



The following speech was presented by Bill and Brenda Rossiter at the 2005 Tema Conter Memorial Trust Gala. We have posted this speech with the permission of the Rossiter family.

On behalf of my wife Brenda, our daughter Karen; who is unable to join us here this weekend and our son, Bill, I wish to express our collective thanks for your kind invitation to speak at this gala dinner. Standing before you this evening, comes with mixed emotions and presents it's own challenges for our family.

When the invitation was extended, Brenda and I realized how difficult it would be to share our emotions, and, in some ways, bare our very souls before an audience that are strangers on the one hand and good friends on the other and to balance our own sense of loss with a commitment to promote an awareness of critical incident and post traumatic stress. We must take care of our caregivers to protect their emotional health amidst scenes of human tragedy.

We hope to do justice to our son's legacy and in so doing further the awareness, the importance and the objectives of the Tema Conter Trust.

In 1999, the Government of Nova Scotia engaged in collective bargaining with the paramedics and John, being part of the negotiating team made a presentation to the Nova Scotia Legislature. Here is an excerpt from that speech....

TAPE!!

Good evening ladies and gentlemen!

Welcome to the lives of emergency service personnel. These men and women face calls like this each and every day. Those who serve as paramedics, police officers, or firefighters must respond to their profession on the assumption that they are capable of coping with daily challenges. As they go to work each day, they must take a positive but respectful attitude to their work and their role in society.

John's life was well lived and while it was cut short by Hurricane Juan, we sincerely appreciate his gifts, his talents and his time with us.

Let me try to put Hurricane Juan in some context. The east coast of Canada is no stranger to fierce storms, but nothing in recent memory could have prepared us for what we would face in the early hours of September 29th, 2003.

The wind tore down hundreds of miles of power lines; over 100 million trees were uprooted as if they were toothpicks. Hurricane Juan was an unstoppable force that chewed up wharves, houses, and boats and swept away structures like they were dry hay blowing across a farmer's field.

Halifax received a direct hit and although residents are familiar with the occasional northeaster, this storm was different for its violence, its absolute intensity and for its devastation of both property and for the loss of life.

We knew about the impending storm. John had called that afternoon to share his excitement over working that night. I cautioned him to be careful, as we all had done, so many times before. His reply to me; 'Dad, you were in this business for 30 years and you were OK'. John always assumed everything would be OK, just as every emergency service man and woman believes everything will be OK.

They never dwell on the consequences or the what ifs.

Tyler Anstey, a 24-year-old police officer with the Halifax Regional Police, watched the tragedy of that night unfold. He watched the tree fall and crush the back of John's ambulance. A few hours later, Tyler did something I have done, and every police officer, every paramedic and every other firefighter has done after a call at one time or another. He called home just to say I love you and I'll see you in the morning.

You see ladies and gentlemen, we are a unique family. We are a firefighter, a police officer and a paramedic. And, while only one of us wear each hat, our whole family is part of these professions. That's how it is. In times of tragedy we see ourselves in others, our thoughts go to our families and we think of those closest to us and they think of us. That short phone call to a loved one where few words, if any are spoken is understood, conversations are rarely long but the need to find comfort is obvious.

We're no strangers to late night phone calls. Sometimes its to rehash the events of a call, sometimes it's to vent a frustration, sometimes, it's to say I love you, and sometimes, it's to say nothing at all. Sometimes, dads just need to read that bedtime story to their kids, and sometimes, a wife needs to sit close to watch the evening news. Sometimes, you need to tell them what you need.

Realize everyone may not have a family or a circle of friends that understand the lifestyle and emotion that go along with emergency services. Reach out to a colleague. Encourage them to talk to you about their feelings. Start a buddy system!! Find that someone you can call day or night. It could be a colleague in another city or province. They are not tainted by headlines or rumors of a big accident. They do not hear the gossip or stories going around town about some fire last week. They just hear you. Your views, your feelings, and they can relate.

It's not a sign of weakness to seek help! It's better to seek help than to be false to yourself and neglectful of your own mental health. Guys may try to be macho but they often pay an unnecessary price.

The system may not always respond in a manner favorable or satisfactory to those who reach out for help but that's the fault of the system and the system had better listen up. And, to our female professionals, please don't compromise your basic nurturing instincts in response to the nattering foolishness of a few snickering, but weak colleagues, who lack the bravery to be honest with their own insecurity.

Overcome the mindset; challenge those who sit behind large mahogany desks to treat the front lines of emergency service and health care with more respect and understanding. Post traumatic stress and critical incident stress are as real as Hurricane Juan and as predictable as the next car accident, house fire, or heart attack.

And from the time of that 911 message until the incident is finally resolved, another human professional is doing all he or she can to make a real difference in a most challenging working environment.

Brenda and I and indeed our family, appreciate so much, the love and support that so many extended to all of us. However, coping with a tragedy like this is not a short term issue. Hurricane Juan came in like a mighty wind and when it had reaped its pathway of destruction and tragedy it spun it's way out into the Atlantic and simply left. But our story is not an event that can be expressed in past tense.... it's a story that we will live with the rest of our lives. John's emotional impact on Brenda, Karen, Bill and myself continues. Coping with tragedy cannot be packaged and placed on a shelf or left in a file folder. Life cannot be so easily compartmentalized.

We miss John's telephone calls, we see his empty spot at the Christmas dinner table, we look at a lifetime of photos, we fumble gracefully through the things of a son and brother who shared his short life with so many and we whisper a silent prayer for him and for ourselves in the hope that life and death are intertwined in meaning.

And yes, tears still flow, and grown men do cry and Mothers' hearts do break, and his sister and his brother cope valiantly with the loss of a precious sibling that helped define who they are and what our family stands for.

And while nothing has changed in the look of our house, everything has changed in our home. Our family has been on a roller coaster of emotions. Some days we cope better than others.

Let me tell all of you one basis fact. Don't ever be afraid to show your feelings. Your career can take a toll on both you and your families. To all emergency service workers, your families understand that 'it's your job' and you love what you do. Just remember there is always someone worrying about you and loving you while you go about your work.

Thank you for asking us to speak to your fundraising dinner. The objectives of the Tema Conter Memorial Trust are exemplary and maybe, just maybe, there will come a day when the priorities of the Trust will find acceptance and action in the minds and hearts of those whose jobs it is to allocate funding for programs dealing with critical incident and post traumatic stress.

Let me leave you with the quote, we feel applies to all emergency services. It is from Superintendent Robert Fox of the OPP and is inscribed on John's headstone...

"Excellence in what we do, Integrity in who we are"

Have a great evening. Good Night and God Bless!