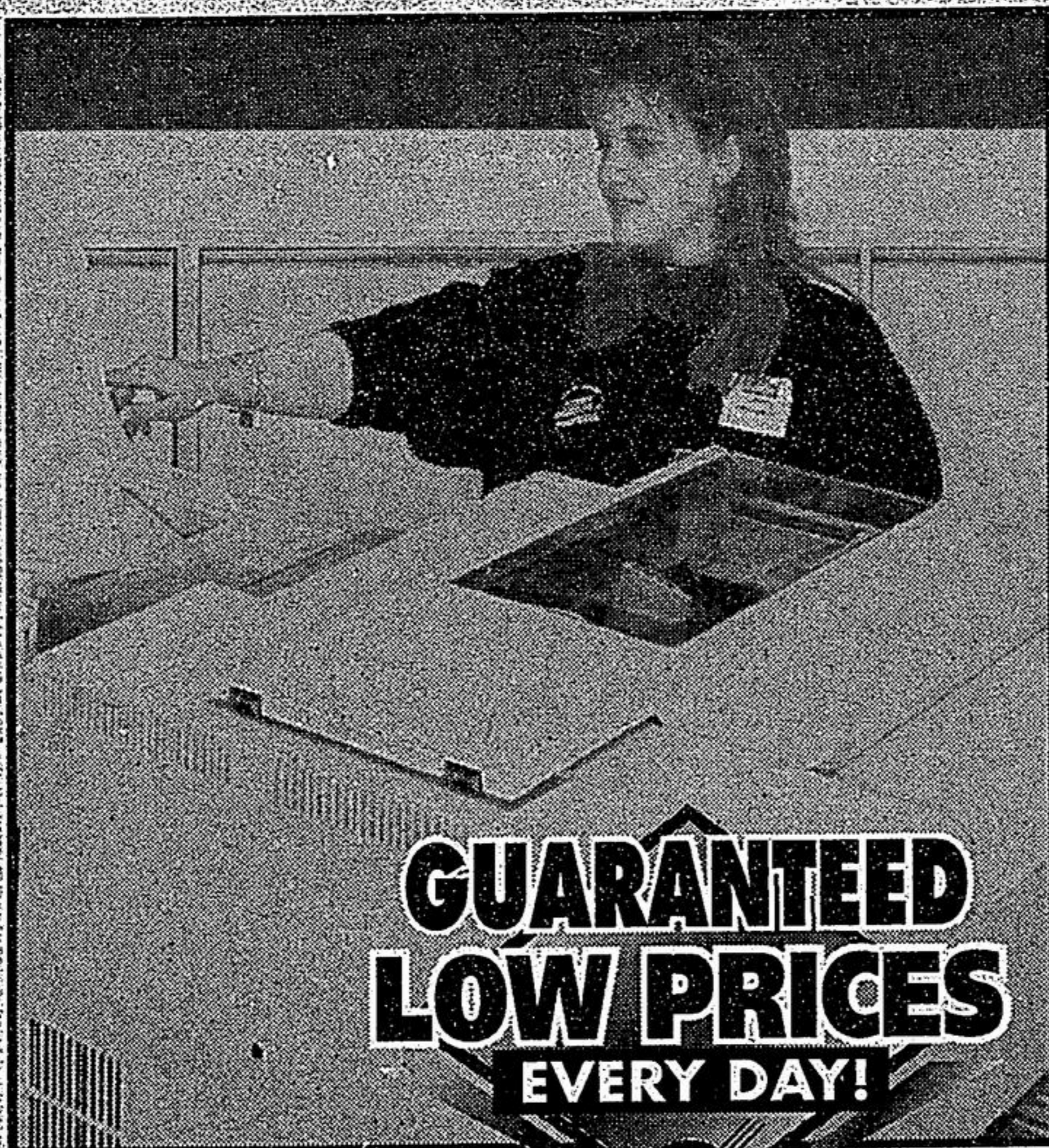
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