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Getting roasted because of a campfire

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Some incidents are so small that God's microscope could miss them.

Toronto bylaw 129/92, Section 12A, states that it is an offence to have an open fire without a permit. On the night of Saturday, Sept. 25, six people — four adults, two children — were roasting marshmallows on a campfire in Dufferin Grove Park in west-central Toronto. The police arrived and asked to see their permit. Although the marshmallow-roasters had one, they didn't have it with them, and, at 9:57 p.m., a ticket was written for \$55.

The police then called the fire department; a truck was dispatched and the firefighters extinguished the fire.

The fine was paid by cheque, mailed to city hall.

The Man Who Built It

Philip Saunders is slim, dark-haired, with the go-for-broke intensity of a one-time bicycle courier. He is working for a building contractor to learn the skills he needs to fix up the small, semi-detached house he shares with his wife Sarah and their 5-year-old son Carlin. The house, a few blocks from Dufferin Grove Park, is in an uproar of renovation.

Having ripped apart the living room, Saunders found himself with a station-wagonful of subflooring. A long-time resident of the neighbourhood, he was familiar with Dufferin Grove's campfire pits and came up with a scheme that promised to be both practical and fun. He and Sarah planned a marshmallow roast and invited a couple of friends to bring their son and join them.

He paid the \$10 fee and was issued a permit.

Strictly speaking, people who have campfires are only supposed to bring enough wood for that purpose, not a load of construction debris.

Strictly speaking, the permit is supposed to be posted near the fire, or be in the possession of the person it was issued to.

Strictly speaking, the permit called for the fire to be out by 9 p.m.

Philip Saunders was genuinely unaware of all these strictly speakings, but then Dufferin Grove's community activities are run by volunteers; it is not a military operation.

They had one heck of a fire. They toasted lots of marshmallows. The pile of subflooring was gone; nothing remained but embers, and these were turning to ash when, "Out of nowhere, high beams hit me."

A police cruiser. An officer asked for the permit. Saunders explained that he had one, but it was locked in the park office.

This didn't entirely satisfy the cop, but Saunders, confident that he was entirely entitled to do what he was doing, was inclined to shrug it off.

Things got a little — testy isn't quite the word.

When the cop announced that, although it was discretionary, he was giving him a ticket, Saunders shot back, "Fine, I'll see you in court."

That's how things got.

When the cop asked Saunders how old he was, Saunders told him 34. The officer, according to Saunders, said, "I'm four years older," and proceeded to give him a lecture on respect for authority.

"Where was the respect for me?" Saunders asked later. "The idea that I might not be lying, that I might be in the right?"

We would be missing something if we didn't detect a little testosterone bubbling on both sides. "He reeked of attitude," recalled Saunders. "He was definitely in wanna-be-top-dog mode."

The Honourary Mayor

of Dufferin Grove Park

Unelected, unappointed, unpaid. There was a volunteer vacuum and Jutta Mason has filled it for years.

In her mid-to-late 50s, Mason has a philosophical smile that smacks a bit of the long-gone era of do your own thing, and a bit of calculation: The folks who use Dufferin Grove have a good thing going and it would be crazy to screw it up.

The park, on Dufferin St. just south of Bloor, is in the middle of a mixed-income — plenty of Saabs in driveways, plenty of clunkers — ethnically mixed neighbourhood. The only Wal-Mart in downtown Toronto is across the street and does very well.

It's probably the busiest park in the city from the point of view of organized and semi-disorganized activities — hockey, pickup volleyball, parades. Its two wood-fired public bake ovens have been written about often; it is a rare day that their chimneys aren't smoking. And there are the three campfire pits, permits available from Jutta Mason on request, fee \$10.

But when Mason's smile slips there's a wrinkle of animosity. Toward litterers, graffiti sprayers, dog owners who don't scoop. But also toward the police working out of 14 Division, the local station.

She finds them harsh and judgmental with kids who aren't white. If they sometimes don't pay enough attention and are slow to respond to problems that crop up, they come on a bit high-handed when they do pay attention. Mostly, though, she finds them out of touch with life as it is lived in and around Dufferin Grove.

She blames this on the "bubble" — the bubble cops work in.

She attributes the bubble's existence to 1) the possibility that 75 per cent or more of Toronto's police officers live outside Toronto (the Toronto Police Service doesn't have statistics on this); 2) rapid turnover in 14 Division that keeps officers from becoming familiar with such things as the park's 10-year tradition of campfires; 3) so many of them spending so much time in patrol cars; and 4) their youth.

"The police that come here — they seem to have no curiosity about what's going on. They're very young."

(An aside: Her four points are highly debatable but are well worth debating.)

Then again, in her years of running the park she has maybe come to take things too much for granted. She had no idea — she hadn't bothered to read it — that the 2004 version of the overall permit, by some foul-up, called for fires to be put out by 9 p.m. Permits in previous years had specified, as does the one issued for next year, 11 p.m.

And she had neglected to give Saunders a Xerox of it.

"I got lax."

Jutta Mason, by the way, writes the Friends of Dufferin Grove Park's monthly newsletter. The headline in the October edition reads, "Police Catch Families Toasting Marshmallows."

The Officer Commanding

Superintendent James Dicks of 14 Division — its roughly 300 officers see to the well-being of 152,000 citizens — answers the phone this way: "Jimmy Dicks." He is close-cropped, a 35-year member of the Toronto force built along the lines of a howitzer shell, and with a manner to match. But the demeanour has chinks in it.

When I read him the headline from the Dufferin Grove newsletter, he sounded as if I'd just told him his dog had been run over. "Oh, that's good for public relations, isn't it?" he groaned.

And if I might leap ahead and sum up his position on the Sept. 25 incident, it would be this: We don't *do* campfires.

It also serves as a response to a comment by Jutta Mason in her newsletter to the effect that surely the police have more important things to deal with. But before arriving at it, he had assigned a detective to look into the whole business and report to him.

Despite the apparent randomness of the marshmallow-roast bust, it wasn't at all. "The cops were called to that location," Dicks said. Somebody who could see the fire from two blocks away had phoned and complained. "It must have been a big fire." I let this go.

When somebody calls in a complaint, the police, sooner or later, respond. In fact, there had been a complaint the night before, too, but to the fire department.

The local city councillor had organized a corn roast and somebody called and a fire truck was sent, but the firefighters found that the councillor's permit was in order.

Was it the same person? Somebody with some kind of grievance? A crank? Maybe somebody newly moved to the neighbourhood who was unfamiliar with local customs? Who knows?

When the police arrived on the 25th, Philip Saunders, Dicks reads from the report, "starts to get a little cheeky." I let this go, too.

"If the folks had been somewhat compliant and put out the fire, that would have been that."

Campfires aside, I ask him for some perspective. What are the three biggest problems the cops in his division have to deal with?

"Crack dealers and whores," he says.

That's two. I wait for him to list a third, but he doesn't. When he sees me waiting for more, he says, with maybe the barest hint of a smile, "You could write `prostitutes' instead of `whores.' That might be a little nicer."

Slinger's column usually appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

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