

Bomb threat defused by award-winning dispatchers

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

The calls came in as a police dispatcher's worst nightmare.

An intoxicated, enraged man threatening to blow up the Hospital for Sick Children.

One call after another, each one escalating in its threat of violence.

Because the man was dialing 911 from a cellular phone, the calls were impossible to trace.

York Regional Police's D-platoon handled the man's calls, which began at 2:29 a.m. March 21, 1999.

Dispatchers tried desperately to calm him down, assess the danger and plead with him not to carry out his threat to blow up the world-renowned children's hospital.

They alerted Toronto's emergency response team and continued fielding the man's calls.

Then he made a fortunate mistake. He called from a conventional phone.

Dispatchers traced the calls to a Markham hotel. Officers descended on the room and arrested the man, who, as it turned out, had no weapons.

"It was a high-risk take-down at a hotel room," Staff Sgt. Greg Olson said.

"If he hadn't been stupid enough to use the phone, he would have had us running all night."

Olson and police Chief Bob Middaugh presented the dispatchers

Kathy Sparks, Rob Fraser, Leann Russell, Pauline MacAdam, Dawn Young and Marlene Summers — with an award for outstanding performance by a platoon at the third annual emergency response communications awards at York Region headquarters Tuesday afternoon.

The awards, given to police, fire and ambulance dispatchers, were presented to the unsung heroes of emergency teams — the people behind the scenes who co-ordinate the response by officers, paramedics and firefighters.

"Thank you for your quality service to the front-line workers," Middaugh said.

Newmarket Fire Chief John Molyneux, regional fire co-ordinator, agreed dispatchers don't often get the recognition they deserve.

"I want to truly give to you our heartfelt thanks for the work you do. Often, the (crews) out on the road receive the accolades, but we couldn't do our job without you."

However, the awards again highlighted the problems cell phones pose



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

The tri-service communicators of York Region were recognized at regional headquarters Tuesday for outstanding service. Winning in the fire department category from Markham were (from left) Chris Lawton as call taker of the year, Nick Webb as dispatcher of the year and Mike Gottlieb for outstanding platoon performance.

for dispatchers, who have no way of tracing where the call is coming from if the caller doesn't give his location.

But Markham Councillor Gord Landon, chairperson of the region's 911 operating committee, called cell phones both a blessing and a curse.

While they allow witnesses to an emergency to call for help immediately, Landon admitted they are impossible to track down.

Other award recipients included:

• Jackie Wrigglesworth, who won the award for police dispatcher of the year. She handled communication in a bizarre series of calls that came in as a murder, attempted suicide and car accident.

Melissa Pajkowski, 21, of Thornhill, was found murdered with a bullet in her head in her ex-boyfriend's Jeep on Bathurst Street in Newmarket last April after the vehicle collided head-on with a pick-up truck.

Her estranged boyfriend, Peter Morrissey of Richmond Hill, was dis-

covered in the driver's seat suffering from a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

• Janel Perron, who won the award for ambulance dispatcher of the year. He handled communications following a Dec. 21 fiery head-on crash that killed two drivers on Hwy. 9 between Keele and Jane streets. Perron took numerous calls from witnesses reporting the accident.

• Markham fire dispatchers Mike Gottlieb and Nick Webb, who stick-handled fire and other town calls during a severe snow storm New Year's Day 1999.

• Markham fire dispatcher Chris Lawton and police call taker Lisa Cummins, for ongoing professionalism in their duties.

• Charmaine Emberley, who took home the award for ambulance call-taker of the year. On Feb. 8, 1999, she received a call from an elderly Aurora woman whose husband was suffering a heart attack. She calmed the woman while dispatching paramedics.



Joan Ransberry

Treat violence with care, not fear

Erring on the side of caution will take on a special meaning in a Toronto school tomorrow morning.

Parents are scared. Most will keep their kids home from Oakwood Collegiate after learning that a threatening message was found scribbled in a washroom.

"If you thought Columbine was bad, just wait," the message said, suggesting Friday was hit day. The reference to the massacre in Colorado a year ago is unnerving.

A rumour of a gun being found recently in a locker at Sutton District High School reminded parents that living in the country is no guarantee of safety, while last week, two 18-year-old males and a 15-year-old girl were arrested in connection with a school brawl in Thornhill.

The melee at Thornhill Secondary School injured four, attracted dozens of cops and has damaged the school's reputation. This fight involved a baseball bat, while rumours circulated that a knife and gun were also involved.

At the same time, the Wamback family of Newmarket are left feeling cheated by the justice system. While the Wambacks fight to reform the Young Offenders Act, three youths are getting ready for a date with a judge. Originally charged with attempted murder, the charges were reduced to aggravated assault.

Last June, Jonathan Wamback was beaten to a pulp. In a coma for three months, the 15-year-old is now brain damaged and faces a life-long struggle, while those responsible will likely be free in about two years, if they're convicted. Of course, there's no justice in this.

The Wambacks have launched a country-wide advertising campaign designed to get Canadians on side. I wish the Wambacks mission would make bad kids improve and consequently make our neighbourhoods safe. If reforming the Young Offenders Act was the answer, we'd all be on side. It's just isn't that simple.

However, the Wambacks are proving that ordinary Canadians can make the rest of the country stand up and take notice.

Perhaps we're not all going to hell in a hand basket. The province has just invested \$20 million in mental health services for children. If directed properly, the money can treat the kids that write and utter death threats, the kids that put guns in school lockers, the kids that beat babies, other teens and old ladies and then leave them for dead, the kids that carry knives and guns and the kids that brawl.

Most of these kids are goofs. All of them are sick — they're mentally ill. They're a danger to themselves and to others.

The kick-ass approach is tempting. And, tossing offenders in jail and throwing away the key is an expected knee-jerk reaction to a horrible crime.

The flaw is: It's all about punishment and revenge and has nothing to do with fixing something that's broken.

The medical community is seeing more and more young kids with severe aggressive behaviour. Dr. Jennifer Steadman, chief of psychiatry at York County Hospital reports. Meanwhile, Dr. David Kocerginski of Markham Stouffville Hospital stressed that the mental health outpatient service is limited. There's a huge need, said Kocerginski.

Without treatment, the medical community knows some of these kids will go on to carry guns, knives and baseball bats. And, some will use them.

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