

SUBURBAN DIARY

Pedestrian safety is his ongoing personal crusade

By Allan Lewis | March 31, 2005

Another in a series of occasional essays on how we live our lives.

I know I've gotten some folks mad at me because I'm so single-minded, maybe even bull-headed, in trying to persuade them to stop blocking their sidewalks with snow.

The other day I spoke with a business owner whose plower I suspected had violated the law. "What's it to you?" he asked.

Even my wife is sometimes perplexed by my passion for this issue. "Why do you care so much? It's not just that blind guy, is it?"

There was a thirty-something blind man who used to catch the commuter bus into Boston back when I worked downtown. We both walked along Derby Street to reach the bus stop. In winter, the sidewalk near that street's elementary school was well shoveled, but plenty of other stretches were rutted, icy, or completely untouched. What really got me mad was that snow plowers built up walls of snow along driveway edges, completely blocking sidewalk access.

There was enough traffic on that road that I didn't feel completely safe when I had to walk in it. But what about forcing a blind man into a street that buzzed with traffic during commuting or school drop-off and pick-up hours? That burned me up.

And it got me thinking about sidewalk safety eight or 10 years ago. One time, I knocked on a door and politely alerted the owner about the blind man who had to find his way around the snow barriers. But I didn't start my crusade on this topic until three years ago, when I was forced into busy Elm Street by a snow pile blocking the sidewalk from the city's metered lot to the stores on Washington Street in West Newton. I stood there a while and noticed adults and children tracing my steps into the road. Somebody could get hit by a careless driver. Finally, I took action.

Since then, I've learned a lot about how local government works and doesn't work. As an alderman warned me, local government moves at a tortoise's pace.

I estimate that I've spent 1,000 hours on the matter. That includes meetings, investigating,

talking to and e-mailing aldermen, reporting violations, and expanding my circle to folks at City Hall.

I scored a small victory this year when the Newton police agreed to investigate violations of the updated regulation banning people from placing snow on sidewalks.

But I still don't fully understand why I've sunk so much time into this effort.

Maybe it's because I'm short and because I'm the younger of two brothers, so I've always felt like sticking up for the little guy. When I'm on the phone or the Internet, my opponents can't see my height. They just feel my passion and my persistence. Maybe they silently curse me, but they listen.

Maybe it's that I have a low opinion of Boston-area drivers, so I fear they'll put pedestrians at risk. I've seen so many funky maneuvers on the roads that I've become an ultra-defensive driver. Protecting pedestrians is a natural extension of that. For instance, I fastened a tiny flashlight on the zipper of the coat my wife wears, so she is more visible when she crosses the street from the bus stop at night. I also stuck silver reflective tape at the hem of her coat. She was happy when it fell off.

Maybe it's that I have too much energy that I don't expend at work. I've got to purge it from my system. I've learned that my wife doesn't take kindly to being the target of my projects. With no children, and with work and home accounted for, that leaves the public domain as my stage.

Snow will end soon, but with spring comes the budding of leaves so that low-hanging trees block the visibility of stop signs. The city needs to trim those trees more aggressively. There are some folks I've got to call and e-mail.

Newton resident Allan Lewis, a client manager for a software firm, wrote this piece with the help of his wife, Susan Weiner, a freelance writer. ■

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