

Wife still haunted by death of jumper

Novice skydiver
went on unplanned jump

BY JOHN SLYKHUIS
Staff Writer

He wasn't even supposed to jump that day.

Gareth Rodgers had parachuted the day before and he wasn't scheduled to go again until after he and his family finished their vacation a week or so later.

Mr. Rodgers and wife Lisa had come back to Baldwin Airport Aug. 25, 2002 just to hang out with friends they had met there, enjoy a barbecue and watch the other skydivers from the Parachute School of Toronto make their jumps.

It was a perfect day for parachuting.

Mr. Rodgers had made five jumps up to that point since his initial one July 6. When he had first come back from work to their newly renovated home in Sutton to tell his wife he'd finally made up his mind to try it after six years of talking about it, she wasn't happy.

"My only condition was that I go with him every time he did it," she said. "That sort of made me feel better."

She also videotaped every one of them, including the last fateful jump.

"After that first time, he was so excited I don't think he slept for three days. He'd keep playing the video and yell to the kids 'Come and see this!'"

As a beginner, he was still jumping with his instructor. He was on his way to his first level of proficiency, obtained

after 10 jumps.

This would be his sixth, and, as it turned out, his last.

A representative of the school came over and said there had been a cancellation so there was an opening on the plane. Did Gareth want it? No, he said he really didn't feel like it.

He was asked again.

"I said to him, 'Don't do it. Don't be pressured into it,'" Mrs. Rodgers recalled. "He finally said, 'I'll just do it and get it over with.'"

Unlike his previous jumps, he hadn't watched the parachutes being packed. After 20 jumps, he would be able to pack his own.

"He would watch them being packed and then point and say, 'I want that one,'" Mrs. Rodgers said. "This time he didn't."

He got up to board the plane. They briefly talked about going home and starting dinner.

"Love you," he said.

"Love you," she replied.

With the video camera going, Mrs. Rodgers caught her husband jumping from the plane, breathing a sigh of relief when the chute billowed out. This time it came out, then fluttered away like a wounded butterfly.

The tape got shaky at that point. She thought she saw him engage the reserve chute.

She got into a jeep with friends and headed over to where they thought he would land. They were in a wooded area

nearby, calling out his name when they heard the sirens of emergency vehicles speeding down from Sutton.

Her heart racing, they climbed into the jeep, sped north on Hwy. 48, cresting the hill near Old Homestead Road to see firetrucks on the shoulder, an ambulance, police cruisers — and the crumpled figure under a yellow tarp.

"I knew then," she said. "I knew." Mr. Rodgers had landed just off the highway. He was estimated to be going at least 200 km/h when he hit the ground, leaving a six-inch impression, bouncing and landing about 15 feet away. He died instantly.

"I'm not sure what he would have had time to think about when he was falling," Lisa said. "It only took about 21 seconds."

They had been high school sweethearts in their hometown of Stouffville before moving to Sutton about 10 years before.

An outgoing, high-energy individual, Mr. Rodgers was a first class carpenter and excelled at fixing up old houses. The couple had bought several fixer-uppers since moving, renovating and then selling them. They were in the process of doing the same to their latest house near the Sutton arena.

Happily married for 15 years, they raised three children, Stephanie, now 16, Daniel, 14 and Brysen, 9.

Attending the inquest into the accident earlier this month helped the family deal with his death, she said.



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Auditing school board 'meaningless' exercise

OPINION

After recent events in Ottawa, announcing the auditor is coming strikes fear into the hearts of those in the federal political community.

And for good reason. Not so at the York Region District School Board.

Reviewing the independent auditor's report and observing it actually being presented to the board rivals watching the proverbial paint dry on the excitement scale.

The annual audit of the board's financial behaviour is virtually meaningless in terms of telling you how wisely your money — \$750 million of it — is being managed. It just tells you the money was indeed spent and who got it — that's all.

It is a compliance audit as required by the Education Act. As the representative of the auditing firm stated during his presentation at the board meeting, "We don't make any value judgments."

According to him, it would be cost-



Bob Burrows

On Board

prohibitive to do so.

Last year, this audit cost taxpayers \$51,000.

But let's do a quick audit of the audit process.

In response to questions from trustees Alan Shefman and Diane Giangrande, it became apparent the board has used the same firm to audit its books since 1969.

In addition, the board, apparently, does not feel any need to publicly tender this task and it has never done so.

For the sake of perception alone, is that appropriate and prudent fiscal

practice?

And, at the end of the road, what do we have here anyway? Not much.

I'm sure many taxpayers wouldn't mind paying a little more to make sure their education tax dollars were well-spent.

Many would likely be willing to invest in a process that would evaluate the board's spending practices in a comprehensive way, especially on non-essential things such as hotel conferences and other such functions, as compared with more basic needs such as adequate classroom textbooks.

They would spend a little more for a process that would critically review purchasing strategies, expense accounts, travel allowances and other such board expenditures.

Now that would be an audit worth paying for and hearing about.

And, in the end, it would likely even pay for itself.

Bob Burrows was a York Region elementary school teacher for 27 years and a trustee from 2000 to 2003.

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