

Telling the Parents

The story you are about to read occurs with countless regularity in Vermont. Although this story centers on the highway death of a teen, these kinds of stories cut across all age, gender and economic strata.

As a part of their never-ending effort to make Vermont a safe place in which to live, work and play, law enforcement authorities across the state also have a very unpleasant task to perform: the delivery of messages of sorrow to families.

As you will read, there is no “easy” way to deliver this message. A death occurs, or a serious injury happens, and a family needs to be notified.

The shock of first, seeing a law enforcement official at the door, and second, hearing the message is devastating.

The impact of the message never really settles.

If the victim is the primary household support, the family faces the question of survival — both emotionally and financially.

If the victim is a valued employee, the business owner is faced with the loss of leadership, strength and economic support.

Life is priceless. And, in many instances, the taking of a life on Vermont's highways is totally unnecessary.

***Attitude determines behavior.
Behavior determines driving habits.
Driving habits determine survival
on our highways.***



Buckle Up Pay Attention Slow Down



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Telling the Parents:

A Trooper's Story About The Kids Who Lost



Telling the Parents: A Trooper's Story

By State Police Sergeant John Wilder (Ret.)



It's a cold and blustery Friday night in December.

The wind blows and a chill settles into my bones. I've been at the crash scene for over an hour. Rescue personnel have just extricated the last victim. But my work is far from over.



The wreck, a family station wagon, is mangled and in a heap resting against a tall, lone pine. Two of its former occupants lay silent on the cold, snowy ground. Both were ejected from the car on impact.

I may seem a little callous right now, because my mind tells me to ignore the sight of death while I conduct my investigation of the crash. The medical examiner has pronounced them dead.

There's nothing more that can be done. But my conscience struggles with it. I do my job. I take the measurements. I take photographs. I look for skid marks. The bodies lie there covered with white sheets.

Spectators gather and gawk. They make unintelligible comments, shake their heads and walk away.

Some boldly ask, "Who are they?" Others don't care. I can't tell them. Next of kin don't even know.

But I know who they are. Kids, 16 and 17. Kids out having fun. Kids who just left a school dance. Kids experimenting. Kids playing with speed. Kids who lost. I know who they are.

The evidence is gathered. The car is on the wrecker. The decedents are in the hearse. The most dreaded task lies ahead.

How do I tell them? What do I say? I have done this before. I hate it. Fifteen miles to go and I'll be at their home. I rehearse, again and again, the technique that I'll use and the words that I'll say. The images of their lifeless bodies and their horrified expressions haunt me.

I don't know these people. Mom's a stranger. Dad's a stranger. I can't call on the clergy. I don't know their faith. I can't call on their relatives. They're strangers too. I'm on my own.

The 15-mile trip is going too fast. I don't want to go. I don't want to tell them. I hate my job.

A half-mile to go. I've memorized and rehearsed the words along the way. It will be easy now. I just have to remember my lines.



My training has taught me one thing about these kinds of tasks. When Mom and Dad answer the door, don't dilly-dally. They know it's not good news and you've got to get it out.

There's the house. The outside light is on. A car is in the driveway. I wish they were away. I wish someone else could tell them. I exit my car and walk up the front steps. My heart pounds. I can't breathe. I take a deep breath. I take another. I knock on the door.

Seconds seem like minutes. The world slows down around me. I need to get this behind me.

A woman peeks through the front window. She opens the door with a nervous grin and gazes at the man in uniform. "Good evening," she says. "How may I help you?"

"Ma'am, is your husband home?" I ask.

She calls to her husband and the three of us gather. I can feel the anxiety building.

I begin to convey my message and only stutter. I've forgotten my lines. "Get it out, get it out," I say to myself. They know. They're reading my face. Her eyes begin to water.

All time has nearly stopped. Struggling to form the words, I finally say it, "I have some terrible news."

Your son has been . . ."

They know the rest. I don't have to continue, but they need to hear me say it.

She weeps. She collapses. Her husband holds back his tears. He pretends to be stronger. He comforts her in silence. Moments pass and then we talk. I explain. I justify. I apologize. I offer help. I can't help. They've just lost their son.

My shift is over. I pull into my driveway and sit in my car. I think. I question. I curse. I'm angry for what those kids have put me through.

I'm angry for what those kids have put their mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters through. I yell at them, "Look at what you've done!"

I sit in my police car and I cry and I curse. I don't like my job tonight.

