

## Project Dusk charges 20 in break-and-enters amid crime "tourism"

Natalia doesn't know if she will ever feel safe again.

People keep telling her and her family that things will feel better in time after falling victim to a break-and-enter last year.

For them, it wasn't about the material goods that were taken, but what was taken for them emotionally ? their security, their comfort, their piece of mind ? and irreplaceable memories of their husband and father who left this world much too soon.

Natalia shared her story with the media last week as the York Regional Police announced the results of Project Dusk at their Aurora headquarters.

Launched in October 2024 with a focus on residential break-ins, the Project concluded at the end of January and resulted in 20 individuals facing more than 230 criminal offences.

YRP Deputy Chief Alvaro Almeida said many of those charged were part of criminal organizations in South America and Eastern Europe who come to this country on carrying out these robberies in the darker fall and winter days, before heading home in the spring.

"Every single one of these individuals arrived in York Region from outside the borders of Canada," he said. "We believe the sole purpose for coming here was to commit crime for profit. The suspects worked in groups to target homes in York Region and throughout the Greater Toronto Area where they use a variety of tools and techniques to break into people's homes, taking items of both monetary and sentimental value to their owners: jewellery, handbags, electronics, clothing, cash, among other things. Many of these items are irreplaceable.

"Thankfully, I am thrilled to announce that this investigation has not only helped destroy these criminal groups in our communities, but has also led to the return of many of those items taken from their rightful owners. So far, tens of thousands of dollars' worth of valuables are now back in the rightful hands of their owners."

As residential break-and-enters are categorized as property crimes, they're often "discounted as some of the less important, less serious" crimes "but "residents who have been victim of these crimes, how they feel about the acts, they will tell you that they feel violated, shattered, shaken, and in many cases, walking into homes that have been ransacked, windows smashed, doors kicked, priceless sentimental items gone," Almeida continued.

"These are experiences that have long-lasting effects and have an impact on these victims. The supreme court of Canada has affirmed that the sanctity of a home is deeply rooted in our society, recognizing that a home is a place where Canadians should be afforded the highest expectation of privacy and security. A break in is more than a criminal act, it's a violation "a personal violation that shatters the person's sense of safety and security and invades"the place you should feel most protected."

All of that, however, is lost to Natalia and her family.

Speaking at the podium about her widowed mother, Natalia said she is a woman who "worked incredibly hard to provide a safe and lovely home for me and my sister," following their father's sudden loss.

When that "safe and lovely home" was violated, Natalia said the pain she saw within her mother was "unbearable."

"[My mother] had left for exactly one hour to get her tires changed. One hour. That's all it took," she said. "We're almost always home and work from home most of the days and when my mom is working I am usually home. It was a rare time she left and this happened."

She returned home as the crime was underway, but decided at the very last minute to drive past to fill up her car with gas before going home and calling it a night. Had she decided to save the gas run for the morning, she would have caught herself in a dangerous situation.

‘No one truly understands this part,’ said Natalia of the process of determining what was taken in a situation like this. ‘You don’t just make a list and move on; you stare at what’s left, trying to piece together what’s missing while your heart races.’

Perhaps the most heart-breaking items that were ultimately missing were her mother’s engagement ring, her parent’s wedding bands, and irreplaceable mementos of the father who died when she was just nine-months-old.

‘Even though the police work so hard on our case, following every lead and even more door to door, I felt I couldn’t just sit around and watch my mom break down. I needed to do something, so I also went door to door asking neighbours for camera footage. I stayed up all night watching the same clips over and over again, and waking up the next day and knocking on doors again,’ said Natalia. ‘For me, it wasn’t just about gathering evidence; it was the only thing keeping me [from going] insane. The days all blended together. We didn’t feel safe in our own home anymore. If this was just about stolen electronics it would be very different: it’s about stolen memories.’

But, the importance of having that neighbourhood camera footage can’t be understated, said Almeida, in both preventing property crimes but ensuring families like Natalia’s can find peace again.

‘Get to know your neighbours,’ he said. ‘Communities that stick together are much safer when you know who is coming and going within your community and you’re that much better? you have a much better chance of being able to detect when suspicious behaviour’s ongoing in your own community.’

‘Register [your camera on the] YRP Security Camera registry. I can tell you that investigators rely on the resourcefulness of our local residents and home security footage is very valuable for us both from the homes of the victims and those of our neighbours who have helped us successfully identify those and bring them before justice.’

**By Brock Weir**