

April 14, 2008

Street racers ignore peril

As a widow awaits the fate of three men accused in the highway death of her husband ...

By TAMARA CHERRY, SUN MEDIA

Every day of the last 10 months has brought something new for Debbie Virgoe.

On June 18, 2007, she lost her 48-year-old husband, David. He was killed on Hwy. 400 when he swerved the rig he was driving to avoid speeding cars.

Last week, it was trying to fill out her dead husband's income tax forms.

And today, she'll be in a Barrie courtroom where the three young men accused of street racing causing the death of her very best friend will make their pleas -- pleas that, according to sources, are expected to be guilty for two of the three.

"It hasn't stopped changing my life," Virgoe says of the crash. "Every day there's something new."

Virgoe can no longer support herself now that her husband died. She can't look for a new job -- how do you tell a new employer you need a day off for court? And she can't go a day without someone in her Innisfil community reminding her of that day -- they mean well, but it still hurts.

But she can try to make a difference by talking to people about street racing.

Unfortunately, it doesn't seem like the message is getting across -- at least not yet.

As of last week, nearly 4,100 people had been charged under legislation that was passed last September to target street racers and aggressive drivers in this province.

Last week, two men were charged under the law in Toronto following a crash that injured a woman whose friend was nearly killed by an alleged street racer a month earlier.

Days before that, police in York Region nabbed seven GTA drivers after receiving reports of dozens of cars revving up for what appeared to be an organized race in Richmond Hill.

That same weekend, the OPP charged more than 50 people with street racing and stunt driving offences in one day alone.

It's that time of the year again.

"These guys, especially with the long winter, have waited these winter months for summer and spring to come so they can get back into their vehicles and drive," says Toronto Police Const. Mig Roberts. "The sad reality is a lot of these individuals are young guys, inexperienced individuals that like to speed and it puts themselves and it puts the general public at risk."

People like Cynthia "Cindy" Dougherty, 49, and Mariarosa "Mar" Dalsass, 44.

The best friends were killed in a Brampton crash last October that police say was caused by two racing brothers.

Dougherty's husband, Derrick, watched in his car's rear-view mirror as the pair were killed on Hwy. 50 in Brampton.

"It's basically changed (my life) forever," Dougherty says from his Beaton home. "I was quite happily married and lost everything."

"Here I am by myself," he says.

Dalsass' husband, Murray Osborne, has had to learn how to iron shirts, make meals for one -- he still ends up throwing out extra food -- and carry his wife's death certificate around just in case something happens like last week when he was at Home Depot and his wife's name popped up. He used the certificate to get her removed from the system.

"Until you're actually thrown into the situation where it happens to you, most people read about it and say, 'Oh crap, that shouldn't have happened,'" the Palgrave man says.

Not all stunt, aggressive and racing-related crashes are fatal. This is something trauma nurse Joanne Banfield has seen first-hand.

"The consequences can be fatal or (leave you) with debilitating injuries, catastrophic injuries," the Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre manager of injury prevention says.

Two years ago, during what Peel Regional Police called a street race, Peter Kippax was killed when the Porsche 911 he was driving slammed into a silver Pontiac.

Since married, Allison Hickey and Mark Radman were in that Pontiac. Radman still has pain, but returned to work in the banking industry six months ago. Hickey, having suffered a stroke, with no control of her right arm and impaired speech, hasn't gone back to teaching yet.

"She's pregnant and due in the summertime," John Hickey says of his daughter. "A one-armed mother has trouble doing diapers."

"It's not just about the racing," says OPP Sgt. Cam Woolley. "It's the wheelies, the sudden and intentional braking, the complete disregard for other drivers.

"Realistically, there's not always an officer present," Woolley admits. "But the laws of physics are always in effect and unfortunately, there's a death penalty for some things and sometimes it's the innocent person that pays."

YOUNG MALES

The OPP has been averaging about 22 charges a day since the new legislation came in last fall, Woolley says. The most frequently occurring age is 21. Males account for 84% of those charged.

Offenders have their licences suspended, cars impounded and insurance rates raised. Fines have certainly gone up.

Whether this will make a difference, time will tell. But people like John Hickey -- who is in the midst of setting up a street racing victims' advocacy and support group -- hope it will.

"Accidents resulting from street racing, they're not accidents -- they're crashes."

Do surveys to win prizes. Join the **Nanos-Sun Nation**.