

CITIZENS ON PATROL

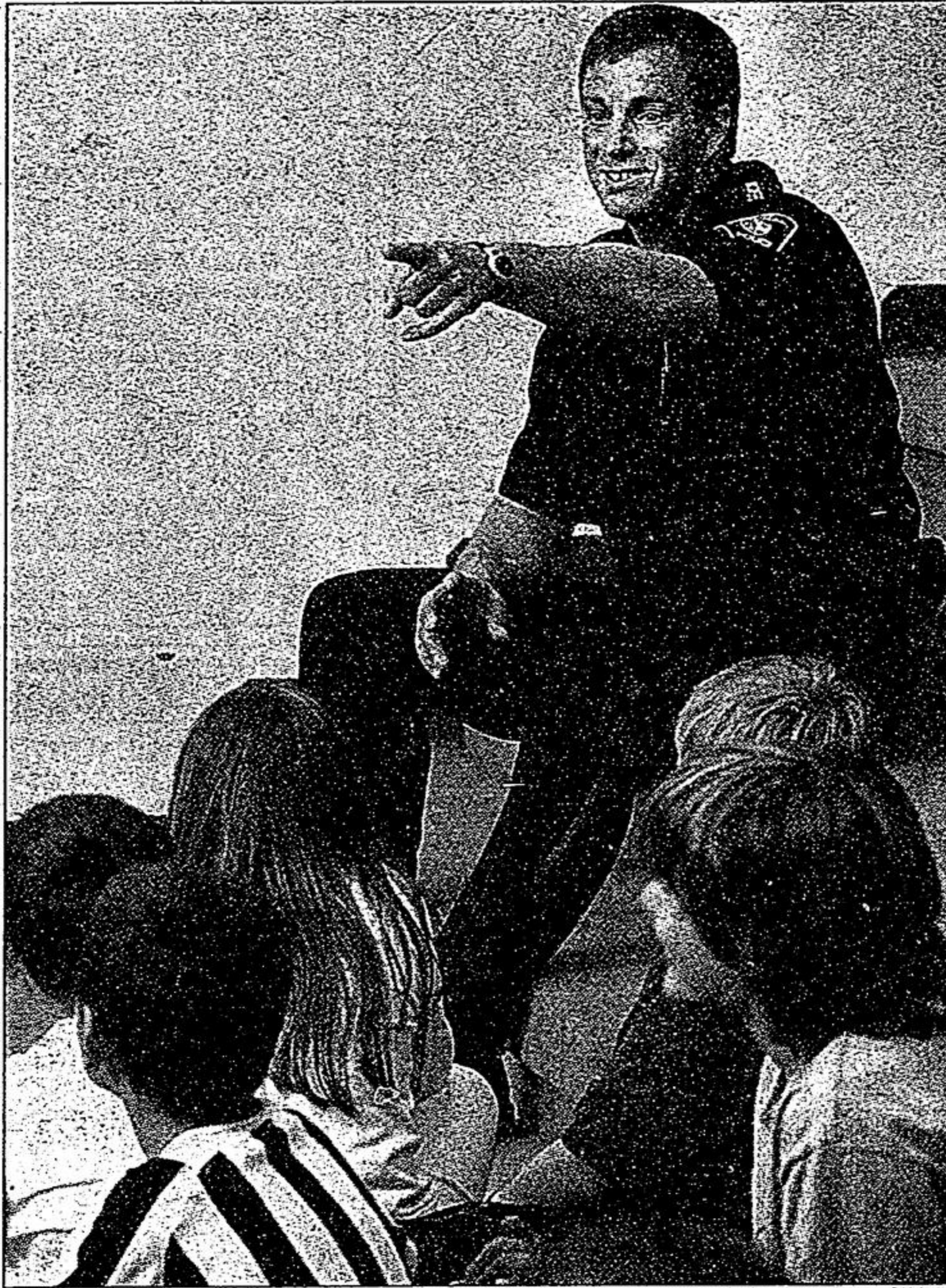
Public involvement, pro-active policing key to keeping York safe

WHERE WE'RE GOING

the state of
PUBLIC SAFETY



Martin Derbyshire writes final instalment of three-part series.



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Const. Ron Ralph answers students' questions at St. Mary Immaculate Catholic School in Richmond Hill. Community policing, including school outings and public meetings, is part of York Regional Police's plan to get citizens involved in public safety.

Fighting future crime isn't just a battle for police, politicians and judges; much of the struggle is up to the people, 22-year-old Chris Beasley says.

Mr. Beasley, who works with teenagers as part of the York Regional Police Venturers program, says youths tell him crime, drugs and violence are on the rise.

"I think it's all increasing," he said. "But it's still safer here than Toronto."

The community has a big role to play and groups such as the Venturers can become soldiers in an ongoing struggle against crime, Mr. Beasley said.

"We attract youth who care about their community, want to volunteer and help others," he said. "That sets an example for other people and helps improve public safety for sure."

Russian immigrant Roksolana Tchotchieva moved to Canada in 2000 to escape rampant crime and deteriorating public safety in the former Soviet Union.

She came to Richmond Hill because it is known as one of the safest communities in the country.

As the region grows, so does crime and other threats to public safety such as aggressive driving. But Ms Tchotchieva, a Russian language radio host, doesn't think putting more cops on the streets is the answer.

Like Mr. Beasley, she believes the solution lies within the residents of York Region.

"We don't really need more police officers. They have been doing a good job," she said. "It's just that people need to consid-

er themselves a part of the community, look out for their neighbour's house. People don't think they have a right to look around, but it's their duty to let people know what's happening.

"Back in (the former Soviet Union) they always thought, 'It's not my business.' But here it's different. Safety is the community's responsibility. You need to be a part of the community and you have to report crimes or suspicious things. We have to educate people so they can understand this is how it works here in Canada. The future of public safety is really up to us."

York Regional Police Chief Armand La Barge couldn't agree more.

"Crime is not a police problem, it's a community problem. If you're going to be successful in eradicating crime or slowing down the tide of crime in your community, then you need to get the community involved," he said. "In fact a great deal of the crime that we solve is as a result of information we receive from the public."

In most serious crimes, police make an appeal to the community for information, the chief says.

The service is always willing to help set up Neighbourhood Watch programs for residents who are willing to get involved.

"The community needs to be involved, not just in reporting

crime and reporting suspicious circumstances, but in taking responsibility for their own crime prevention," Chief La Barge said.

"If we continue to do what we're doing right now and we continue to enjoy public support and the community continues to be involved in their police service and their community, then I am confident in saying we will continue to be a safe community.

"The moment that we no longer enjoy the community support. The moment the community decides they're no longer going to participate in making their community safe, then we'll have problems, mark my word."

In the meantime, York cops are doing their part to improve public safety by making crime prevention a major priority.

"We're moving our organization away from a law enforcement organization to a crime prevention law enforcement organization," Chief La Barge explained. "If you can prevent a crime, you prevent someone from being a victim. It is a horrific experience being the victim of a crime, a feeling that you've been violated and there is a significant sometimes lifelong impact and we want to avoid that."

Police are pushing public involvement by using press releases and community meetings to tell residents how to avoid becoming a victim of crime. It's all part of being pro-active, Chief La Barge said.

"You can do things to prevent yourself from becoming the victim of a car jacking or a home invasion, theft, sexual assault, an assault or a homicide," he said. "And these things improve our ability to solve crimes and improve our ability to prevent crimes, while at the same time giving our citizens the tools they need to become part of that crime prevention and law enforcement program."

Part of the reason 85-year-old Bill Scott moved his family to Thornhill in the mid 1980s was the community's reputation

See COURTS, page 10.

Crystal ball gazing difficult

Criminologists focus on today's crime trends

BY MARTIN DERBYSHIRE
Staff Writer

Two of the country's top criminology professors agree, the biggest threat to the future of public safety is difficult to predict.

"I guess if we look at the statistics right now impaired driving is the No.1 criminal cause of death in the country and probably the biggest threat," said Tony Doob of the Centre of Criminology at the University of Toronto.

"What is an emerging problem? The difficulty with looking at emerging problems is that it can distract from all the things we're not doing to deal with the issues of today."

While the Internet has changed the criminal landscape by providing access to a world of potential fraud victims or a market for child pornography, for example, the crimes themselves have not really changed, Mr. Doob said.

Rather than attacking potential threats coming down the road, Mr. Doob suggests we look at things we know are threats today and find ways we can improve public safety now and into the future.

"When you're looking at improving public safety I think the No.1 issue should be what will have the most impact on public safety per dollars spent and that brings us back to traffic," he said.

"It's been shown that the more enforcement out on the roads, the more likely people are to drive better. If people think they're going to get caught they won't run that red light. That's where you'll get the biggest bang for your buck."

While York Regional Police Chief Armand La Barge and Monte Kwinter, the Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services, point to marijuana grow ops and organized crime involvement in the drug trade as both existing and emerging threats to public safety, Margaret Beare, director of the Nathanson Centre for the Study of Organized Crime and Corruption at York University, believes organized crime will pose no more of a threat to the every day citizen in the future than it does today.

"I just don't see organized crime as a new and emerging threat," she said. "They've always been here, still are and will be."

Technology has changed how the criminal element works, Ms Beare added, "but that's the same as it has changed things for most legitimate businesses."

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