

PEOPLE: First on job, Saunders retires after 23 years on beat

Trained crows to wild skunks tested bylaw officer

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K eith Saunders spent 23 years rounding up loose dogs, keeping properties from being over-run by weeds and garbage and ensuring residents park only when and where they are supposed to.

As the town's senior bylaw officer, Mr. Saunders has helped lead the way in creating a municipality he is proud of. On May 7, Mr. Saunders, 65, retired.

"Twenty-three years is a long time, I feel, to be in bylaw enforcement and 65 is a good time to stop, I think," he said.

"It's a very stressful job because all you're dealing with really is confrontation one way or another (and it's coming at you from all angles," he said.

On April 7, 1987, Mr. Saunders became Whitchurch-Stouffville's first full-time bylaw officer.

"One of the main reasons they were looking for a bylaw officer in 1987 was they just adopted a new property standards bylaw and a new zoning bylaw ... and a couple of years before that (the) first sign bylaw ... and they were looking for somebody to (enforce) those bylaws."

Along the way, Mr. Saunders has encountered a few surprises.

Like the time an east-end resident called Mr. Saunders requesting he remove the town skunk.

"I said: 'excuse me ma'am, but the town don't own skunks.' I said: 'they're wild animals. They happen to live in Whitchurch-Stouffville or in Stouffville (and) we don't remove skunks.' She was quite upset," Mr. Saunders recalled.

One animal Mr. Saunders did end up removing was a crow, which was attacking young children at a day care.

"The kids couldn't go out and play on their monkey-bars and stuff because this crow would come down, swoop down and try and peck their heads and face," Mr. Saunders said.

The Kennel Inn Animal Control sent a couple of people to town to remove the crow, but they were unsuccessful, he said.

While waiting for the Kennel Inn supervisor to arrive from Aurora, Mr. Saunders, who spent six years working for the Kennel Inn before

becoming Whitchurch-Stouffville's bylaw officer, decided to check things out for himself.

"So I get over there and this thing is perched on the monkey-bars. All the kids are in the house, in the little school looking out and this thing's chirping away to me and I'm thinking this thing's been trained, it was semi tame. I thought: I've got to trick this thing into me catching it. In my mind I'm formulating this plan," he said.

Mr. Saunders put his left hand in the air and started talking to the crow in an effort to distract it.

"It's looking at my hand, probably thinking my hand's talking to it and then I come up with my the hand behind it and gotcha," he said. "I'm holding this crow ... like an ice cream cone ... (and) it's trying to peck me because he can't reach me and even if he was, I wasn't going to let him go."

As the children cheered from inside the day care centre, Mr. Saunders found a garbage can, deposited the live crow in it and put the lid on it, while he waited for the Kennel Inn supervisor to arrive.

"That's what you call 'other duties than assigned,'" Mr. Saunders said. "Sometimes you just have to go the extra mile."

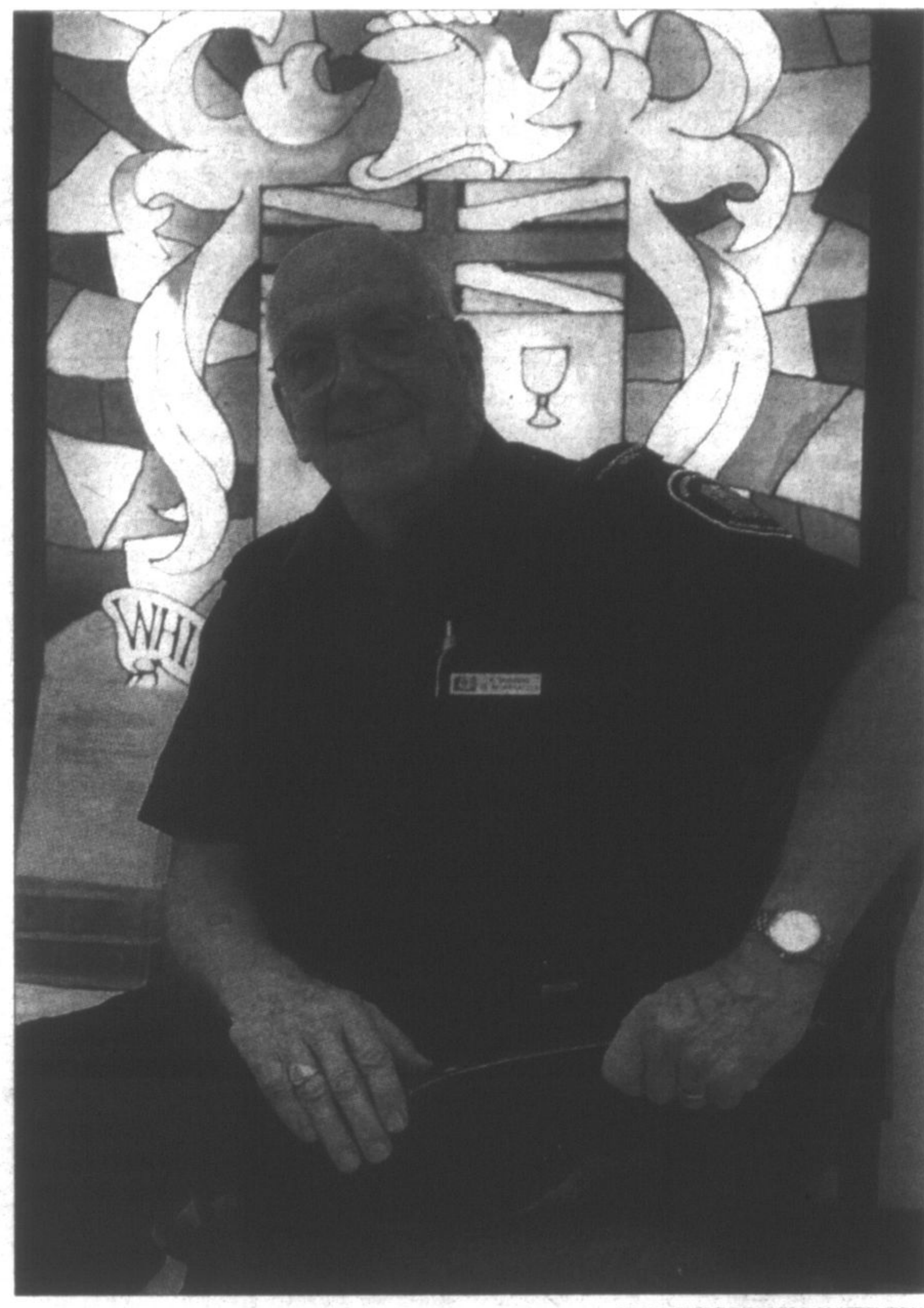
Throughout his tenure as a bylaw officer, Mr. Saunders always advocated co-operation, not confrontation.

"All we're looking for is compliance," he said.

But sometimes compliance can only be achieved in the court room.

"What you have to do is a balance between the people who are complaining and the people who are breaking the law. And the people who are complaining are expecting you, the town, to get this resolved within a reasonable time. You can keep giving people verbal warnings or written warnings or orders and that, but at some point if they're not going to comply, you've got to put your foot down so to speak," Mr. Saunders said. "Give them a deadline and say this is it. If you don't by then I'm sorry you're going to have to go to court. You don't actually say sorry. 'You're going to court' and we issue paperwork and even then we tell people if you can resolve this issue before the court date, we'll be reasonable."

"We have a really good track record. We really only go to court



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Keith Saunders became Whitchurch-Stouffville's first full-time bylaw officer in 1987. The uniforms and marked vehicles now used by officers give them credibility they didn't have back then, he said.

when we think we're going to win. We never go to court to lose," he said.

Mr. Saunders is an animal lover. He and his wife of 34-and-a-half years, Valerie, have three dogs - Lucy Maud, who is a 13-year-old retriever/chow, a 13-year-old collie named Tristian and a 12-year-old sheltie named Mackie.

Ironically, two of the biggest cases Mr. Saunders has had to deal with in court involved dogs.

The first was in 1998 when eight-year-old Courtney Trempe was killed by a dog while at a neighbour's house.

"(That) was very stressful for

everybody here at the town. Attending the inquest was one of the hardest things I had to do and I had to give evidence, not much evidence, but I had to give evidence on the stand and give evidence on behalf of the town about licensing and everything and our bylaws," he said.

In 2005, when the province enacted legislation banning pit bulls in Ontario and toughened the penalties for owners who have dogs that pose a danger to the public, Whitchurch-Stouffville was one of the first municipalities to test the legislation in court.

In October of that year, a five-pound Yorkshire terrier was killed

by an Alaskan malamute.

"We were one of the first municipalities to actually, under the new bylaw, to actually take somebody to court and get a conviction," he said.

Staying with the non-human population of Whitchurch-Stouffville, Mr. Saunders was also instrumental in bringing in a bylaw regulating horse riding establishments following the death of Elizabeth Haden, who was killed at the Wagon Wheel Ranch in Musselman's Lake in 1999.

"She was trail riding and she got thrown off," Mr. Saunders said. "There was no real provincial legislation regulating these places. The town implemented a bylaw, which required certain requirements to be met to make safety standards for these young kids who are being dropped off to do these trail rides and horse riding."

An annual license is now required for riding establishments.

Something else Mr. Saunders is proud to have spearheaded in Whitchurch-Stouffville is the Toys for Tickets program in which every December for the past four years, people who receive a parking ticket can pay it off with a new, unwrapped toy or non-perishable food items, which are then donated to the Stouffville Lions Club.

Other initiatives?

"We needed immediate enforcement and we weren't getting the respect because people were saying, well, anybody can make a business card, anybody can make ID," Mr. Saunders said of the changes made about 18 months ago. "But since we've gone into uniform, perfect ... We got instant respect and I think it's one of the best moves this town has made."

Mr. Saunders plans on volunteering at Habitat for Humanity's ReStore in Newmarket, where the couple lives.

Taking over for Mr. Saunders is Nancy Cronsberry, who comes from King Township.

"She's very capable of doing this job and I'm sure she's going to love it like I have," Mr. Saunders said.

Linda Mainprize, who enforced local bylaws with Mr. Saunders for the past nine years, calls him "a pillar in the community."

"He really knew how to deal with the residents," she said. "The knowledge that man has on the town of Stouffville is incredible."

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