

Retiring York hold-up cop experienced personal tragedy

BY JEREMY GRIMALDI
jgrimaldi@yrmg.com

Det. Sgt. Don Cardwell has faced his share of life challenges, but he's come out on the other side a wiser man for it.

Now that he's retiring almost 30 years after being hired by the York Regional Police fresh out of Seneca College, he's looking back on a life full of achievements and sorrows and forward to one without his ever-present BlackBerry.

After joining the service in 1985, soon after his big brother joined the OPP, Cardwell worked in Newmarket and Georgina before landing in Vaughan, where he served in search and rescue, criminal investigations and drugs and vice, where he became a detective.

But it was only when he found himself in the hold-up squad in

Richmond Hill that Cardwell felt truly at home.

However, his personal life was thrown into chaos more than once.

After years spent dealing with the region's most hardened criminals, Cardwell started struggling to maintain his trust in people, slowly losing his faith in humankind.

"It almost cost me my marriage — my wife noticed the change in me," he said. "I realized I wasn't the same person. You stop seeing the good in people. Before you'd meet someone and trust them until they betray you, but in policing, people have to earn your trust. It was a gradual change that affected the way I interacted with people. I was assuming things about people that weren't there."

Then, in 2003, tragedy hit the Cardwell family when his eldest daughter Christina, then 13, was

struck and killed by a car while crossing Airport Road, while getting ice cream with her 16-year-old cousin near his home in Caledon.

DAUGHTER KILLED

Following the accident, Cardwell was destroyed inside and struggled with his emotions, reviewing photographs from the scene over and over, trying to figure out what had happened. How could his daughter have done something so unsafe after being taught the rules of the road so many times?

"I was trying to deal with it and I had to know everything. You go through all the emotions, anger and pointing fingers at people. One day, while looking at pictures at the department, this young officer walked in, put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'Don, you're beating yourself to death. You're

trying to put an adult's head on a kid's shoulders,'" he said.

It was at this moment Cardwell knew changes had to occur. He started giving back to the community by coaching double A hockey for young boys.

He also joined the peer support group at York police, helping officers going through troubling times, including SIU investigations, two of which Cardwell faced himself, being cleared in both instances.

It was the community of Caledon, his family and his police brotherhood that "wrapped" he and his family in a "warm blanket" of support, explaining how during Christina's funeral the entire town shut down and paid their respect while the procession wound through the town.

Since Christina's passing, Cardwell said he and his wife have

"never been the same", but they've learned "how to cope" and mark Christina's birthday each year.

"There's a bond between the people I meet who have lost someone," he explained. "There's an understanding of what they're going through."

Cardwell's life in police work has seen some significant achievements, but his most memorable was catching a wanted murderer, which helped a family on the other side of the country find peace.

In retirement, Cardwell will work at his brother-in-law's farm, which also includes a restaurant. But before settling back into work, the 53-year-old said he plans to travel to Australia, New Zealand and beyond with his youngest daughter, who is living Down Under, training to become a social worker for troubled young people.

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