

Jack Knox: Top* stories of 2017 (*or at least memorable)

Good riddance to 1938 ... er, 2017.

It was, thanks to the rise of Trumpism, the year everything old was new again: emboldened racism, rampant sexism, coal-fired environmental degradation and a Cold War missile-waving contest with Kim Jong-Nutbar.

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It was the year of Tiki-torch waving Nazis at Charlottesville, take-a-knee protests in the NFL and Donald Trump trying to pretend that his travel ban wasn't aimed at Muslims. Ditto for Quebec and its face-covering rules.

Quebec is also where a lone gunman killed six in a mosque, just one of the terrorist attacks around the world — 22 dead at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, 512 in a Somali suicide bombing — that we seem to shrug off more and more easily.

It was the year Mary Tyler Moore died. So did Tom Petty. So did Charles Manson at 83 (the good die young). So did the organizers of the Oscars after La La Land was mistakenly declared best picture. So did the United Airlines public-relations team as the world watched a passenger beaten bloody for not giving up his overbooked seat.

Here are 25 stories — some significant, some definitely not — that Times Colonist readers will remember from 2017.

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1. #MeToo

I have said it before: If we see Mr. Nice Guy Tom Hanks' photo pop up over

the shoulder of a grim-faced TV news anchor, it better be because he was hit by a bus.

Oh, but it has been discouraging/ encouraging to see a steady parade of previously trusted and well-liked public figures — Kevin Spacey, Matt Lauer, Louis C.K. — unmasked by victims of their creepy/criminal behaviour. So many icons were unmasked that #HimToo? should have joined #MeToo on social media.

It all began in October with bombshell allegations of predatory sexual behaviour by Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein. Then came the hashtag #MeToo as a long line of long-silent women stepped up to say that they also had been victims of sexual assault and harassment.

When the Times Colonist asked local readers to add their voices, the ubiquity of the problem was reflected in the response. That was both saddening and encouraging, the hope being that the out-of-the-shadows movement will change behaviour.

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2. Premier Homeboy

In one shocking May election night, Greater Victoria went from having no government MLAs at all to having one born-and-raised Victorian, New Democrat John Horgan, as premier and another, Green Andrew Weaver, as leader of the party propping him up.

The very next morning, they six-laned the Malahat, built a high-speed monorail on the Galloping Goose and introduced \$1.49 Tuesdays at B.C. Ferries.

Well, no, it actually took a 52-day soap opera to sort things out after the May 9 election gave B.C. 43 Liberals, 41 New Democrats and three Greens. The impasse ended when the latter two brokered a deal that allowed Lt.-

Gov. Judith Guichon to burst out of the Government House delivery room and shout “It’s a boy(s)!” even as Christy Clark barricaded herself in the premier’s office. Or something like that.

B.C.’s first change of government in 16 years really was a seismic shift in the political landscape.

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3. Las Vegas shooting

As horrific as they are, mass shootings in the U.S. usually feel far away, someone else’s problem.

Not the Oct. 1 massacre at an outdoor country music concert. It hit home. Authorities don’t know why 64-year-old Stephen Paddock opened fire from the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay, but his victims — 58 dead, 546 injured — included Victorians.

Sheldon Mack, the 21-year-old son of well-known Victoria television news anchor Hudson Mack, had major surgery after being shot in the abdomen and forearm. Victoria’s Cole Seymour was trying to help Sheldon off the field when he was struck in the buttock. Cole’s brother Liam escaped unscathed — though the stories of others showed that not all wounds are physical. Other Victorians who were there described the horror of seeing people shot, and of witnessing others trampled in the chaos. When Saanich’s Brie Jacobson finally showered after the shooting, blood ran from her hair.

This is madness. Why is there even a debate over the insanity of U.S. gun laws?

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4. Wildfires

At first, we thought it was smoke from Victoria's 628 pot shops. No, the apocalyptic haze that filled South Island skies for two weeks was from the wildfires in the Interior.

So, imagine how it was in Kamloops, breathing ash-choked air for an entire sunless summer as B.C. endured its worst fire season ever.

Imagine being one of the 65,000 evacuated from places such as Williams Lake, or Cache Creek, or 100 Mile House as the flames consumed a record 12,000 square kilometres. One blaze west of Williams Lake covered an area equal to all of Vancouver Island south of Chemainus.

The silver lining was the way people pitched in to help evacuees; among the first to send help were karma-conscious residents of Fort McMurray.

Victoria-area cops spent long nights patrolling Cariboo backroads.

Firefighters from View Royal, North Saanich, Saanich, Sidney and other Island communities hosed down up-country lumber mills.

Meanwhile, Vancouver Island enjoyed one of its most glorious summers in memory. Victoria went 54 days — another record — without rain.

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5. Fentanyl

B.C.'s drug-overdose death numbers are so staggering — more than 1,200 in the first 10 months of the year, including 78 in the city of Victoria — that we often look at them as just that: mere numbers, climbing year over year. Four in five overdose deaths involve fentanyl. Four in five victims are men. Three in five die in private homes. Numbers.

So consider this: On Sept. 22, Christopher Seguin, a high-profile vice-president at Kamloops' Thompson Rivers University, died after being found in a Victoria hotel room. He left behind a wife and two sons.

Or consider this: Heather McLean of Esquimalt, who died in April after saying she had paid an extra \$20 for “clean” drugs. She was just 17.

On and on it goes. Real people. Real loss. This isn't getting better.

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6. Housing

Median Greater Victoria household income: \$70,283.

Benchmark price for a single-family home in the Victoria core in November: \$824,600.

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7. Sarah Beckett

In July, Langford's Jake Fenton was sentenced to four years for the drunk-driving crash that killed West Shore RCMP constable Sarah Beckett, 32, in April 2016.

The circumstances of the crash finally came out at trial: Just before 3:30 a.m., an RCMP corporal lit up Fenton's truck, which had no taillights showing. Fenton, his blood-alcohol three times the legal limit, sped off (the Crown and defence agreed it was because he hit a straightaway on Peatt Road, not because he saw the police car's lights). Within moments, the pickup blew a red light at Goldstream Avenue, striking Beckett's cruiser broadside while doing between 76 and 90 km/h. There was no chase; the corporal did nothing wrong. Nor did Beckett, who was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The mother of two young sons, Beckett was the first female B.C. police officer killed on duty. What a tragic waste.

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8. Gord Downie

For all the government-funded Canada 150th hoopla, to many it was the Oct. 17 death of the Tragically Hip frontman that really reached into the Canadian soul.

“He was one of the good guys, a patriot who, in recent months, dedicated his time to Indigenous issues in Canada,” wrote the Times Colonist’s Mike Devlin. “It was his dying wish to reconcile our country’s dark past with what he hoped would become its bright future, and he did so while knowing he could die suddenly at any time.”

Within days of the 53-year-old’s death, CTV aired Long Time Running, a fine, loving, intimate documentary that followed the Hip’s 2016 cross-country tour following Downie’s brain-cancer diagnosis. The film was co-directed by Victoria-raised filmmaker Jennifer Baichwal and produced by former University of Victoria students Scot McFadyen and Sam Dunn.

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9. Backer comes back

Yes, Harold Backer came back, but where on Earth was he for a year and a half? Nobody is saying.

It was surprising when the mutual-fund salesman, a former Olympic rower, disappeared in November 2015, leaving behind investors who were unhappy to discover their money was also gone. It was even more stunning when Backer showed up again, surrendering to Victoria police on April 13.

He’s out on bail, awaiting trial on two fraud charges next September. Backer, who at the time of his disappearance sent a remorseful letter to several clients, blaming himself for their losses, also faces a hearing in front of the Mutual Fund Dealers Association of Canada.

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10. Pot

Among those signing on with Big Bud: former Victoria police chief Frank Elsner, former B.C. health minister Terry Lake, former RCMP deputy commissioner Raf Souccar and former Toronto police chief Julian Fantino, who was also a cabinet minister in Stephen Harper's government. The marijuana industry might be going legit, but this still feels like running into the Pope in a peeler bar.

Governments are still working out the details as Canada drifts toward next summer's legalization of recreational pot. Can you smoke in public? (The rules might be the same as for tobacco, says John Horgan.) In marijuana lounges? (The city of Victoria says no.) Here's what we know: In B.C., the toking age will be 19, the Liquor Distribution Branch will be the distributor, and pot will be sold in both public and private stores (though not necessarily liquor stores).

The feds will license commercial growers. Health Canada has already approved a 150,000-square-foot marijuana greenhouse — the first of 21 — to be built by Evergreen Medical Supply on the site of the Stanhope dairy farm in Central Saanich.

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11. Ferry jumper lives

You're only supposed to be able to survive two or three hours in the frigid ocean. Ladysmith artist Mya DeRyan, who believed she had a terminal illness, lasted five after jumping from the Queen of Cowichan on the Horseshoe Bay-Nanaimo run Oct. 30.

Searchers retrieving a life ring were shocked to find the 52-year-old inside it, alive. "We've been looking for you," one of them said. "Who, me?" DeRyan

replied, her dark humour still intact. By then, feeling guilty about the extensive search efforts she had seen from afar (she had hoped to slip into the water unnoticed) she had had second thoughts about dying.

DeRyan, who was later found not to have a terminal condition, enjoyed an emotional reunion with her rescuers in December.

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12. Bike lanes

Your lip just curled into a snarl, didn't it? Jeez, the city of Victoria has 260 kilometres of roads, yet suggest keeping cyclists safe on 5.4 km of them and some people react as though they just found a flaming bag of dog crap on the porch.

Or maybe it's the way city council charged ahead with these particular lanes, which make downtown merchants nervous and inconvenience drivers, ramping up the resentment. That, and the cost has jumped from \$7.75 million to \$14.5 million.

The two-way lanes on Pandora Avenue opened May 1. The Fort Street lanes are being built right now. Then will come two-way lanes on the west side of Wharf from the Johnson Street Bridge to the intersection of Wharf and Government; two-way lanes on the south side of Humboldt between Government and Douglas, and one-way lanes on both sides of Cook from Pandora to Pakington.

On Dec. 8, somebody sabotaged Mayor Lisa Helps's bike. Everybody take a deep breath and be better.

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13. So long, Sears

Blame online shopping. Blame low-cost competitors such as Walmart. Blame a U.S. hedge fund guru for going for the cash. For whatever reason, 65-year-old retail institution Sears Canada surrendered in 2017, pulling the plug on all 190 of its stores and their 15,000 employees, whose pensions are now in doubt. Among the casualties were Victoria's Hillside mall store, with a staff of 110, and the 104-employee North Town Centre outlet in Nanaimo.

Other Canadian chains — Woodward's, Eaton's, Zellers — have disappeared, swallowed by competitors, but Sears actually went under, which was unsettling given its image. Sears was middle Canada: solid, reputable, nothing flashy. Its Wish Book catalogue was a cultural touchstone in its own right.

All Sears stores must close by Jan. 21.

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14. Nanaimo nuttiness

Name-calling, an assault allegation, resignation demands, accusations of bullying. ... When former Mountie Sheryl Armstrong won a July byelection in a landslide, it might have reflected the public's desire to see a little law and order restored to city hall.

And when Nanaimo residents rejected an \$80-million downtown event centre by a 4-1 margin in a March referendum, the vote appeared to have as much to do with city council dysfunction as it did a new arena. In fact, the No campaign spawned the OurNanaimo group gearing up for the October 2018 civic election.

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15. Sheriff shortage

You had one job: Staff B.C.'s courtrooms with enough sheriffs to allow trials to go ahead. Shouldn't be so hard, right?

Wrong. A chronic sheriff shortage plagues B.C., with Victoria particularly hard hit, resulting in judges chucking out charges against accused drug dealers and curtailing trials. The province is training more sheriffs, but part of the problem is keeping them in the job once hired: \$58,000-a-year sheriffs are prime recruits for municipal police departments (average pay: \$93,000).

It's not just sheriffs, either. To keep the justice system moving, court clerks (annual pay: up to \$46,000) were flown here from as far away as Fort St. John and put up in the Empress, Chateau Victoria, Marriott and Parkside hotels.

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16. Unsolved deaths

Two cities, two unrelated suspicious deaths of young females.

When Nanaimo's Makayla Chang disappeared in mid-March, those who cared for the 16-year-old — including her father, who felt helpless while completing a six-month firearms-related sentence at the Wilkinson Road jail — feared the worst. Those fears were realized when her body was found in mid-May.

In Victoria, the body of Euarchol Wanichpan was found wrapped in a tarp and buried on the grounds of S.J. Willis school on Aug. 22, which would have been her 26th birthday.

No arrests have been made. Both investigations continue.

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17. The usual suspects

OK, I've been writing an annual year-in-review piece since, oh, the days when I still carried a comb. Which means I've been writing about sewage treatment, the Colwood Crawl, the Johnson Street Bridge and amalgamation, again and again and again.

To bring you up to date:

- The opening of the new Johnson Street Bridge, which was supposed to be done by this Christmas (actually, the original target was 2015) has been pushed back to the end of March 2018.
- The opening of the McKenzie Interchange has been pushed from late 2018 (actually, the original target was the late 1990s) to mid-2019.
- Under pressure from local voters to produce an amalgamation study, and under pressure from local politicians to do no such thing, the provincial government sided with the politicians and released a report on capital region governance that was little more than a summary of the status quo. It might as well have been titled *Intended to Gather Dust*.
- We're actually building sewage-treatment stuff! OK, we're not sure how we'll get the sewage from Victoria's Clover Point to Esquimalt's McLoughlin Point, and we're not sure how we'll get the sludge from McLoughlin Point to the Hartland landfill, and we're not sure what we'll do with the sludge once it's there, but we're far enough into the construction that Mr. Floatie, Victoria's most-famous feces, was able to fly to Seattle to announce his retirement. ("It's time to be relieved of my duties," he declared.)

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18. Claire Eccles

When the 19-year-old southpaw knuckleballer stepped on the mound for

the Victoria HarbourCats in June, she became the first woman to play in baseball's West Coast League.

Her story drew international media attention (ESPN, Sports Illustrated, USA Today) and pulled fans to Royal Athletic Park, but this wasn't just some publicity stunt. Eccles competed well in seven appearances and was recently re-signed by the HarbourCats for 2018.

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19. The eclipse

On Aug. 21, Victoria had the most dramatic view in Canada — 90 per cent totality — of the first coast-to-coast solar eclipse since 1918.

A communal giddiness prevailed, as offices emptied, a thousand people flocked to the UVic observatory, hundreds watched from Mount Tolmie, and hundreds more gathered at the Metchosin cricket pitch for what was, for many, a once-in-a-lifetime event. In the U.S., twice as many people viewed the eclipse as watched the Super Bowl.

The celestial phenomenon lasted until I sacrificed a goat, a bit of quick thinking that earned me a job as Donald Trump's new science adviser.

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20. Levidrome

When Levi Budd, a Grade 2 student at Saint Michaels University School, couldn't find a word that describes a word that forms another when spelled backward — like stop and pots, or pool and loop — he coined the term “levidrome.”

Backed by family and friends (including a celebrity endorsement from William Shatner) he launched a drive to make “levidrome” so popular that it

would fall into common usage and earn a place in the dictionary.

By year's end, the campaign had earned international media attention, a YouTube video was approaching 40,000 views and "levidrome" was on a list of words being monitored for possible inclusion in the Oxford English Dictionary.

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21. All dogs go to Heaven, Part I

For the 14 years before his death in October, Cody the golden retriever was a Fort Street fixture in the doorway of Charmaine's Past and Present store. The canine equivalent of the Dalai Lama (old, gentle, serene, calming, adored) he was greyer than second-term Obama, less threatening than the Canucks' power play — which made him an unlikely symbol of dissent.

When Victoria's animal-control department ordered Cody off the sidewalk in 2016, what was unleashed (other than the dog) was the indignation of people who believed that city hall, up to its ears in Tent City, had lost interest in the average shmucks who go to work, pay their taxes and generally go about their lives unnoticed by those in power.

All dogs go to Heaven, Part II

A decade ago, before many of us had heard the term "going viral," Central Saanich's Wendy the Whippet was a media star. A rare mutation made her the Arnold Schwarzenegger of dogs, 27 kilograms of rippling muscle.

She was flown to Manhattan for the Today show, featured on National Geographic Wild and written up in the New York Times. A June 2007 Times Colonist piece was one of the most popular ever on our website.

But when the whippet died this January, owner Ingrid Hansen just saw her as kind, sweet Wendy.

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22. Rogue cow of Metchosin

When a previously placid Angus-Hereford heifer suddenly bolted for freedom this spring, hurdling the hedge hemming its Happy Valley Road home, few expected it would remain on the lam for long.

But the cow proved elusive, not only surviving but thriving in the West Shore wilderness. It periodically popped into view — grazing with its friends the deer in a farmer’s field, or surprising Galloping Goose trail hikers, or scaring the manure out of drivers when her ninja-black bulk would suddenly loom in the middle of a darkened road — only to slip into the bush again before the Bossy posse arrived.

As was true with other famous fugitives — Robin Hood, Che Guevara, Bonnie and Clydesdale — the Rogue’s legend grew the longer it avoided cowpture, which is why there was a hint of sadness when the Rogue turned herself in, reappearing in her home pasture at the end of summer. The Rogue’s owner moved her to a farm in Duncan — the bovine equivalent of being shipped from William Head Prison to Shawshanksteak Penitentiary.

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23. Dairy drama

Authorities never did identify the “harmful extraneous material” that found its way into Vancouver Island milk jugs this year. All we know is the RCMP got called in and the milk producers added a pull tab to their containers as a security feature.

It’s now harder to break into your milk jug than your car.

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24. Mean streets of Central Saanich, Part I

The sound system in Dustin Hamilton's car is so powerful that Central Saanich residents complained it rattles coffee cups off tables, wakes children in the night and frightens livestock. "It's clean sound and I love it," protested the 24-year-old audiophile, but he failed to sway the courts, which refused to vary an order not to play his PT Cruiser's stereo in the community.

Mean streets of Central Saanich, Part II

It was a most Canadian crime.

When snow fell on the Saanich Peninsula in February, farmer Marko Kardum used his \$300 used Zamboni (what, you don't have one on your farm, too?) to plow his aunt's street. Alas, when police discovered the vehicle was uninsured, they shooed Kardum home — and into the national spotlight, as the story took off.

Kardum — a good Canajun boy, as Don Cherry would say — was later applauded by MLAs in the legislature.

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25. Trump

What, you thought we could talk about 2017 without talking about President Voldemort?

The good news is the lunacy in Trumpistan might have contributed to Victoria's banner tourism year. And it was uplifting to see Centennial Square packed with pink Pussy Hats at a January rally.

But there were the lies, the NAFTA nastiness, the wishy-washy response to Charlottesville, the non-response to mass shootings, the abandonment of

Puerto Rico (“an island surrounded by water, big water”), the abandonment of the Paris climate accord, the Comey firing, the Joe Arpaio pardon, Scaramucci, Flynn, the handshake shenanigans, shellshocked Sean Spicer, a Twitter history that reads like that of a drunken drama queen, Kellyann Crackpot, covfefe, “Pocahontas,” fake news, Russia. ...

Have a great 2018, everyone.