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BEING BARBRA





Barbra Streisand
talks about her
life and career

There are different levels of fame in Hollywood – those who are just starting to climb the ladder, then the stars, the divas and superstars. Barbra Streisand is above all of them.

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Ryan Pfeiffer / Metroland

WHITBY -- Terry Von Zuben, a fire prevention officer with Whitby Fire and Emergency Services, has a learning disorder that places him on the autism spectrum. He says he wants to do more to help educate individuals in the community with special needs about fire safety.

FIRE OFFICIAL USES UNIQUE APPROACH TO FIRE SAFETY

Whitby fire prevention officer uses own experience with learning disability to better educate others

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WHITBY — Terry Von Zuben stands in the centre of the room with his hands held out in front of him and his eyes bouncing around with childlike intrigue.

National Fire Prevention Week in October has wrapped up but the longtime Whitby fire prevention officer continues to make his rounds, recently dropping by the Abilities Centre for a fire safety presentation geared to seniors. There's a lot of ground to cover and Von Zuben's breathless delivery and encyclopedic knowledge of the material is intense, reflecting a genuine passion for the subject.

"This is the highlight of my day — it's the best thing I get to do," says the 53-year-old Scarborough native who began his career with Whitby Fire and Emergency Services in

2001 and has been involved in public education with the department for about 10 years.

When he's not conducting fire inspections or assisting with investigations, his commitment to promoting fire safety in the community has made him a fixture at countless events, including the Brooklin Spring Fair, Harbour Day, Harvest Festival and Santa Claus Parade. Sometimes he brings Molly, a six-year-old Dalmatian he adopted from a rescue group and has trained to demonstrate fire safety tips to children.

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Fatal fire in 2012 sparks creation of fire safety program designed for youth with special needs, including autism spectrum disorder

From page 1

Other times, like during this presentation, he sprinkles personal anecdotes throughout his talks to keep the audience engaged.

"I can remember a time when I was very young going into the police station with my father and the walls were just brown with cigarette smoke and the smoke hung in the area," he tells the group of seniors and a few nod, knowingly.

"Thankfully, we don't do that anymore for the most part but a lot of seniors still have that comfort with smoking (and) it presents a fire risk, especially for smoking in bed."

Drawing examples from his life to illustrate points, gesturing with his hands instead of keeping them at his sides, and making eye contact while speaking are all "social norms" he says he's taught himself over the years in order to connect with others. Von Zuben has a severe learning disability that places him at the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum. The condition affects how he receives and processes information, as well as his communication skills, and has been a challenge throughout his life.

"I don't work very well with social expectations that people have; I don't understand them for the most part," he says.

"An example would be blinking. I stare a lot because blinking is a social construct; you don't need to blink as often as you do. You're in an elevator, you avert your eyes — I stare. So, in high school or public school, I would be staring constantly at people because I got a fixed gaze and that's how I'm taking in information."

Von Zuben's condition was previously classified as a "pervasive developmental disorder" but the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders categorizes it under the umbrella of autism spectrum disorder, along with Asperger syndrome. ASD affects an estimated one in every 68 children.

His IQ is in the average or normal range but he has superior spatial awareness — his skills as a marksman in the army led his sergeants to dub him "the prodigy" — and he can absorb many details at once. He was told by the neurologist who diagnosed him about a decade ago that his general knowledge or understanding of things ("except for sports," he makes sure to add) is in the 98th percentile.

"Where you might see four or five distinct things about a specific object, I see 20, so I pick up more information from the world around me but I can't hold onto it because I'm easily distracted," he explains.



Metroland file photo

WHITBY -- Terry Von Zuben from Whitby Fire and Emergency Services demonstrated Molly the Fire Dog's crawling technique on March 5, 2015. Molly was adopted from the Virginia SPCA in 2012 and has been trained to demonstrate the techniques being taught to children including stop drop and roll, crawl low under smoke, check a door, and test a smoke alarm.

It makes it impossible for him to perform multiple tasks at once or some of the duties of his job, including driving a fire truck. He's also encountered difficulty when interacting with other staff. Last year, Von Zuben says the department brought in a behaviourist from the Geneva Centre for Autism to help work through some of those issues.

"She helped explain their point of view," he says, adding that people with ASD have trouble grasping social cues like tone of voice or sarcasm.

"If you tell me something, I take it literally, without the inflection ... so in a lot of cases I take things negatively just because I'm never sure."

Von Zuben says the emotional detachment associated with the disorder can also work in his favour, allowing him to cope better in crisis situations, such as when responding to tragic fire scenes.

His experience also uniquely positions him to be able to identify with and reach a portion of the population that's often overlooked when it comes to public education: individuals with special needs. In the past, he would only mention his diagnosis sparingly but lately he says he's finding more reasons to broach

the topic.

"Over the last year, it's become pertinent in the fact that I would have a parent bringing their child to the Junior Fire Camp and they'd almost whisper it, like as if they had cancer, 'My child's on the autism spectrum,'" And I'm like, 'So am I. We're good.'"

Von Zuben says he wants to help reduce barriers to education that students may face due to physical or cognitive limitations, so he has developed a fire safety program that specifically addresses their needs.

The idea for the initiative came up during a coroner's inquest held last year into a fatal fire at 917 Dundas St. W. in 2012 that took the lives of three Whitby teens, Benjamin Twiddy, 19, Holly Harrison, 18, and Marilee (Hollylynn) Towie, 17. Jurors heard they died from smoke inhalation after being trapped in an upstairs apartment with only one exit when a burning towel triggered a blaze in a stairwell.

Through interviews with friends and family in the aftermath of the blaze, *This Week* learned that Hollylynn had mild autism and Holly had been diagnosed with intellectual disabilities and mental

illness.

The first time Von Zuben says he proposed the notion of teaching fire safety to special needs students at a local high school, he encountered some resistance. The principal politely explained that she understood his intentions but ran through a list of possible challenges and asked what he had in common with the students, he says.

"So I said, 'Well, actually, quite a lot ... a severe learning disability to start with,' and I said on top of that, 'I have an education dog that comes in with me to help me teach.'"

Often, people with ASD have a special bond with animals that can pick up on their nonverbal gestures and be used to regulate their behaviours, he explains. Molly the Fire Dog helps to not only "centre" him during presentations so he can maintain his focus but she also provides context to the lessons and a visual learning experience for people with special needs.

"You've got to teach people in other ways and me coming into a classroom to lecture ... it's not going to work for everybody, and so we need an alternative method of education."

Last year, Mississauga, Caledon and Brampton Fire and Emergency Services hosted a seminar on new trends in fire safety, including educating children with special needs, and Von Zuben offered to share his experience.

"It was the first time I actually came out and announced to everybody that I am on the spectrum and I have a serious learning disorder and this is how I see the world," he says. Since then, he's been contacted by some fire services members seeking his advice.

"It's had some very positive effects, especially for other fire educators in terms of (me being) a resource for them." Outside of his role with Whitby Fire, Von Zuben also does work with Molly for Therapeutic Paws of Canada. This past summer, he took part in Sensory Friendly Hour, a program offered at the Whitby Public Library for children with special needs and their caregivers. This month, he's teaming up with EmploymentWorks Canada to help young adults with ASD looking for employment practise their presentation skills.

His efforts on behalf of the fire department and beyond have not gone unnoticed.

"He has a lot of experience in the fire prevention division and he's a very valuable member of our department and an asset to the community," says Whitby Fire Chief Dave Speed, adding that public education is a growing area of the department and Von Zuben's dedication helps underline its importance.

"He's very passionate about what he does. He wants to make a difference."