

## SPECIAL FEATURE

## A statistic of one

Paul Kells

*Editor's note: after hearing Paul Kells describe his experience and what followed, I asked him to write this 'personal communication'. I am certain readers will be moved and inspired by his example.*

I want to put a face to a statistic that over the past 16 months has helped move 10 Canadian communities in two provinces to attempt to radically reduce injuries at work, home, and at play.

19 year old Sean is a 'statistic of one'. A beautiful caring young man, 6'4" tall, an outstanding athlete with a passion for the game of hockey, a brilliant, glowing smile, and a wonderful sense of humor. He's a student finishing up a few high school credits who, all things considered, would rather go to a party than a study session. Still, in a few months, he plans to attend Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia.

Sean is a hard working kid living at home. In spite of his family's relatively comfortable lifestyle, he knows he *has* to earn extra spending money. So he gets a part time job working for the father of a friend of his in a small warehouse unit in Brampton, Ontario. His third day there he's asked to pour liquid from a 45 gallon drum into small containers. The drum isn't bonded, grounded, or labeled. It's not in a ventilated area or isolated from six nearby ignition sources. And Sean isn't told he's working with a hazardous flammable chemical.

Suddenly, a spark of electricity ignites toluene fumes collecting on the floor from the filling of only a few small cans. The drum explodes, covering Sean with a wall of flame. In the hospital, on his deathbed, the last words he every communicates make his parents and every doctor and nurse in the room break out loud into laughter. And that is how he left this world, making others laugh. Sean was, Sean is my son.

And if this thing could happen to him, it could happen to any child, even to you and to yours, no matter what laws you have on the books or your economic social status. The rules were clear. They just weren't followed.

The fact is that if enforcement alone *really* worked, we'd have no other crimes either. Sean was killed with multiple violations of eight different agencies representing municipal, provincial, and federal levels of government.

Most of us, in our heart of hearts, don't grasp the real risks to our children. We can't see how in the world our own child could ever be killed or maimed on the job. It never happens to us, only to someone else.

Apathy and denial are the Achilles heels of *all* injury prevention, at work, at play, at home, in the streets. Scientists, bureaucrats, and health and safety professionals cannot hope to bring their work to life until they understand that the people they are trying to reach are

moved to action by feelings and not by facts, numbers, or by legislation alone. If we are to radically reduce injury, then we must attend to emotion, not minutiae, and paint a picture of understanding by inspiration, not by numbers.

How *do* we move people from lethargy to meaningful direct action? Well, think about MADD—Mothers Against Drunk Driving—an organization created by mothers whose children have been killed by drunks. These women get angry. They don't talk about statistics. They tell stories, stories we can relate to: they tell them to the media, to legislators, but more importantly, to *all of us*. In the process, they've altered the dynamics of drinking and driving forever.

Let me move to explain how the Safe Communities Foundation of Canada builds on that to provide another successful framework for injury prevention. We have a crystal clear sense of purpose: to make Canada the safest country in the world. Some of the techniques to accomplish this goal originated at a Swedish medical institute just a decade ago. But we have added many other components to develop a uniquely Canadian approach.

On 23 April 1996 we launched the only totally private sector funded Safe Community program in the world, now the world's fastest growing. We approached and convinced Canada's five major banks to be the key funders and founding partners. They include the Bank of Montreal, the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, Royal Bank, Scotiabank, and Toronto Dominion Bank. Together, they committed a million and a half dollars over two years. They were soon joined by Dupont and Noranda, two major corporations that contribute expertise and smaller amounts of money. The governments of Ontario and Alberta have joined our board and deliver vital non-financial support and expertise, along with the invaluable assistance of the Industrial Accident Prevention Association (IAPA) of Ontario.

Our foundation provides seed funding and low key, but very skilled, organizational help to grass roots community coalitions typically consisting of: chambers of commerce, committed individual citizens and workers, small business leaders, municipal governments and their police and fire services, health care professionals, educators and school boards, community bankers, and safety organizations, such as the IAPA, Red Cross, St John's Ambulance, traffic safety volunteers, and many others.

Together, they select target areas. One of

**Cormana  
Communications,  
260 Richmond St W,  
Suite 600, Toronto,  
Ontario, Canada  
M5V 1W5**

Correspondence to:  
Paul Kells.

those areas must include small business workplaces and their young workers. They set breakthrough, not marginal, goals for injury reductions and agree to measurable meaningful results. The *community* can also choose other areas it wants to work on. These had included senior citizens' falls, toboggan injuries, railway track safety for kids, and child seat restraints.

Safe Communities is *not* a private sector replacement for the government's duty to preserve and protect human life. Specifically, it is *not* a substitute for inspection or enforcement or the other activities we entrust to government as the guardian of public safety. Nor is it a replacement for the leadership and advocacy of workers' rights that must continue to be provided by our union movements.

Rather, Safe Communities empowers people to make a personal and positive difference by actually doing something themselves, instead of pleading with others to do it. Here is a snapshot of some of the specific activities that communities are engaged in.

- In one community, all high school students now learn about their rights and responsibilities in the workplace through content integrated into existing mandatory academic and vocational courses. The local steering committee has given every student a pocket size card with 10 safety related questions to ask their part time employers. Within the broader student population, many students are enrolled in a coop education program which exposes them to future careers through company placements. Their first assignment is to prepare a paper which evaluates safety conditions in their assigned workplace.
- On another front, St John's Ambulance is providing a massive new program of certified first aid training for high school students. Recent Red Cross research shows that workplace injury rates are reduced by 50% for people with first aid certification.
- In every Ontario and Alberta community, very diverse small businesses have signed up for a special collective incentive program developed with the assistance of the Worker's Compensation Board. Each company undergoes special training, conducts safety audits, identifies unsafe practices, and makes the required changes. If one company then has an injury, every one of the other

companies gets less money out of the program incentives. In other words, no results, no incentive. It creates tremendous peer pressure among these businesses.

Overall, national success utterly depends on the commitment of local Safe Community champions to influence those around them. But to sustain it, we in the movement depend on some key principles:

- First, we focus on results, not just activities. If we can't measure the differences we're making, then why do these things in the first place?
  - Second, Safe Communities is driven by community champions, not managed bureaucratically by outside forces.
  - Third, Safe Communities is inclusive, not exclusive. We don't *compete* with other organizations: we work together for a safe community, which serves the self interest of each participant for everything from fund raising, to leveraging new partnerships, to program execution.
  - Fourth, we systematically recognize and celebrate the successes of our champions and partners. If we can't feel good about what we're doing, why do it?
  - Fifth, we never take our champions for granted. Who will pick up the torch when those who began to fight take on other challenges? New leadership *must* be nurtured from the very beginning.
  - Sixth, we always move ahead. We don't network just to say we met each other. We push, we shove, we create, we partner, we work for results. If I can help you get what you want, and that helps me to get what I want, I want to talk to you.
  - And finally, the seventh point in this list, but the most important of all, is that passion is our greatest ally.
- My passion is Sean Marshall Kells, brother of Robin, born to Judi and Paul, 26 April 1975, in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada. Died, 19 November 1994, Wellesley Hospital, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. He is no statistic. He is our son. And *this* is for Sean.

Paul Kells is a small business owner, former journalist, and the Vice Chair and Founder of the Safe Communities Foundation of Canada (64 Charles St E, Suite 201, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4Y 1T1).