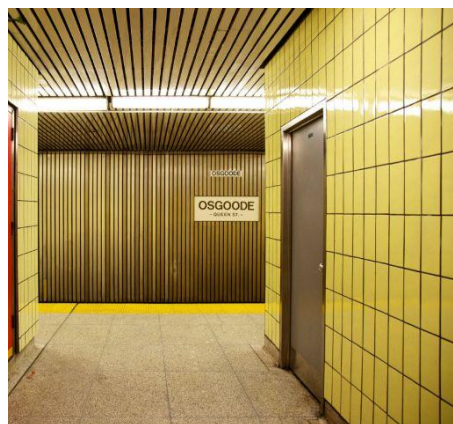


Why Didn't You Stop Him?

By Ernie Bies May 1, 2015

Those words have haunted me for fifty years.

Being a twenty year old kid from Northern Ontario coming to school in Toronto, every day brought new experiences and adventures. On this peaceful Sunday in the winter of 1965 I was at the Osgoode subway station in Toronto on my way to my girl friend's apartment for supper. I don't remember what brought me to that station that day but I will never forget the outcome. The Osgoode Station, at Queen Street on the University Avenue subway extension, was opened in 1963 and consisted of a central platform with the Northbound and Southbound trains on either side. Bright yellow tiled pillars are evenly spaced along both sides of the platform which was about



three feet above the sunken tracks. There was a small overhang on the platform where someone could press against the wall to avoid a train if he found himself on the tracks at the wrong time.

Alone on the platform, I leaned against the first pillar on the platform, casually reading the Saturday edition of the Toronto Star. Suddenly I heard, or really, felt the presence of someone else and glanced up to see an intense looking young man, eyes wide open and staring fixedly ahead, he strode past me, a man on a mission. He was about my age and size with short, close cropped sandy coloured hair. I did

notice that this young man seemed to be unusually anxious as I went uneasily back to my paper. A minute or two later I heard a distinct flop on the tracks, so I pushed myself off the pillar and looked down the platform and the tracks. They were both empty. Thinking that the young man was behind one of the other pillars, I started walking along, looking behind each pillar when I heard the train approaching in the tunnel. I started to run along the platform, trying to look under the overhang as the train entered the station when the young man suddenly appeared about ten feet further down the track. He had been crouching under the overhang, facing the on-rushing train and could not be seen from above. He scrambled on his hands and knees and lay down on his belly across the first rail. I could see his face as he looked right at me and then he simply lowered his head as the train bore down on him.



The driver slammed on the brakes and the train stopped about 60 feet beyond the location of the victim impact. It was over in seconds but I could see every movement as I continued running to the front of the train.

The driver was a trainee, dressed in a regular suit and a uniformed supervisor was standing beside him. The supervisor ran past me to the far end of the platform and hit the emergency shut-off button, cutting power to the rails and shutting down the system. He then dove under the train to check on the victim. The shaken driver was still on the train and he asked me: "Did you see him?" When I said, "yes", he said "Why didn't you stop him" Those words have haunted me all my life. I stood there with my mouth open, unable to speak, and the supervisor, who had crawled under the train, shouted: "Forget it, half of him is at the front and half is two cars back".

I wonder if the trainee driver changed vocations that day? The station was immediately closed and people were ushered up the stairs to continue their journey above ground not knowing what had just happened. I waited to talk to the police

and within a few minutes an ambulance crew came running in with a stretcher that was really a zippered body bag attached to a hoop. The police said they did not need anything from me so I went on to see my girl friend, arriving late and in a state of shock, almost in tears. There would be no supper that night as I recounted my horrifying experience. I had been to funerals before and had seen deceased people but had never been the last person to look into someone's eyes just before they died. Perhaps I should have contacted the family but I don't think what I had seen would have provided any comfort.

Going back to the scene a day later, I saw a black stain on the tracks where they had mopped up the blood and put some colorant down to camouflage it. There were chalk marks on the platform showing where the driver first saw the victim, where he was on impact and where the train stopped. I made a note of them and have them somewhere. I seem to remember 50 feet on one side and 63 on the other but am not completely sure, but the total of 113 feet rings a bell. Ironically the train number also ended in the number 13. Unlucky 13. Trains normally travel up to 80 kph in the tunnels and slow down to about 35 kph as they approach a station. Normally they use the entire length of the platform to make their stop but the emergency stopping distance at the lower speed would be about 100 feet.

The only trace of the victim was a bloody handprint left by a first responder about a foot up on a nearby pillar that the cleanup crew had missed. A few days later an obituary was posted in the Toronto Star reporting the death of a 23 year old Finnish man who had died suddenly on that Sunday. No details were provided but "suddenly" usually means by suicide. Another relevant fact: the main Psychiatric Hospital in Toronto at that time was at 999 Queen Street, a few miles from the Osgoode Station. I often wondered if he was a patient there and what had driven him to this final act.

Speaking with a TTC employee at the St. George Station later, he informed me that there was at least one suicide a month with more in December near Christmas time. TTC policy was not to publicize these events for fear of encouraging copycats. If you have ever been on the subway and it has been shut down for about two hours for maintenance, that usually means a suicide has occurred and the clean up and investigation was underway.

For many years the TTC drivers complained about inadequate training for employees who had experienced the trauma of a “jumper”. The TTC now has counseling programs for employees and customers who have witnessed a suicide, something from which the rookie driver and I would have benefitted in 1965. In 2010, a husband and wife, who were both subway operators, both had desperate souls jump in front of their trains 11 weeks apart. They were devastated by the experience and required months of counseling before they could return to work.

In 2009, the Toronto Sun won an appeal through a freedom of information request forcing the TTC to release suicide statistics. These showed that not much had changed in the last 50 years with the numbers of suicides steadily increasing along with the traffic and line expansion of the system. The Toronto Sun reported that there were 218 subway suicides since 1998, an average of about 20 a year.

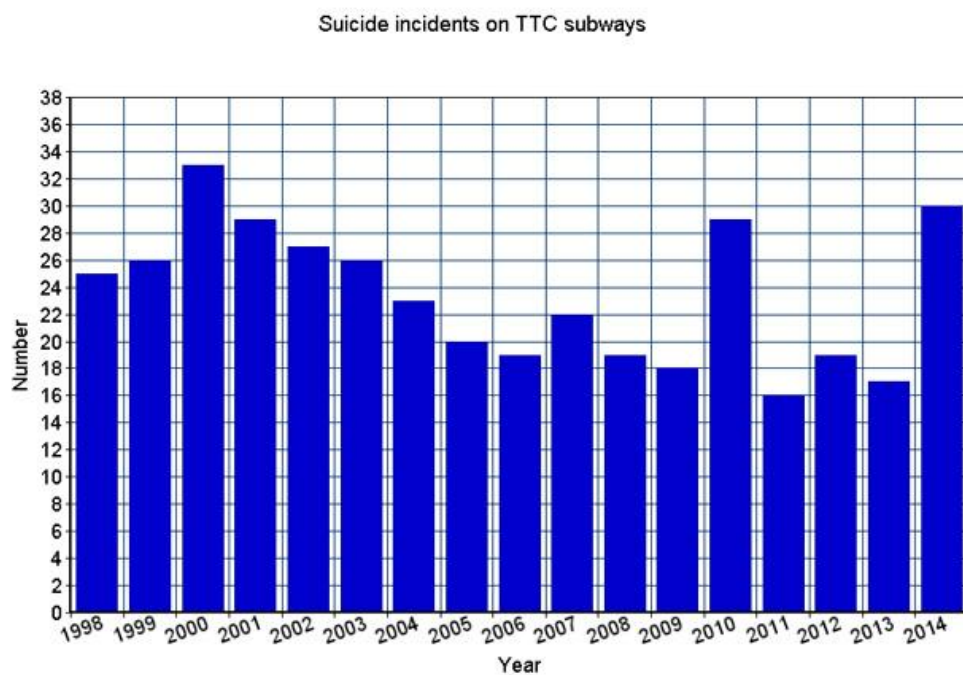
The TTC embarked on several initiatives to deal with the suicide problem. In 2011, the commission launched the Crisis Link program and that included putting posters in all of the subway stations along with free pay telephone links to counselors at designated waiting areas.

Front-line staffers were also trained to watch for signs of possible jumpers, like those who take off their shoes or clothes, or hang around on the platform. If a person in emotional distress is recognized, an unsafe platform message is sent to transit control, and the trains slow to a crawl when entering that station. This could have saved the jumper I saw in 1965.

That simple telephone link and a trained eye appear to have helped reduce the number of suicides to 13 in 2014, bringing the rate back to 1966 levels.

As reported by Ben Spur in Toronto/Now on February 12, 2015.

*“According to the TTC, there were 30 suicide attempts on subway tracks in 2014, nearly double the 17 in 2013 and higher than the annual average of 23.4. Agency staff say that one-third of the attempts were fatal, and no one station appears to be a magnet for suicidal behaviour. “*



Graph Source:  
Toronto Transit  
Commission

While in the past the TTC policy had been not to talk about suicides, the current practice is to de-stigmatize mental illness and try to get people the help they need.

In addition to training staff and reaching out to potential victims, there are very costly changes in infrastructure that would alleviate the problem such as Platform Edge Doors (PEDs) as shown in the TTC mockup below.



Toronto City Council has debated whether to spend more than a billion dollars to install these Platform Edge Doors (PEDs) throughout the system.

The entire track area would be walled off and the doors only opened when the train was in the station. The Yonge-

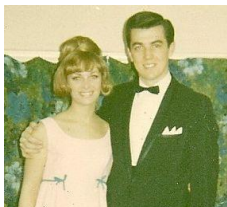
University-Spadina line would require \$551 million and the Bloor- Danforth line \$614 million to erect them. These doors are thought to increase service efficiency

and reduce maintenance costs by preventing fires caused by paper and debris falling onto the track area and to deter suicides. They would also prevent people from accidentally falling or being pushed onto the tracks, as has occurred in recent years.

The Toronto Council voted to request that the TTC consider retrofitting the existing stations and include PEDs in future designs, though the source of the money has not yet been identified. The PEDs have proved effective in deterring suicides in transit systems in Paris, Hong Kong and Singapore. Above the \$1.1 billion price tag, there is also the expense of upgrading the train operating system to an automated system allowing the trains to align properly with the subway doors. Some councillors expressed the concern that the money could be better spent on other infrastructure or mental health programs.

While progress on suicide prevention has been slow, the recent initiatives by the TTC and Toronto City Council have had a positive effect in dealing with the problem. Many lives have been saved and perhaps a few bystanders were spared the horrible question "Why didn't you stop him?"

#### **Acknowledgements:**



Special thanks to my girlfriend Sandy who was there for me fifty years ago and is still with me as we celebrate our 45th wedding anniversary later this year.

#### **References:**

Personal memories

The Toronto Sun, March 27, 2010 Subway of Horrors

Torontoist website Nov.12, 2014. Subway Suicides - the Case for Platform Barriers on the TTC

Toronto/Now website, Feb. 12, 2015 Debate on Barriers Sheds Light on TTC Suicides.

Wikipedia