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Speaking from the heart

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POLICE





By Brett
Williams



SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

When it came to the Christmas road-safety message last year, the Police Association knew who could best get it across.

If she had one thing wrong, it was that no one would watch or listen to her. Major Crash brevet sergeant Di-Ann Salotti never thought she was the right person to feature in an interview on social media. She insisted that, on the Police Association Facebook page, others would prove “far more interesting” interviewees than she would.

But the Police Association knew Salotti as one of its more gregarious, engaging members, with a capacity for persuasive, heartfelt commentary. And the point of the interview was, after

all, to drive home the road-safety message for the 2017-18 festive season.

“No one ever gets bored in a conversation with Di,” association president Mark Carroll says. “She has a very direct, entertaining style about her and a quick wit.”

“But she also cares about her work and the people it brings her into contact with, like the families of crash victims.”

“We thought those traits, along with her vast experience and dedication as a crash investigator, made her the perfect fit for our video interview. And we were right.”



“I was really struggling. Sometimes you just soak up grief like a sponge, which is really not good because I’ve got no right to feel like that about strangers.”

Above:
Brevet Sergeant Di-Ann Salotti in the Facebook interview.

The four-minute video, shot in a city studio and uploaded last December, drew an overwhelming response of 155,000 views, more than 1,000 likes, and 844 shares.

And the viewer comments seemed a clear indication of how meaningfully Salotti had delivered the message.

“Beautifully and eloquently spoken,” one viewer posted, while another wrote “Wise counsel impressively delivered”. Other viewers insisted that the video “should be on all TV stations”, and “shown at schools”.

The glowing endorsements and success of the video (*Take Care on the Roads? This is Why*) have left Salotti “astounded, baffled and dumbfounded”.

“I still can’t believe it,” she says. “I’m not good at that kind of public exposure, and I don’t really feel the need to be out in the spotlight. I don’t feel comfortable with it. If I did, I would’ve chosen a different career.”

All the attention and accolades still have the 49-year-old feeling “quite a bit embarrassed”. She much prefers to keep her profile low and enjoy her downtime with police officer husband Andrew and her border collie and two basenjis.

But Salotti concedes that she is proud of her contribution as the Facebook video interviewee.

She claims not to know why the video was so successful but trusts in the theory of one of her friends. And the theory is simple: the Salotti commentary sounded “straight from the heart” and therefore genuine.

“She (my friend) said it made her cry when she listened to it,” Salotti says. “She had no idea because I don’t talk about my work with her very much.”

“A lot of people commented on how it just seemed very personal, genuine and sincere and didn’t seem scripted or fake, which would be because it wasn’t.”



Of course, there was much more to the death messages and multiple fatalities Salotti spoke about in the interview. And she agreed to elaborate for the *Police Journal*.

There was the toughest-ever death message she had to deliver to a woman whose son had died on New Year's Day, 2016. He had slammed his car into a tree on Kangaroo Island.

Salotti arrived with the news at 8am and could tell that the mother, by her expression, had already sensed what was coming. She just knew one of her children was dead and immediately asked: "Which one is it?"

It reminded Salotti of the death-message scene in WWII film *Saving*

Private Ryan (1998). Mrs Ryan (Amanda Boxer) sees military officials turn up at her home and knows that one or more of her four sons are dead.

Ever the professional, Salotti kept her message delivery and interaction with the mother just as cops must: honest, empathetic and supportive. No displays of emotion in front of, or with, primary or secondary victims.

But this encounter was heart-rending, particularly when the mother revealed that, when she was pregnant with her now dead son, her husband had died in a car crash.

"With some people," Salotti says, "you think: 'What did they do that they deserve this much pain?'"

Top and above: The crashed white Magna in which a woman died on Christmas Day, 2009, near Tintinara.

"She loses her husband when she's pregnant and, then, the very son that she was pregnant with she loses as well – both of them to the road."

Salotti felt the grieving mother's agony and became tearful, but only after she was out of sight, heading back to her police car.

"I was really struggling," she says. "Sometimes you just soak up grief like a sponge, which is really not good because I've got no right to feel like that about strangers."

What Salotti came to regret most was that the dead man's mother had followed her out to speak to her and seen the tears in her eyes.

"Oh, my God, dear, are you okay?" she asked Salotti.

An embarrassed Salotti apologized and told the woman she was fine and not to worry about her.

Another festive-season fatality Salotti related was a horrific Christmas Day crash on Dukes Highway near Tintinara in 2009. It was a case of a soon-to-be-married couple falling victim to driver fatigue. The passenger, a woman, died on impact.

The crash happened around 10:30pm. Salotti and one of her colleagues got to the scene just after midnight on Boxing Day. The death-message procedure had to play out as required, but the dead woman's mother was to receive the news on her birthday.

Salotti and her colleague were too far from the city to call on the mother themselves. Other police undertook that task.

"The notification was no merry Christmas and happy birthday," Salotti says. "Christmas Day for that family? It would have become a day of mourning forever."

An equally tragic case in the Salotti files is that of a young woman who lost her fiancé in another crash on Dukes Highway. She had lost a baby to SIDS two-and-a-half years earlier and was now seven months pregnant with a child who would never know its father.



“I don’t wake up in the middle of the night with a scene of horror in my head. It doesn’t overcome me. If it did, I’d leave, and pretty much immediately, because that’s very unhealthy.”

“There she was on the phone to me in the middle of the night,” Salotti recalls. “And, in two months, she’s going to give birth on what should have been the happiest day of their lives – and he’s dead.”

Of each loss of life Salotti talked about in the Facebook interview, none was sadder than that of the Inglis family in 2010.

Killed in a crash near Williamstown were mother Melania and her daughters, seven-year-old Logan and 10-year-old Claudia and her friend Georgie Pearce.

Salotti, who investigated the crash with her entire team, spoke of husband and father Kym Inglis in the Facebook interview.

“It’s like, in the blink of an eye, he’s gone from being married with children to having no family,” she said.

Above and above right: The crashed red Commodore in which Melania, Logan and Claudia Inglis and friend Georgie Pearce died.

Salotti, a psychology student, recognizes that every vehicle wreck, every vision of death, and all the “incomprehensible” human suffering she has seen will never leave her. But she insists that the horrors are “buried in my subconscious”.

“While that continues, it’s not a problem,” she says. “I don’t wake up in the middle of the night with a scene of horror in my head.

“It doesn’t overcome me. If it did, I’d leave, and pretty much immediately, because that’s very unhealthy. It’d only have to happen to me twice, and I’d think: ‘That’s it! I’m out!’ ”

And she suspects that, were she ever to leave Major Crash, she would quit policing altogether.

If that happened, it would end the career for which Port Pirie-born Salotti had always seemed destined. The youngest of four siblings, she was six when her mother tried to shield her from the sight of a serious crash near their home.

But the youngster sneaked out through a window and went to watch the first responders cut victims out of the wreck. Rather than traumatized, she was “absolutely fascinated” by the dynamics of the crash.

“And that was it,” she says. “By the time I was 15, I’d finally worked out that I needed to be in the police to do this (investigate crashes).”

Salotti, who had grown up in Port Pirie, got to undertake work experience with Major Crash as a teenager. She felt unready to join SAPOL, however, after it accepted her application in 1989.

Over the next few years, she worked for Visy Board in Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne and for a recruiting agency, also in Melbourne. Back in Adelaide, she took on some temp work for government departments before reapplying to join SAPOL in 1998.

Accepted for the second time, she began her training with Course 10 and, in 2000, joined Holden Hill Traffic.

Still unattracted to other fields of policing, she scored two secondments

Below: The remains of the white Commodore in which the fiancé of the pregnant woman died; **bottom:** the truck with which the Commodore crashed on the Dukes Highway.

to Major Crash in 2005 and won a permanent position there in 2006. And even now, 13 years later, her fascination with the dynamics of vehicle crashes remains.

"I never tire of looking at them (wrecks)," she explains. "I can go to the compound and I'm still wowed by the damage to the cars involved in the crashes. I think: 'My God, that's just incomprehensible,' even though it's what I've done for a long time now."



And, after that long time, Salotti is simply "not the same person" she was before she joined Major Crash. She finds that most people expect the job to have hardened her when, indeed, the opposite is the case.

"When I started at Major Crash, no one ever saw me cry, and I didn't cry," she says. "No one would know what was going on in my head at any given time."

Now, Salotti jokingly describes her transformation into a "pathetic, sappy little wimp". "It's not that bad," she says with a laugh, "but it certainly has changed me."

Still, most expect to see Salotti serve out the rest of her working life with Major Crash. She took on her psychology studies because she loves to explore "what makes people tick" and she cares deeply about the grieving families she consults.

"They've been put in a situation that's completely beyond their control," she says. "It's a pain that's incomprehensible to most of us."

"I want to do the best job I possibly can to help them through that. I want to get the answers to as many questions as they have, and I want to be honest with them."

"They might not want to hear that their 18-year-old son was drunk and on drugs, but there's no point in not telling them. It's going to come out eventually."

The Facebook comments



Spoken very well with first-hand experience and compassion. A great spokesperson with a powerful message to us all.



This ad should be constantly on tv, not just for the silly season, but for every day of the year. Should be shown at schools, before handing over a licence...



She is very kind and empathetic.



Great insight Di.



Thanks Di, great person for the job, smart, knowledgeable and always doing a great job in hard situations.



Don't know how you do this Di but am grateful for your compassion and well-spoken words.



Beautifully and eloquently spoken with brevity and compassion.



You can't make your message any clearer Di. This clip should be on all TV stations.



Wise counsel impressively delivered.



This should be broken up into sections and run as adds on tv. **PJ**