

Operation Red Nose aims for a 'big zero' this holiday season



By Brock Weir

Nathan McMillan lost his aunt, her fiancée, and three others in an alcohol related crash 13 years ago.

Since then, he has devoted a significant portion of his life to making sure such accidents don't happen again.

It wasn't mere talk. Having joined MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) York Region 10 years ago, he came to Operation Red Nose as MADD's liaison. He has recently stepped down from MADD, but his devotion to the cause remains steadfast, particularly Operation Red Nose.

Operation Red Nose is a volunteer initiative in 11 communities across Ontario during the Holiday Season to help keep potentially impaired drivers off the road. One of the eleven, the Aurora-Newmarket campaign is entering its 10th season this year.

Volunteers with Operation Red Nose take calls from clients who might have been celebrating in the spirit of the season and drives them, and their cars, to their destinations, free of charge.

"A program like this is so hands-on," says Mr. McMillan. "You can tell people not to drink and drive, you can do advertisements and you can talk in schools, and those are great things for advocacy, but this is where the rubber meets the road. When you are physically in the bars and you see somebody say, 'Yeah, I've had a couple of drinks and could drive home, I might be okay and I might not' we just take out the whole questioning and the hassle of having to make that choice.

"We say, 'Don't even worry about it. We'll come and get you, no questions asked. Let's not even take a chance. Just tell us where and when you need to be picked up and we'll be there.'"

The nerve centre of Operation Red Nose in Newmarket-Aurora will be in Aurora for the first time this year, setting up at the headquarters of CHATS (Community Home Assistance to Seniors). Here, volunteers will have lots of elbow room to take calls and keep their vehicles at the ready for when the calls start to roll in. They will be running for 10 nights, beginning the last weekend of November and running on each weekend through December 28.

Whether you have a license and are able to do some of the drives, or simply interested in standing by the phones to process the requests, volunteers are always welcome to keep Operation Red Nose rolling.

The honorary chair of this year's campaign, as has been the case for the last five years, is Newmarket-Aurora MP Lois Brown. Ms. Brown knows all too well the importance of keeping impaired drivers off the road, having lost her own mother to an impaired driver.

?I want to see there is no other family who has to go through the kind of pain and grief they experience when they lose a loved one to an impaired driver,? she says. ?If I can be helpful in ensuring that doesn't happen, it's a very small contribution on my part to keep the community safe.

?When I started with Operation Red Nose, we were in the basement of Old Town Hall in Newmarket. We have seen the program grow and expand and hundreds of volunteers come in and provide their time to keep our community safe. It is a wonderful program and I am pleased to be part of it.?

In addition to the volunteers, Operation Red Nose is run by the Ontario Safety League. They highlight how the program works in conjunction with York Regional Police to keep the communities safe.

?We're hoping with the work of volunteers and public awareness we will be sitting at zero again ? zero crashes, zero injuries, and zero fatalities involving impaired drivers during Operation Red Nose, and that is the direct result of the work of the volunteers,? said Brian Patterson of the Ontario Safety League.

?Over the last 10 years, we have had probably 1,500 volunteers. Some come back every year and some just do it for two or three years, but once they have done it, they are like old war horses. As soon as a call goes out, they are ready to volunteer. It's a high energy team providing that big ?zero' to the community.

?At the end of the day, if you are a little slow getting out of bed in the morning and the family is okay with that because you spent the night doing good work, people find when they go to work and they talk about the program, people recognize that it is of real value to the community.?

Operation Red Nose is open to all volunteers over the age of 18. There are also opportunities for high school students to participate, strictly assisting in the setup and cleanup of the late night operation. The program is available for all people who might not feel up to driving home, including people who simply feel unwell.

?I can guarantee them they will have a wonderful time,? Ms. Brown says of potential volunteers. ?If there is one message, it is come and participate because the more we do together, the better our community will be.?

For more information on Operation Red Nose, visit www.operationrednose.com.