

Haden awarded Medal of Bravery by Governor General



By Brock Weir

As he approached Rideau Hall on Thursday afternoon, a feeling both 'surreal' and 'overwhelming' engulfed Aurora's James Haden.

The trip to Ottawa was not business, and not entirely pleasure, but one in which Governor General David Johnston would bestow upon him and three of his former work colleagues, and indeed heroes from across Canada, the Medal of Bravery.

While he says receiving the medal from the Queen's Representative was an 'amazing feeling', 'special' and an experience he would never forget, at the same time, it forced him to relive things he says are best left forgotten.

'It was pretty special, but at the same time it brought back a lot of not-so-good memories of that particular night,' he told The Auroran just after receiving the honour. 'I haven't thought about it in a little while, so to get it was great, it was special and amazing, but it brought up a lot of memories.'

His story starts around midnight on one winter night, February 11, 2008. At the time, Mr. Haden was working with Bulk Plus Logistics, a company contracted to serve the CN Rail Yards in Concord. Also on duty that night were fellow medal recipients Shawn Doyle of Alliston and Gerard (Gerry) Robineau of Bowmanville. It was an otherwise unremarkable evening of unloading dangerous goods from rail cars and onto trailers en route to their final destination. All of a sudden, his walkie-talkie gave the first clue the ordinary evening was about to turn terribly extraordinary.

'I was working away as you usually do when I got a call on the walkie-talkie from a different rail track,' he says. 'I was doing a load for a fellow employee when he asked me to come quickly because there was a problem. When I got there, I saw a rail car spewing caustic sodium hydroxide everywhere and he was covered in the stuff. He said he couldn't see.'

'The first thing I had to do was get him to the emergency shower, but we were blocked by the pressurized spray of the rail car. I then threw him in the pickup truck, got him to the emergency shower and then called for help. That is when Gerry and Shawn came in and things went from there. They took over at that point and I had to clean myself up of the caustic spray.'

'An ambulance and a hazmat team had shown up at that point, and they got us in the ambulance, we went to the hospital and were treated for second-degree chemical burns. What happened there after that, I really couldn't say.'

After receiving treatment, that incident proved to be his last night working at the Keele and Rutherford Road business.

'I hadn't known afterwards whether I was going to get back there or not,' he says. 'I had to take some time off because it was a traumatic experience and I made the decision with my family and other loved ones. It was probably best that I not go back'

considering the dangerous conditions. Seeing my fellow co-workers seriously injured was eye-opening and made me realise I wanted to take my career in a different direction.?

Mr. Haden now works at the Aurora-based Neotec Water Treatment company. He lives in Aurora and he and his wife, Jennifer, are expecting their first child in May.

Jennifer was at his side in the Rideau Hall Ballroom on Thursday as Mr. Haden and his three co-workers were overcome with memories as their citation for bravery were read out to an esteemed audience of hundreds.

Although he says he will prize his medal, he's almost at a loss over what all the fuss is about.

'I wasn't thinking at the time of any kind of dangerous situation,' he says. 'It was totally reactionary and I was just helping somebody that needed help. When I first heard about this awards ceremony, the first thing I thought of was, 'Wow! I'm not really sure I deserve it.' I was just in a place where somebody needed that help and I was there, able to give that help.

'It could have just as easily been me and I could have needed someone to help me. You just want to help your fellow persons.'