

LOCAL

'She wasn't going home that night'

It was a moment that changed many lives.

Some obvious. Some not.

Heather Pegg, of course. Her life ended at 17.

The three other young passengers in the car.

The 17-year-old driver. Who was drunk.

The moms and dads.

The other relatives. The friends. An entire high school.

And a volunteer with the police who looked into the wrecked car that night exactly nine years ago and will never forget what he saw.

Josh Santa-Barbara had been an auxiliary officer for a year. He loved it. Still does. His favourite

part is doing ride-alongs with sworn officers. Going along to calls, riding in a cruiser.

Back then, Josh was 30. Single. No kids. Going on patrol was a great way to spend a Saturday night.

This night was busy. The air was warm. The long weekend was coming. School was soon coming to an end. Everyone seemed to have some reason to celebrate.

Just after 10 p.m., Josh and the officer he was with stopped at Tim Hortons at King and Dundurn to finally get dinner. The call came over the radio — a car had gone into a concrete pole at Cootes Drive.

A moment later they were on their way to the scene.

"It was pretty chaotic when we got there," Josh remembers.

It was a single-vehicle crash. The car was totalled.

A firefighter — there were 10 of them — threw Josh a flashlight and told him to shine it into the wreckage so they could work on those inside. The interior of the car was strewn with beer bottles — most of them empty.

There was the boy, 18, sitting in the back behind the passenger



SUSAN CLAIRMONT

seat. His legs were trapped.

"I still remember the blood-curdling scream," Josh says. "His legs were like bags of bones."

It took more than an hour to get him out.

Beside him was another boy, 20. For awhile, he had no vital signs at all. The extent of his brain injury wouldn't be known until later.

Another 18-year-old boy in the back suffered — like the drunk driver — only minor injuries.

And there, in the front passenger seat, was another body. Doubled over, face hidden.

Dead.

Josh reached into the car. Found a purse on the floor by the body. Looked for the driver's licence.

Heather Pegg. Seventeen. Pretty in her photo.

"I can remember my heart freezing at that time. She was a beautiful girl and she wasn't going home that night."

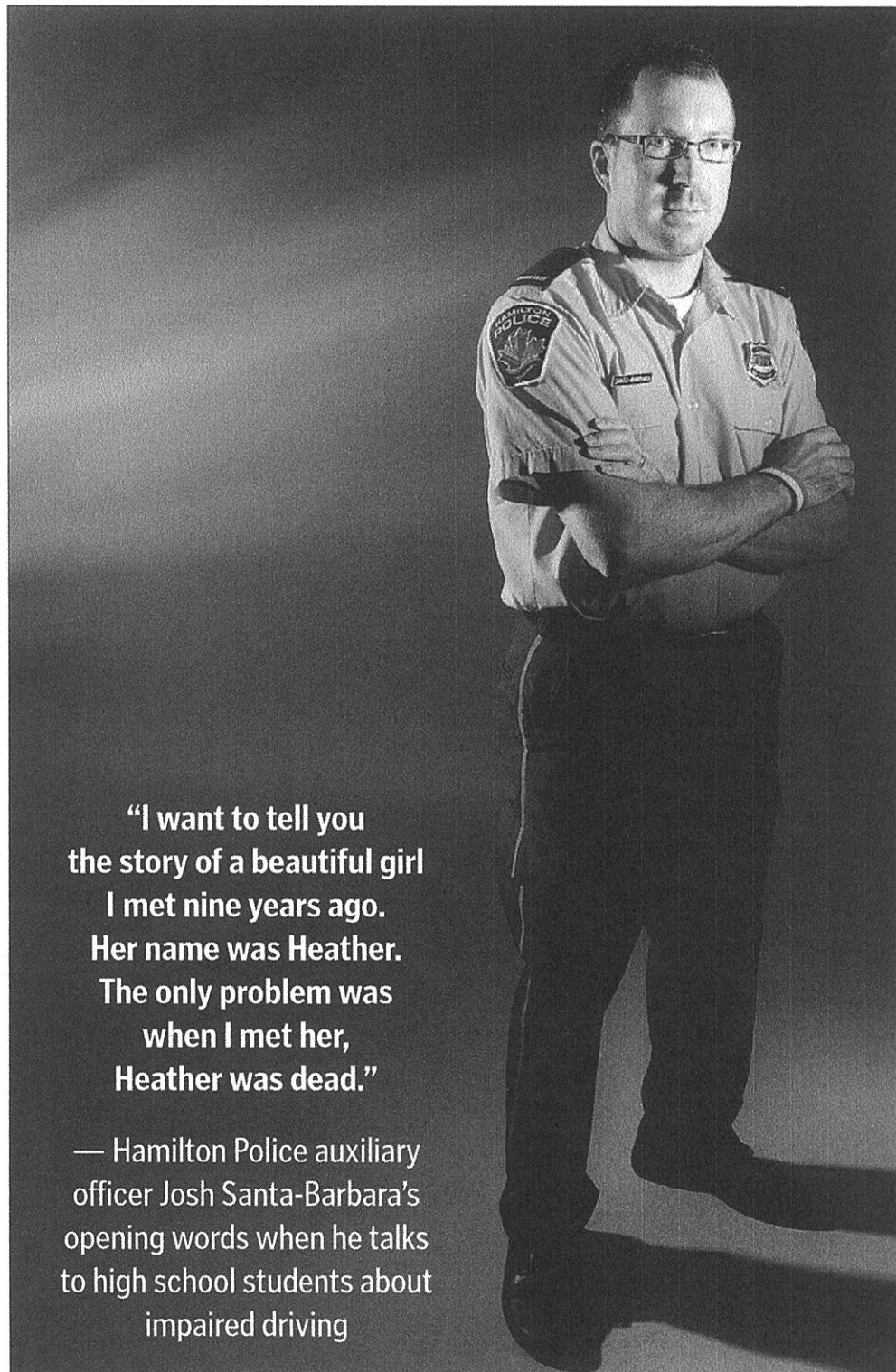
After midnight, Josh escorted Heather's body to McMaster hospital's ER. Staff put her on one bed, then another because all her blood had drained onto the first one.

From there, Heather was taken to the morgue in the basement of Hamilton General Hospital. Josh went with her.

"You can smell the morgue before you get there. And I can see Heather being wheeled in a body bag, zipped up to her chin, her eyes wide open staring at me."

He sat with her body for three hours. When his shift ended at 6:30 a.m., he went home. Couldn't sleep or eat.

Josh decided he needed to tell people about Heather. About what



"I want to tell you the story of a beautiful girl I met nine years ago. Her name was Heather. The only problem was when I met her, Heather was dead."

— Hamilton Police auxiliary officer Josh Santa-Barbara's opening words when he talks to high school students about impaired driving

can happen when you get in a car with an impaired driver. About the way one stupid, arrogant, irresponsible choice can ruin lives. So now he goes to schools and tells teens about Heather, who had been a promising, beautiful, popular student at St. Mary's. He urges them to make a deal with their parents — that they can phone home for a ride no matter what time, no matter what the circumstance, and a parent will come and get them.

Josh does these talks with the blessing of Lori Pegg, Heather's mom. She sat in on one and was nervous about hearing the graphic details. But at the same time, those details answered some of her questions. She knows everything about how her baby came into this world, and she felt she needed to know just how she left it.

Her broken neck. Her shattered pelvis. Her burst aorta.

Lori lives in Goderich now. Near Heather's grave. Today she and

two of Heather's girlfriends — adults now — will go there toting bouquets of lilacs.

Lori still talks of her daughter in the present tense. How Heather's hands get chapped in the winter. How she is sometimes too compassionate for her own good.

How she still hears her laughter.

Susan Clairmont's commentary appears regularly in *The Spectator*. sclairmont@thespec.com 905-526-3539

JOHN RENNISON,
THE HAMILTON
SPECTATOR

Hamilton Police auxiliary officer Josh Santa-Barbara was at the scene of the crash that killed Heather Pegg nine years ago.



Heather Pegg