

Cyclists, motorists look for mutual respect

Tragedy has some cyclists and motorists feeling the need for mutual road respect

VIVIAN SONG

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Cyclists and motorists negotiate Queen St. W. "People are feeling particularly vulnerable," says Yvonne Bambrick, of the Toronto Cyclists Union.

Lately, cyclist Janet Irvine has noticed drivers are more willing to give her the right-of-way.

Strangers are urging Jake Williams, a bike courier, to be careful on the streets.

And Nick Ganas, 16, has finally shaken off that adolescent armour of invincibility and is wearing his bike helmet.

Since Monday night's confrontation that led to the death of courier Darcy Allan Sheppard and the downfall of former Ontario attorney general Michael Bryant, it seems an atmosphere of détente has descended upon the mean streets of Toronto.

"I've noticed in the last few days that, on the smaller side streets, drivers have been giving me the right-of-way at a stop sign," says Irvine, a 36-year-old yoga instructor. "As long as you seem to be courteous, they'll let you go first."

Getting the right-of-way and extra space aren't lost on cyclists as they're rare and uncharacteristic gestures.

For University of Toronto staffer Steve, 43, who declined to give his last name, an act of kindness from the patient driver who gave him extra room to make a right turn did not go unnoticed.

"He was a young guy and you could just sense that he was very conscious of where we were."

For some territorial cyclists and motorists, the fatal accident has only served to widen the gulf between them. But for others, like newbie bike courier Williams, 22, the front-page event has reinforced the need for mutual road respect and even brought out admissions of road transgressions.

"A lot of the time it's not the drivers' fault," he says.

As a new driver, Williams acknowledges cyclists can be hard to spot, especially when they're weaving in and out of traffic and turning corners at high speed.

"Learning to drive definitely adds a level of sympathy," he says.

The incident also shook up his youthful notion of superhuman infallibility, he says, a sentiment cyclists have shared with Yvonne Bambrick, executive director of the Toronto Cyclists Union.

"People are feeling particularly vulnerable," she says.

Though a conscientious cyclist herself, Bambrick feels Monday's incident has made her more expressly communicative: She's making eye contact with motorists and giving clear signals.

"There's a heightened sense of awareness about how we go through the city."

But not everyone has gotten the message.

During yesterday's noon-hour rush, for instance, a female biker eastbound on College St. was talking on her cell phone as she rode. A bike courier was weaving in and out of traffic, dodging other cyclists and traffic lights.

And on Bloor St. near where Sheppard was killed, a female cyclist was seen negotiating the street and other cars with a cup of coffee in one hand.