

Flashpoint: December 2009

Making the best of a bad situation

Written by **Peter Sells**

Oct. 16, 1987. That was the day that Jessica McClure, Baby Jessica, was rescued from an abandoned well in her backyard where she had been trapped for 58 hours. Fledgling cable outlet CNN was among the media throng that swarmed the town of Midland, Texas, and captured Jessica's rescue. A flood of books, articles and a movie of the week followed. Through it all, Jessica's parents showed uncommon maturity. They kept her out of the spotlight and she led a quiet and almost anonymous childhood with no memory of her ordeal.

For a while, the spotlight shifted to the rescuers and shone particularly intensely on paramedic Robert O'Donnell. O'Donnell saw the incident, already almost a day old, unfold on TV while he was off shift but hurried to volunteer his services directly to the fire chief. He spent most of the next day and a half underground.

Jessica was wedged seven metres below ground in a pipe about 20 centimetres in diameter. The rescuers bored a hole adjacent to the pipe and jack-hammered a tunnel laterally to intersect just below Jessica's position. O'Donnell did the lion's share of the work, due in part to his lanky frame and despite his claustrophobia. He was the first to reach Jessica and he figured out how to safely extricate her and package her for transport up the rescue shaft.

Of course, such a rescue is always a team effort. Among the other notable contributions was that of Midland police officer Andy Glasscock, who spent the bulk of three days flat on his stomach talking to Jessica and listening to her cry, sing nursery rhymes and call for her mother. Neither Glasscock nor any other rescuer, however, received the attention that was suddenly and unexpectedly showered on O'Donnell. O'Donnell's was the media face of the rescue and he enjoyed the attention until North America collectively changed the channel.

April, 23, 1995. After watching the coverage of the recovery efforts at the Oklahoma City bombing site, and commenting to his mother at one point that "those guys are going to need a lot of help for a long time", O'Donnell drove into the bush and put a shotgun shell through his head. Media attention? Post-traumatic stress disorder? Depression from losing his job due in part to prescription drug addiction (he had developed migraines shortly after the rescue)? Nobody will ever know.

Dec. 24, 2003. Midland police officer William Andrew Glasscock Jr. was arrested after a female acquaintance complained that she had been drugged and raped. Police found that Glasscock had videotaped the assault, along with scenes of a 12-year-old girl stepping in and out of his shower. They found other unsavory images on his computer and discovered 180 kilograms of high explosives in his house. He pleaded guilty to multiple charges and won't be out anytime soon.

There is no way to conclusively connect Glasscock's behaviour to his role in Jessica's rescue. It is remarkable, however, on a visceral level, to reflect on how two professional responders who played key roles in a successful rescue each ended up broken and damaged.

Now, let's flash back to Jan. 27, 1988. Melvin Stanton, serving time after being convicted of three rapes and a murder, walked away from a Toronto halfway house and brutally murdered 25-year-old Tema Conter in her apartment. The pumper crew from Toronto Fire Department station 24 responded but were stopped at the door by the cops, who had secured the murder scene. I was on the aerial and I still remember the other guys saying that even from the door they could see how gruesome the scene was.

Paramedic Vincent Savoia was at that scene and witnessed its full horror. Recognizing that the experience had affected him, he sought counselling early. He went on to found, and is the executive director of, the Tema Conter Memorial Trust. From the trust's mission statement, posted on its website at www.tema.ca : "The mandate of the Tema Conter Memorial Trust is to assist emergency services personnel to better understand and cope with the physical, psychological and emotional stressors of acute trauma and its powerful aftermath. The trust was founded to improve the understanding of acute and post traumatic stress disorder. This goal is accomplished through research and public education, as well as the granting of scholarships, media and public service awards."

The contrast of Vincent's example with the outcomes for O'Donnell and Glasscock is striking and ironic, given the outcomes for Tema and Jessica, respectively. I don't have space here to do justice to Vincent's courage but I urge readers to visit the trust's site and learn more.



Retired District Chief Peter Sells writes, speaks and consults on fire service management and professional development across North America and internationally. He holds a B.Sc. from the University of Toronto and an MBA from the University of Windsor. Peter sits on the advisory council of the Institution of Fire Engineers, Canada branch, and is the lead instructor for the Blue Card Command Certification Program in Canada.