

FROM THE NEWSROOM: Impaired driving, are we doing enough?

In many ways, journalism is as much about asking the right questions as it is getting the right answers.

In our newsroom in recent days, we've been asking a lot of questions surrounding our coverage of impaired driving.

Last Tuesday marked one year since the deaths of the Neville-Lake children, Daniel, 9, Harrison, 5, and Milly, 2, and their grandfather, Gary Neville, 65, at the hands of drunk driver Marco Muzzo.

Should we report on this anniversary? What story do we tell?

As reporters Jeremy Grimaldi, Lisa Queen and Tim Kelly began combing through the news stories and police reports of the past year, it became clear the story was not about one tragedy, but of a pattern.

Despite the public attention and outrage over those deaths one year ago and despite the 10-year sentence Muzzo received, the incidents of drunk driving in York Region are disturbingly high.

If the current trend continues, we could see charges top 1,500 this year. York Regional Police statistics show there was a 43-per-cent

increase between 2012, when there were 877 charges, and 2015, when there were 1,255 charges. So far in 2016, there have been 1,188.

Why don't the police provide names of people charged with impaired driving when they do for nearly every other criminal offence? And why don't we, as reporters and editors, ask them to?

Mother and daughter Jennifer Neville-Lake reacted to these grim statistics with this plea: "To be honest," she said, "I can't stop anyone from driving impaired. Our story is one fading afternoon and is darkening with time. I can share with you how hollow and desolate my life is because someone chose to drink and drive on a Sunday afternoon. I can probably make you cry imagining what it is like to be



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me existing in an empty and dead house. But I can't stop you from drinking and driving. My shattered heart can't. My dead dad can't. My dead children can't. Only you can. I hope you choose life."

In recent weeks, we also learned of Toronto cop and York Region resident Andrew Ford, who pleaded guilty to impaired driving in East Gwillimbury and was demoted after a disciplinary hearing.

We don't typically publish the names of people charged with impaired driving.

Unless the accused are facing additional charges, such as impaired driving causing bodily harm or death, police don't release

the names to the media. Instead, we get general descriptions: sex, age and place of residence. And we don't push for names.

Should we treat this man, who was off duty when he was pulled over while driving erratically, any differently? Do we apply a different standard to a police officer who admits to committing a criminal offence than we do the average citizen?

We did run this story on yorkregion.com. And I think we were right to.

But that discussion led to more questions.

Why don't the police provide names of people charged with impaired driving when they do for nearly every other criminal offence? And why don't we, as reporters and editors, ask them to?

Is it because there is no victim? Often, police lay charges during a RIDE stop or after they've observed someone driving erratically. While the driver may have endangered the lives of the dozens of people they encountered on the road, there are no bruises, no broken bones, no death, no damage.

Are we allowing them to avoid public shaming because the worst didn't happen?

Or is it simply because we've always done it this way? And, if so, is it time to change?

In the past 30 years, governments, law enforcement and non-profit organizations such as MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) have spent considerable time, effort and dollars to educate the public about the devastating impacts of drinking and driving and demand personal accountability.

But you only have to look at the above statistics to see that the message isn't reaching everyone.

What role does the media and, particularly, community journalism play in getting that message out? Are we doing enough?

I'd be interested to hear your thoughts. Send us your comments to newsroom@yrmg.com.

—Lee Ann Waterman is editor-in-chief of Metroland Media, York Region. From the Newsroom is an occasional column by reporters and editors at your local newspaper.



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