

# The Toronto **OBSERVER**

## Filming the city's darkest hours

A freelance cameraman keeps his eyes on the city at 4 a.m.



Freelance cameraman Peter Mills films an apartment fire in Scarborough at 4:30 a.m. *LINDA VACHON/TORONTO OBSERVER*

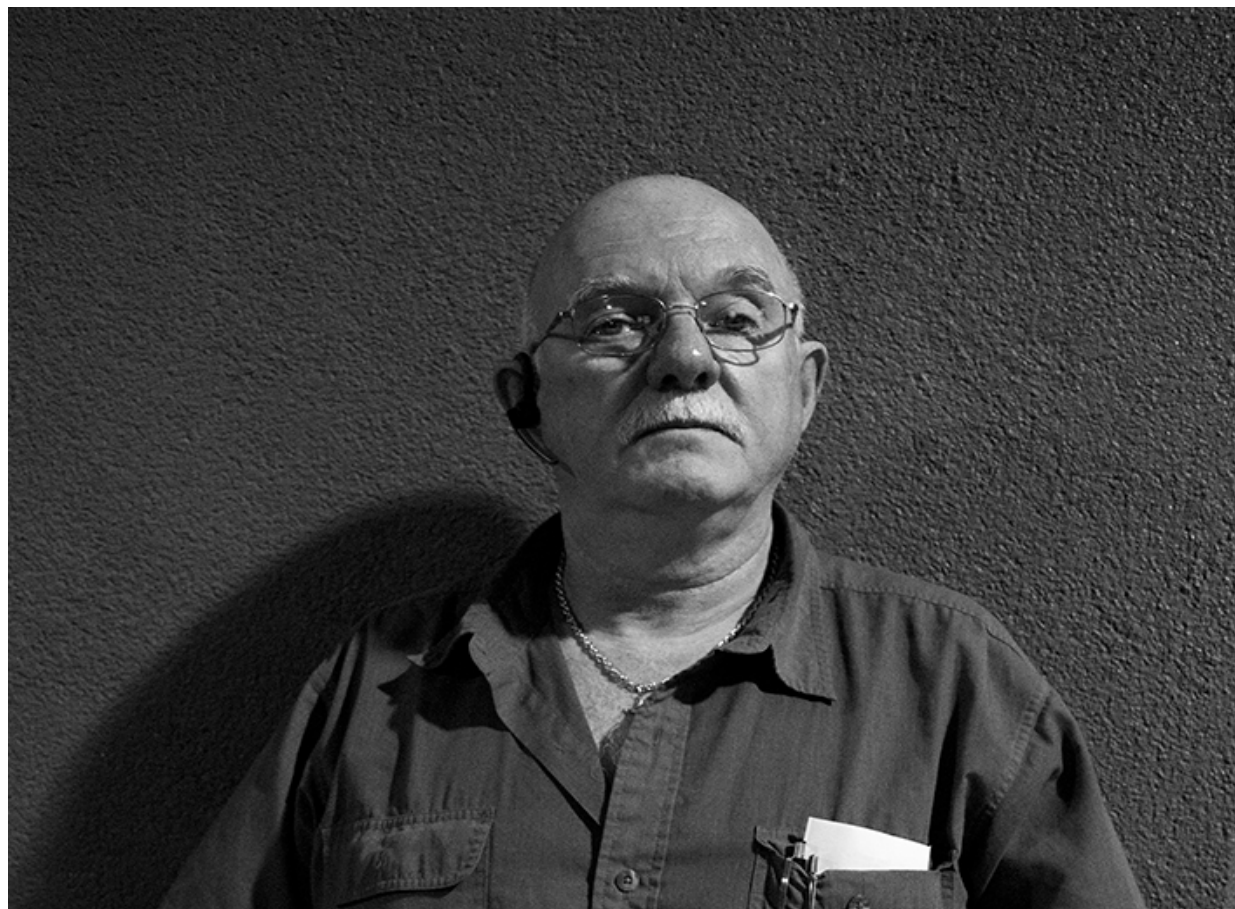
BY **LINDA VACHON**

JUNE 10, 2019

As the dark sky lingers, the screen from a laptop installed on the passenger seat brightens the inside of Peter Mills' black Jeep. The silence is interrupted by an occasional crackle from one of the nine scanners he uses to monitor fire, police and ambulance calls across the Greater Toronto Area.

Mills has been capturing scenes of late-night/early morning drama on Toronto's streets through the lens of his video camera for over 34 years. He listens for a certain type of scanner call, which will lead him to the type of scene a newsroom will want him to shoot.

"You get better footage because you're there quicker," says Mills, who prefers to work overnight.



"Usually the stuff shot from the night shift has a tendency to be a little more dramatic than the day shift stuff." -Peter Mills

The downside to nights is trying to stay awake, he says. Coffee and energy drinks keep him fueled through the night.

On this night, Mills is chatting with a reporter when something catches his ear on the radio. He stops, replays the scanner call from Toronto Fire and within a minute he's tearing out of the parking to a residential fire in Scarborough. The address is 27 kilometres away, but with empty streets at 3:59 a.m., his drive will be a quick 24 minutes.

By 4:35 a.m., Mills has already filmed a variety of angles of the streams of smoke meandering out of a second floor apartment window in a Scarborough strip mall. He knows exactly what footage a news editor will pay for. It's why he is careful to exclude a shot of the giant Adult Video sign that dominates a large portion of the building's front.

Mills uploads the footage he has just taken to one of the several Toronto news outlets for whom he freelances. He only gets paid for the footage that goes to air.

He barely has time to pack up his equipment when he gets another call, this time about a gunshot victim being taken to Sunnybrook Hospital. It's 19 kilometers away. Once again, he races off through the city streets.

Last year, Toronto reached a record high of 96 homicides, prompting a call for greater gun control, including by Toronto Mayor John Tory. In his three decades as a cameraman, Mills says that he's seen an increase in the level of violence in the city, but he doesn't think a gun ban will be effective.

"(It's) not just gun violence, but stabbings, beatings. People just being knocked down and kicked in the head until they are unconscious and they can't get up," said Mills.

"(It's) all sorts of violence, not just gun violence." duties.

"We like to call smartphones the Swiss Army knife of reporting," says Susan Newhook, assistant professor of journalism at the University of King's College in Halifax. She is referring to the fact that the devices come equipped with a lot of different apps and attachments to increase their versatility.

She says that while they may not be the very best available, “they have a lot of tools.”

Newhook says that those who resist the move to a mobile device because of the concern over video quality should give cellphones a try.

Mills says he thinks the quality of phones will soon surpass the quality of the video that he shoots on his current camera.

“If it was more cost effective, why not?” he says of the possibility of switching over to a cellphone.

As the sun rises, Mills will have driven over 50 kilometres from one end of the city and back. He ends his shift at the water’s edge at Humber Bay. The downtown skyline is reflected in the stillness of the water. It’s a perfect antidote to the earlier night’s frenzy.