



The death of an elephant

Matt Torigian*

On December 13, 1929, in the small town of Grantham, Ontario, Canada, a young boy named Haratoun Artinian was born. Haratoun was the proud son of Armenian immigrants, Dickran and Gulvart Artinian. When their son joined the local police department, the irony was not lost on Dickran and Gulvart, who had fled war and persecution at the hands of the deadly authorities during the first genocide of the 20th century. If the sight of their first-born son wearing a uniform triggered images of violence, abuse, murder, and death, they didn't let it deter his noble pursuit. They beamed with pride when their young boy, known to his friends as Harry, standing tall and proud, walked into their home wearing his uniform for the first time. They avoided looking at his gun, and the ominous wooden club dangling loosely from his thick black duty belt, and instead trained their eyes on his cherub grin, which revealed his innocence and genuine belief that he could someday make a difference. A short time into his career, young Harry would become a household name. The pride and joy of the local Armenian community would soon begin a journey that would resonate for decades, and generations to come.

Harry found pride and purpose as a police officer with what later became the Niagara Regional Police Service. Known fondly to everyone as Sergeant Harry, his voice and message was heard almost every morning on the local radio station, 610 CKTB. He engaged with almost every child and attended almost every school throughout the Niagara area. Every year, without fail or fatigue. His mustachioed smile, hearty laugh, and bright round brown eyes lent to his approachable and trusting demeanour. As did his sincere dedication to positively influencing the lives of children, sharing life's lessons while serving as a role model to those who needed one. An endearing quality of Harry's was that he knew that the position and presence he so enjoyed couldn't have been accomplished by him alone. Harry had a partner, his trusted sidekick, the grey, fuzzy, and affable Elmer the Safety Elephant. They were indiscernible, and inseparable.

Throughout the school year, they appeared together on early morning radio shows, followed almost every day by a visit from school to school, throughout the community. Together they shared safety tips with young children, whose wide-eyed, open and accepting embrace helped create a sense of comfort and support, as they gained knowledge and wisdom that many would carry with them through their teenage and adult years. Working together, this first-generation

Canadian and this personified gentle giant reflected the nobility of countless women and men who enjoyed the unquestioned trust of their communities.

Elmer, however, was not the brainchild of Sergeant Harry, nor was Elmer local only to the Niagara community. In 1946, then Toronto mayor Robert Hood Saunders visited Detroit, Michigan, where he was introduced to a novel approach to teaching safety tips to children in elementary schools. The city of Detroit used a school safety patrol student as its messenger. Upon the mayor's return to Toronto, he envisaged a similar safety program for his city and sought the assistance of a local newspaper editor as well as the Toronto Police Department.

Undeterred from any erroneous perception hinting at the *politicization of policing*, Toronto Police Inspector Vernon Page, and Toronto Telegram Editor Bas Mason both embraced the mayor's school safety program initiative. They chose to adopt a cartoon elephant as their mascot, noting an elephant's remarkable memory (Canada Safety Council).

Capitalizing on community and police partnerships, whilst involving private industry, the iterations of Elmer the Safety Elephant multiplied, as did the program of relentless engagement. As communities across Ontario asked to join the program, the copyrights were generously handed over by the Toronto Telegram, first to the Ontario Safety League, and then broadly throughout Canada. A moment of community mobilization took root. Those old enough to remember Elmer's visit to their own school will recall that his messages went well beyond crossing only on a green light. They extended to include concepts of community, kindness, and pro-social responsibility.

Sergeant Harry Artinian, school resource officer extraordinaire. Elmer the Safety Elephant, avant-garde community partner. Mayor Robert Saunders, contemporary politician.

As the *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* closes out an incredibly successful, watermark year, it is remarkably profound that 2023 included editorials and papers focusing on youth. Michael DeValve reminded us of the lessons from Jonathan Livingston Seagull (DeValve, 2023). Contributing Editor Vivien Lee shed light on how our rapidly changing world affects today's youth (Lee, 2023). Fittingly, Robert Christmas reinforced our purpose and optimism as police strive to inspire a new and diverse generation of young people (Christmas, 2023). Editor-in-Chief Norm Taylor once again directed the 15th cohort of the 20-year Executive Global Studies Program, where, this year, Canadian police executives

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explored “the intricate dynamics between youth and policing, with a particular focus on [...] trust building in the Canadian context” (CACP, 2023).

At a time when School Resource Officers are being championed, maligned, and debated throughout North America, when police response is being discussed and designed with a view to involving non-police partners, when local politics is forcing a hand in the deployment models of various police activities, and when the radicalization and post-truth social media distractions of young people present real and dangerous threats to the safety of our communities, we take pause and reflect on what was, what we’ve lost, and how we can recapture our noble pursuits of authentically engaging with our youth for a healthier and safer future. As noted, such was the purpose of the aforementioned research on the 2023 Executive Global Studies Program, sponsored by the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police. Similarly, it was recently discussed in detail at the 9-11 Voices Resilience Symposium in New York City. It is also why the journal’s Mission Sponsor, Niche Technology, is indefatigable in their efforts to further research, evidence, and technology to better enable community safety and well-being solutions.

Have the police lost their compasses, or their own bearings, or have broader shortcomings in public policy forced all of us in CSWB off Sergeant Harry’s pursuits? Although the answer may be as elusive as climbing atop Disraeli’s pole, one thing remains certain: the community needs that inspired Harry and his colleagues some 75 years ago have never been more complex and urgent than they are now and will be in the

coming years. Today’s policymakers must raise their sights to regain the same kind of courage, innovation, and trust that brought young people into decades of community building.

In the meantime, many police services/departments/forces (words matter) across North America have lost a valuable partner. On September 9, 2023, at the young age of 94, Sergeant Harry Artinian passed away, predeceased by his parents, his brother Charlie, aunts, uncles, friends, and sadly, his trusted elephant.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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