

From B.C. to Manitoba—road safety guy shifting gears

Priority is for all Manitobans to take ownership of safety

To be honest, I had no idea what to expect when I announced I was leaving Vancouver for the windswept prairies to take up a new role as Road Safety Manager at Manitoba Public Insurance. I can tell you my former co-workers more or less left me with the impression that I was leaving paradise on earth to move to a harsh, primitive land of biting cold and large, cunning insects. They gave me a balaclava as a going away present.

Of course, these were obnoxious West Coast people who had never set foot outside of their local coffee houses for fear of suffering painful cappuccino withdrawal. People I met who had actually been to Winnipeg were far more complimentary, and with good reason. What I've seen of the city is lovely, and the weather has been more than kind. And, the Winnipeggers I have met have been funny, helpful and more than friendly.

Of course, these same nice, friendly people also waste no time in telling



**Road
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**Paul
Allen**

me how truly lucky I was to escape grey, soggy, wickedly expensive, earthquake-destined, snobby and cold-hearted Vancouver for a place as sunny, diverse and wonderfully cultural as Winnipeg.

Seems like human beings, as a rule, don't agree on much from place to place, do they?

"I am a good driver"

But, in my opinion as a road safety professional, there is one unifying factor, one common thought that brings us together, regardless of location, gender, race or religion. And the universal truth held by all is: "I am an above-average driver—far better than that bozo in front of me, who obviously got his

license from a little plastic bag inside his Honey Nut Cheerios."

Road safety, in the minds of many, is CheckStops and speeding tickets, all appropriately designed to catch the "bad drivers." And, since very few people consider themselves bad drivers, the rationale is road safety is more or less directed at "someone else."

My job as the road safety manager at MPI does involve working to prevent high risk driving behaviours like speeding and impaired driving. It also involves an education component, like radio and television ads to remind people of the rules of the road, and comprehensive driver education programs. But there is a much more important, and much less obvious, side to the job.

Think about this. All the well-intentioned messages, ads, sound bites, commercials and brochures out there, while key components in delivering our road safety messages, can have little impact on someone who thinks they are directed at someone else.

I believe one of the biggest (and toughest) parts of my job is to make sure that the road safety messages we deliver are understood by, and have an impact on, every person driving a vehicle. Sure, I'm trying to reach the guy with the Cheerio license, but I'm also trying to reach the above-average driver, too.

Do dumb things

Although some people are menaces on the road, most are actually pretty good drivers. But that doesn't mean they don't do dumb things; "finesse" four-way stops, add 15 km/h because they're late for work, dig around for that catapulted baby soother, or generally let their minds wander away from the very complicated task of keeping a vehicle safely on the road.

My mandate is to reduce the number of accidents and the number of people injured or killed each year on the roads in Manitoba. Enforcement and education will help with the task at hand, but what will truly make a difference is that shift in driver

mentality, when we finally take an honest and critical look at our own driving behaviour rather than always assuming that someone else is the problem. Once we all assume personal responsibility for what happens in that space of time between pulling out of the driveway and pulling back in, then the real changes can begin.

I am allotted 750 words a week in this column. My plan is to talk about a variety of road safety issues, and to respond to your thoughts and comments... which means you need to let me know what you're thinking. I can be reached on email at pallen@mpi.mb.ca.

Next week; how many parents does it take to correctly install a child car seat?

In the meantime, be RoadWise.

Paul Allen is Road Safety Manager for Manitoba Public Insurance. He would like to hear from you. His e-mail address is pallen@mpi.mb.ca and his mailing address is Room 824, 234 Donald Street, Box 6300, Winnipeg, MB R3C 4A4.