

Truckers reign on death road;

Despite horrible crash that killed two sisters, big rigs still ignore safety rules

On the day that Isabel and Vanessa DiCeglie were laid to rest at Glendale Memorial Gardens -- they being the two young Brampton sisters whose car was demolished Sept. 13 by a massive transport hauling upwards of 30 tonnes of crushed stone -- the trucks hauling aggregate up and down Airport Rd. had not slowed their tempo.

Life goes on and so, too, does life continue to be endangered.

The police could have a field day on both Airport Rd. and Hwy. 10, where the movie *Fast and Furious* is being played out daily, not with high-end, pimped-out street machines but with mega-tonne trucks hauling mega-tonne loads that view speed limits as mere suggestions, and stop signs as nothing more than speed bumps.

Amber traffic lights, and even reds, trigger air horns, not brakes.

INFRACTIONS NON-STOP

On the morning of the girls' first visitation at the Ward Funeral Home in Woodbridge, big-rig driving infractions along the stretch of road where the DiCeglie sisters met their end were seemingly non-stop -- with virtually too many flagrant infractions to count. Red lights being run, stop signs being ignored,

and speed limits being pushed way past the point of acceptability.

A block away, though, on a quiet, residential stretch of Kennedy Rd., three Peel Region traffic officers had a speed trap set up, ticketing local drivers in their small sedans who dared exceed the posted 60 km/h limit.

Meanwhile, a stone's throw to the west, it was as if *Mad Max* were on steroids -- in real life, in real time, and in the surround-sound cacophony of diesel engines.

Words do not tell a proper story.

It has to be experienced. Only then, with the lost lives of the DiCeglie sisters front and centre -- 19-year-old Vanessa dying at the scene, and Isabel, 23, dying two days later at St. Michael's Hospital -- does it really set in.

These are truly dangerous roads, and far too many truckers hauling aggregate from the collective of gravel and sand pits to the north of Escarpment Rd., and even closer off King Rd., care about nothing more than getting in one more load before the day is done.

How many such trucks did I follow who were breaking the speed limit or driving recklessly? More than two dozen over a three-day period.

What is important to know, however, is not one of those trucks -- not a single one -- stuck to the posted 80 km/h speed limit. They all did at least 90 km/h and the majority were doing 100-plus by the time I finally backed off -- all these hurtling southbound along both Airport Rd. and Hwy. 10.

And 30-tonne missiles do not stop on a dime.

The massive truck that crushed the DiCeglie sisters' car, and took the two girls' lives, was heading south on Airport and, according to witnesses at the corner Coffee Time cafe, it allegedly blew through the red light at Mayfield Rd. -- its air horn reportedly blasting a warning that came far too late -- as the DiCeglie's small Honda Civic was making a legal left-hand turn.

They never stood a chance.

After a week-long investigation by both the ministry of transport and the Caledon OPP, and on the day of the girls' funeral in Woodbridge, provincial police finally charged the driver of that truck, Gurjant Singh Sidhu, 28, of Etobicoke, with two counts of criminal negligence causing death.

A court will eventually decide what ultimately happened.

According to Caledon OPP Const. Linda Kennedy, however, the investigation is not over. While she would not name the trucking company that had hired Sidhu as one of its drivers, she said the company itself is also being investigated, although she would not elaborate on the reasons.

Raymond Kingsmore, however, knows the sound of the kind of horn the witnesses to the girls' death claim to have heard just before seeing the impact.

An elementary math teacher and guidance counsellor at nearby Great Lakes Public, Kingsmore began hearing those horns -- "They have a sound similar to a fog horn," he says -- while playing golf at a small executive course not far from his school, and within earshot of those trucking thoroughfares.

"I didn't know what they were at first, but I soon found out personally," he says. "By all rights, I should be dead right now -- because that's how close I came.

"Today I call those horns the devil's warning."

Kingsmore was so traumatized by the events of that day that he remembers not only the date but the exact time -- Wednesday, Sept. 12, 7:20 p.m. -- the day before the DiCeglie accident, which, in tragic retrospect, was also Isabel DiCeglie's 23rd birthday.

"I saw and heard the devil that day, and not far from where those two girls met their end," he says. "My light had turned green, and I was about to enter the intersection. And so was the Brampton transit bus that was facing me from the other direction.

"Then I heard (the truck driver's) warning coming from my left ... like the sound of a distant fog horn. I heard it grow in volume and wondered what it could be.

"And that's when he came ... charging ... that devil ... a gravel truck, fully loaded, not slowing, but barreling through our right of way," Kingsmore says.

"After he ploughed through the traffic signal that had long turned red, I sat momentarily paralyzed, amazed that I had come within a second of being killed, and even more amazed that the riders on that transit bus also managed to survive the moment.

"But it was close," he says. "Way too close."

Outside the Coffee Time, where the wilting memorial to the DiCeglie sisters remains by the roadside, trucker Desmond Smith steps down from his rig, and surveys the ever-growing heap of flowers and the memorial cards.

He, too, hauls gravel. "I feel for those kids, I really do," he says. "I have kids of my own, and I can't imagine."

Desmond Smith is 54. He says he has been driving a truck for 40 years, 20 in his home country of Jamaica, and 20 here in the GTA.

He's an independent trucker, like many on the road, and gets his jobs booked through independent dispatchers working as agents for various developers and contractors.

And his unwillingness to keep the pedal to the metal has cost him jobs.

"Somehow, the truckers out here

must be forced to slow down," he says. "But I've had dispatchers tell me that I'm too slow -- that I've been passed by other trucks doing the same run -- and that I have to speed it up.

"But I won't. And, as a result, I've been told many a time to sign out and go home. Either that, or I tell them to sign me out -- simply because I won't be forced to break the speed limit and risk my life and the lives of others.

"It's just not worth it."

Brandon Muir also drives a truck -- a big truck, a four-axle tractor trailer not unlike the rig that took the DiCeglie sisters to their graves.

38 TONNES OF GRAVEL

He pulls over when his cellphone rings. He checks the weigh ticket on the load he just took on. His rig, fully loaded, weighs 58,800 kilos. The load of gravel in his 45-foot trailer weighs 38,000 kilos -- that's 38 metric tonnes.

"No, you do not stop a load like this on a dime," he says, adding that there are good truckers and bad truckers, and all should not be tarred with the same brush.

But he also wants the bad truckers reined in. "While it is hard to understand why these two young girls had to die, what is even harder to understand is why anyone, much less the driver of a vehicle that most likely weighs in excess of 55,000 kilos, thinks a red light does not apply to him.

"And one needs to only stand at the intersection where the girls were killed, or maybe Hwy. 10 and King

St., to see how common this practice has become," says the 27-year-old Muir, who drives full-time for an Erin company.

"Routinely, truckers are choosing to simply sound their air horn and run the lights, even as they change red, rather than anticipate the light change, and get on the brakes a half mile up the road. And generally the warning signs are there -- cars sitting on the trip squares, the cross-walk signs flashing, even flashing yellow signs a quarter mile up the road flashing in advance of an amber.

"The gravel trucking business is generally set up so that the driver gets paid a percentage of what the truck grosses, which encourages 'hustle' and often results in risky moves," Muir says. "And (because) some of the companies in this province are paying dirt-cheap rates to their drivers, the drivers must move it all day to make a decent buck.

"That practice should be stopped immediately." The corner of Mayfield and Airport Rds. -- like many intersections that were once considered rural and remote -- are only going to get worse.

Isabel and Vanessa DiCeglie were likely not the first to die at that intersection, but they'll certainly not be the last.

Inside the nearby Coffee Time, owner George Maniatis has still not come to grips with what he saw, nor will he ever forget the sound of the air horn seconds before the truck hauling 30 tonnes of stone took out the DiCeglies' small Honda before his very eyes.

On this day he pulls out City of

Brampton zoning plans for that corner. South of the Mayfield Rd. centre line is Peel Region. North of it is Caledon, which is why the Caledon OPP got stuck with the investigation.

The DiCeglies' car was struck a metre or two inside Caledon territory, but was driven by the force of the collision back into Peel.

If the zoning plans Maniatis holds in his hands show one thing, however, they show that the best-laid plans often mean nothing.

Plans that show entrance and exit points at that corner cannot be constructed within a minimum of 100 metres from the intersection have already been ignored.

And the building boom that will only bring in more trucks is already ongoing. Land is now being cleared for a 1.2-million-square-foot warehouse and trucking depot just a half-kilometre to the north. A cement yard is in the works across the road.

An industrial wasteland is being transformed into an industrial maze.

At the northeast corner, a few metres up the road, more than 200 school buses owned and operated by Laidlaw Education Services are dispatched each morning, sent out on their runs, and brought back to the Laidlaw yard.

The same happens each afternoon when the school bell rings.

Laidlaw manager Ken Tower, whose three-hectare bus facility is one of the largest in Canada, says he cannot recall an incident or a close call regarding any of his buses pulling out onto Airport Rd.

"Safety is our No. 1 priority," he says. "Our drivers are all well trained. If there is a concern, it's that everyone wants to get in front of us. No one likes to be behind a school bus. But we expect that, and we take precautions."

That statement, however, is not echoed by at least one driver who takes out one of those Laidlaw buses, and who has been driving school buses for 16 years.

"I get tailgated by those gravel trucks almost daily," she says. "And I have been almost run off the road more times than I can count. It's dangerous beyond belief.

"There've been more than a few scary moments when our hearts have been up our backsides," she adds. "Trust me, someone has to do something about it. "

Those two girls should not be dead."

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