

Impaired driving death devastates local family



By Bill Kilpatrick

Dwight Crawford and his partner Deb Ellison, were ecstatic the day that Dwight's son Jesse Crawford and his partner Dakota Milburn gave birth to twins on April 27, 2019. The babies, Stella and Felix were healthy and the plan was that Dwight and Deb were going to go and visit them as soon as possible, but Dwight was having health issues at the time so they decided to put it off until 2020, when they hoped Dwight would be in better shape to fly. However, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic they had to push plans to visit even further down the road and health issues continued to plague Dwight. They kept in touch with pictures and videos over Christmas and at birthdays, "We were lucky to have this phone to be able to at least video chat and hear them say hello," said Deb. Both Dwight and Deb were holding on to the hope that they would one day soon get to travel to Red Deer Alberta and finally see their grandkids in person. Fast forward to April 15, 2023, which for Jesse, Dakota, Felix and Stella began like any other day, but it wasn't just any other day, because Stella, got a bike as an early birthday present and learned to ride it for the very first time that morning. Jesse and Dakota were very proud of her, but they realized that now they had to get some helmets because the twins would want to be riding all the time now. "We had some errands to run that day," said Jesse "and If were going to go to town anyway let's just go to town and get some bicycle helmets, the kids can pick out their own and we can go for lunch." Jesse dropped Dakota off for a massage and he took the kids and their dog Tandum over to the park where the kids could play on the jungle gym until Dakota's massage was done. After they picked Dakota up they decided to go a local dog park, "We hadn't been to the dog park in a while," said Jesse, "It's a nice big area with lots of trials and trees and we can let the dog run. It was a beautiful day, it was like 15 degrees." By this time the kids were exhausted, said Jesse, so they decided that they would take the long way home to give the kids a chance to rest up a bit before they hopped back on their bikes at home. Stella, who refused to take off the new helmet, fell asleep in the car with it on. "We took it off of her head because she was sleeping because we didn't want her to get a sore neck with it on her head.

She had a little grumpy face as we took it off of her and she went to sleep with that grumpy face on and that was the last time she woke up. Ten minutes after the family left the dog park their car was t-boned in an intersection by a drunk driver killing Stella just 12 days before her fourth birthday and seriously injuring Dakota. Jesse pulled Stella from the car and despite her injuries, Dakota began doing CPR until the paramedics found out that she was her mother and made her stop, Dakota told Global News. "I can't hardly think about it," said Dwight through his tears as he recalled getting the phone call from Jesse the day of the accident, "I'll never be able to hug my granddaughter." "This would be the last thing I have of her," said Deb as she brought up a video of Felix and Stella together celebrating their last Christmas morning. The two kids can be seen happily opening presents and paying little attention to anything else. "You don't think about it," said Deb, "you think, "Oh, we got lots of time and all of a sudden you don't." According to a Global News article the driver of the vehicle that hit them, 41 year old Curtis George Miller, plead guilty to impaired driving causing death and bodily harm and he received a five year sentence for killing Stella, a two year sentence for injuring Dakota, and also received a 7 year driving ban. The judge decided that Miller sentences would be served concurrently as opposed to consecutively and for the family it was this sentence that was like rubbing salt in their wounds. Scott Millburn, Stella and Felix's grandfather, told rdnewsnow that, "his family cannot forgive, nor get over that he [Miller] may spend less time in jail than Stella did on earth." Miller is eligible for parole after serving one third of his sentence. Miller's sentence prompted Dakota's sister, Fallon Milburn, to begin a petition calling for sentences of people convicted of impaired driving causing death or bodily harm to have to be served consecutively as opposed to concurrently. [A link for the petition can be found at the end of the article]. The petition also calls on the government to "Amend the Criminal Code of Canada to impose driving bans equal to or greater than the prison sentence received for individuals convicted of impaired driving causing death or impaired driving causing bodily harm, and ensure the driving ban is served consecutively with prison sentences, not concurrently." The idea that Miller's driving ban began at the same time that he began his jail time was something that both Dwight and Deb found utterly ridiculous adding that they believe anyone who is convicted of impaired driving causing death should never be able to drive again. In 2018 the Government of Canada passed new impaired driving laws that increased the sentences that can be handed out to those convicted of impaired driving causing death and/or bodily harm. For impaired driving causing death the maximum penalty is now life imprisonment and for bodily harm it's 14 years, according to the Government of Canada's web page. "This petition is asking, "Why are people getting off [with light sentences]?" said Deb who further added, "Why is it that the crown attorney doesn't go for those big sentences?" The Crawford's and the Milburn's continue to try and cope with the overwhelming grief from Stella's death, but it has been overwhelming. Scott and his wife Susan Milburn told rdnewsnow that they continue to suffer "physical and mental distress." Susan admitted to self-harm and Scott said that he was in "constant fear of family members commuting" and receiving another phone call. Dakota is suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder explaining to Global News that, "I have nightmares, just random flashbacks," Milburn said. "It's just never ever the way you want to see your child, the last memories of her? the last memories our son has of her." Four year old Felix is struggling to process what has happened, and will sometimes just start crying, but luckily the family lives in Red Deer which, according to Dakota, allows them access to one of the only two psychologists who treat young children in Alberta. "It's just about wrecked our family," said Dwight. Bancroft This Week reached out to the local OPP detachment and sat down with Staff Sergeant and detachment commander Jeff McKinnon to speak about the prevalence of impaired driving in North Hastings. The numbers were shocking for McKinnon who pointed out that despite all the public relations campaigns by the OPP and Mothers Against Drunk Driving there has been a 174 percent increase in the number of impaired charges since 2018 when the federal laws were tightened. Prior to 2022 the highest number of impaired charges that were laid in one year was 57 in 2021, but in 2023 the number shot up to a staggering 107. Another number that was alarming was the 163 per cent increase in the number of impaired collisions from 2018 to 2023. In 2018 there were 6 impaired collisions, but that number jumped to 20 in 2023. Some other stats that McKinnon shared showed that in the last five years people between the ages of 25 and 44 made up 53 percent of impaired drives across the province and in terms of gender 22 per cent of impaired drivers were female and 78 percent were men. McKinnon said that people often attribute the high number of impaired drivers to young males, but that is clearly not the case. McKinnon wanted to thank the public for doing their part in reporting suspected impaired drives adding that, "Impaired driving is a community problem and we need the community to continue to play an active role in reporting suspected impaired drivers. We cannot do this alone." He also wants to warn those who may choose to drive while impaired that with the increase in staffing at the local detachment they are running RIDE programs on a daily basis, so if you make the choice to drink and drive you will get caught sooner rather than later said McKinnon. Dwight and Deb are planning on a trip this summer to Alberta to see Felix, but as they continue to grieve the loss of Stella they want to also continue to raise awareness about the dangers of impaired driving. They simply cannot understand why, with all the tragic stories related to impaired driving, people still chose to drive impaired, but they hope that if the Government of Canada can increase the penalties again, that maybe this time, people will make better choices. "If it helps just one kid stay alive, then it's

worth it,? said Dwight who asks that everyone sign the petition so another family will not have to suffer what they are going through. The petition can be found online at: www.ourcommons.ca/petitions/en/Petition/Details?Petition=e-4710