

TRANSCRIPT

LAW REFORM, ROAD AND COMMUNITY SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into lowering the probationary driving age in Victoria to 17

Wodonga — 4 October 2016

Members

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**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR — Welcome to our hearing on the opportunity for lowering the probationary driving age in Victoria to 17. We understand you have been a mentor in the L2P program and have a number of things that you would like to share with the committee.

Mr MURPHY — I have.

The CHAIR — You will see that the workers over here are the Hansard reporters, who are taking notes on everything that is said so that we have transcript of our discussion. A couple of weeks from now you will get a copy of the relevant transcript from this discussion, so if there is anything you think is technically incorrect in the transcript, that can be corrected. It then becomes part of the public record for this inquiry. As I said before, we have had 91 written submissions. We have been hearing from groups in Melbourne as well as in other parts of regional Victoria. We are here in Wodonga today to hear the thoughts of people from this part of the world.

We are pleased that you have come along to talk to us, Darren. We welcome what you have to say, and then we will have some questions perhaps to follow up.

Mr MURPHY — Thanks for the opportunity. Yes, I am interested in this program. It just appeared in the local newspaper in Myrtleford, and they were looking for submissions. I thought about it, and I thought why not? I have had a bit of experience and I am a community conscious person. I contribute to other things apart from this.

I am 54 years of age. I have been driving for quite some time. As you would have seen in my submission, my background has been army, and I lived in Albury-Wodonga here for 7 of my 21 years whilst I was serving. I have now been out for 16 years and live in the rural community of Myrtleford. As a consequence of that I have got involved with the community, because in the army they move you around quite a bit. I had 16 moves in 21 years, so I have lived in most states in Australia. As a consequence I am aware of licensing across the country. Obviously Victoria has the requirement for 18 whereas the other states are 17.

I have got a few case studies, which I can share with you, of my experiences in Myrtleford. What I have been acutely aware of in Myrtleford, being a country town of 3500 people, is that once school leavers leave school, unless they go straight into work, they become very isolated and disconnected. That is just the system. We cannot have a perfect world, but we should try to improve it if we can. Given that, I also work casually in a bottle shop. When these 16 and 17-year-olds fall out of society, I think for two years whilst they are waiting to get their hours up and their time up they sort of run amok, some of them.

Like all small communities, we have our drug problems and our welfare problems. Certainly Myrtleford is a community that is multicultural. We do have good systems in place to support people who know how to get it, but I am finding — and I think it is just my observation in life — that mums and dads are both working now, and the whole society is geared for two-income families. As a consequence they just give the kids money, and they just do what they like until such time as they can find their own pathways to jobs.

Myrtleford is the industry town within the Alpine shire. When we had tobacco and when we had manufacturing in small communities, there were lots of opportunities for people. You did not have to drive anywhere, you could ride your bike and you could find jobs. I think kids should be either learning or earning. If those ones who do not work are fit, then I think there should be a case for service to our country, be that in reserves or community things.

You will see that I have put in my submission something about incentivising volunteering. As a community volunteer myself, we are all getting older and there is no-one replacing us, and that is right across the board — that is Lions and Rotary. I did a bit of research. When I spoke to your executive officer yesterday she asked me if I was giving a PowerPoint presentation. I thought, ‘God! What is this? A bloody job interview.’ I thought I had better do a bit of research here. I had better go and load my guns, so I actually made quite a lot of phone calls yesterday. I rang the local CFA and whatever, and I did actually print seven copies, as requested, of some notes that I collated from yesterday. Essentially it just talks about the Myrtleford demographic and my observations of numbers within the CFA, the local SES and Landcare groups. I suppose the best way is to perhaps steer you through it. It will save you taking it off the top of my head.

As I said, Myrtleford has got a population of about 3500 people and is the largest town in the Alpine shire. It is the shire’s industry and business hub, and we have a local sawmill. We are a timber-driven town — there are

100 years of pine trees in the Alpine shire — and if we are not planting trees, we are harvesting trees, we are transporting trees and we are processing trees. But even in the 15 years that I have been in Myrtleford, we do not make timber anymore; we just do ply only. So that has been a change of user needs and whatnot.

We lost the tobacco industry. That was a great crop and a great business for kids to work in after school during the season. It gave them an income so that they were able to afford to get on in life. We have two schools in Myrtleford, they being Marian College, the Catholic School, and Myrtleford P–12. I have put some numbers there. If you look at year 10s, 11s and 12s, there are 102 students within Marian College, and in the Myrtleford P–12 there will be 76 students in those year groups. Just 5 per cent of those left school before they completed their VCE, because most of them are about 17 or 18 when they do leave school. My experience in the L2P program is that it tends to be the year 12s that you are taking out to get their hours up. That represents about 9 to 18 students, about 5 or 10 per cent. I did try to get the education department in Benalla to give me some data, but I was not successful yesterday. My name is not strong enough in that area.

I thought, ‘How does that compare? What jobs are currently available in Myrtleford?’. There are 36 jobs available in Myrtleford today — that is what I looked at on the internet — and of that only six would apply to those kids, therefore there really are not any work opportunities within the town itself.

As I said before, I would like to think that kids are either learning or earning, but failing that they should be taught how to work by their family units. I myself was kicked out of the house at about 15, and my first job was peeling spuds in a fish and chip shop. I used to get 80 cents an hour, but it held me well in life. My next job was in the butcher shop, cleaning it up after I finished peeling the spuds. Then I worked in a pub when I was 16, across the road in Sebastopol — you know, the Globe Hotel. I went in there and asked for a job, and they told me that it was against the law for anyone under the age of 18 to work in hotel. I said, ‘I’m 16, nearly 17. I only want to fill fridges because I’m sick of peeling spuds’. He said, ‘Yes, but it’s all right for relatives. This is your Auntie June, and I’m your Uncle Zac’. Do not put that in the report, please!

Essentially I started work in the hotel in the bottle shop, and here I am now today, back in the bottle shop working in Myrtleford, which enables me to see a great demographic of the town. As I mentioned in my submission, yes, there is a drinking culture in Australia. Myrtleford is no different. At the same time I would suggest to you that kids do get wayward. My observation is that I have seen those kids; I have been working there for about seven years. The kids that came in as little ratbags have now finally got their licences, they have now got employment, they have now got girlfriends, they are now borrowing money, they are on the vicious cycle like the rest of us, and I think that is good for them.

Getting on to the incentivising volunteering, I just think that if you get an opportunity to get an apprenticeship in this country, you should not be retarded by the fact you cannot get to the job place. I think if you can sign up for an apprenticeship, you can sign up for a licence, because you are getting that responsibility. I remember my cousin in South Australia got his licence at 16 and a half. Was it good? Yes. Was it bad? Yes. There are obviously case studies, and you can argue for and against those scenarios.

When I first joined the army in 1980 I came to Bandiana. I actually got my licence here in Wodonga. At that time a lot of my peers on the courses with me who basically wanted a licence went to New South Wales, got a PO box, got their licences in New South Wales and started driving in Victoria, because that is the way they did it. I can give you case studies in Myrtleford. Some of my friends in the Lions Club, their kids have left school early. Once again, they all ride motorbikes, they have got mates that live in New South Wales, they use their addresses, get their licences. Everyone will find a way to get ahead in life. I just think giving young adults responsibility at 17 makes eminent sense to me, and it aligns itself with Australia.

As another case study, I was married for a period of time in Myrtleford. My stepson left school at 16. He got kicked out of schools in Myrtleford, so he had to catch the bus up to Wangaratta. He really tried to do a pre-apprenticeship course, could not find an apprenticeship but found one in Wodonga. How did he do that? We had to put him in the caravan. He used to ride his bike. These sorts of scenarios are typical of what you will find in rural areas, and people come into the regional centres to continue their education.

Getting back to the volunteers, I just think that at 16 and a half you do not want the kid sitting at home isolated. If they put some time perhaps into a state-based agency — like the SES, the CFA or a Landcare group — and they accumulate 50 hours, most of the training sessions these people would undertake would be that once a week they would do 2 hours training, so they would have to go 25 times, and I think they develop rapport with

the volunteers in those organisations, like the CFA, the SES and Landcare groups. Most of the people who volunteer are good people and they are good mentors. Hopefully it is a good recruitment and we can feed people at the bottom at that 16 to 18 age group. Some of those skills they will attain in those areas are fully transportable. If you learn how to use a chainsaw, you can use that in life. I think it is all there in everything I have written and submitted to you today. I invite any questions, and I will do my best to answer them.

The CHAIR — Okay, Darren. Thank you. Overall you are in favour of Victoria reducing the driving age to 17, as I understand it. You did talk about the disengaged young people in the Myrtleford area. You also work in a pub. We had considered whether, if you were not to go to a full licensing system, you would have exemptions for people who have a job and can demonstrate they would be disadvantaged if they did not have their licence. But if they get their licence at 17 and they are disengaged still, is there a potential risk that they might end up using their licence in an inappropriate way, getting their hands on alcohol and being some of those fatalities on the road or causing fatalities on the road? They might be the ones we want to protect. What is your feeling on that sort of position?

Mr MURPHY — I do not think there is a black-and-white answer. I have seen 16-year-olds that act as 19-year-olds, and I have seen 19-year-olds that act as 16-year-olds. I think the advantage of giving young adults licences at 17 is that they have been driving then for 12 months before they reach the legal drinking age, which is 18. I think there is a culture in society where kids in family units are drinking earlier — sometimes under supervision, sometimes not. But I think we all learn from our mistakes.

A 17-year-old gets a licence, they do not have a red P, they do not have a green P, they have a blue P — they have a different colour — so you can actually identify them. They have restrictions on their licence. They have got it for work purposes. If they are not using it for work purposes, they do not drive. There is a whole range of conditions that you could apply to a licence that is given to a youth for the right reasons, as I said. If a person gets a licence, they need a car. How many 17-year-olds have got \$5000 sitting in the bank? They do not. They have got to earn money. I think it puts the onus on them to go out and find work to save money. As I said, if you are not learning, you should be earning.

Ms PATTEN — Thanks, Darren. It was a really thoughtful submission that you put in, so I really appreciated that. Given all the experience that you have had in different organisations, it fit really well. With this notion of restricting 17-year-olds driving — if you are learning or earning, that is a consideration. What about if you are volunteering? You quite rightly put some real importance, as did the previous chamber of commerce person, on those soft skills, which is actually learning about respect, learning about work and learning about all of those sorts of things as well as the actual occupational skills, like learning to use a chainsaw. Do you think that is another area where, if you are doing some CFA volunteering or volunteering for some of the other organisations that you touch on, it would be another argument for a licence, or do we stick to the simple learning-earning restrictions?

Mr MURPHY — I do not think there is a black-and-white answer again. I think you have got to see the colour grey in this. If you want to put an old head on young shoulders, you have got to give them life experience. We all had our near misses as we were growing up. I remember when I was a kid going to Sebastopol Technical School in Ballarat. We had driver education, and we used to get driven around the drive-in. Do you remember drive-ins? I remember the teacher telling us — we were a group of 20 — that 4 or 5 of us would be dead before we were 25. The reality is that that has happened. You do know in life that those sorts of numbers are realistic. Fortunately I was on the right side of the percentage. I think that is across the whole board. I think you learn from your experiences.

Ms PATTEN — So you just say across the board everyone at 17 should be able to get their licence.

Mr MURPHY — Yes, I just think you should be fair. There should be fairness in it. Every other state in Australia recognises that they are capable of driving a motor car at that age. Obviously there are rules, and law enforcement officers enforce those. We have got enough cameras and surveillance to monitor that. When I was taking my L2P kids out, I said, ‘Think of how many hours it has taken you to get your licence and how many seconds you can lose it in’. One of them has lost it for speeding, and I said, ‘I told you’. Then he has found it is an inconvenience. His mum was having to drive him around, and he could not see his girlfriend. He realised the importance of holding that licence.

There are so many inconsistencies in the law. My stepson and I went on a road trip across to Perth. We got pulled over in Mildura, and the policeman said, 'Have you got any reason for doing 30 kilometres-an-hour over the speed limit?'. I said, 'What are you talking about?'. He said, 'He's driving at the speed limit. It's 110, but in Western Australia you drive at 80'. I thought, 'Okay, I didn't know that one'. I said, 'It wasn't in the road rules that I read. It wasn't on any signs as I crossed the border'. Then we got pulled over again in Perth itself, and they told me that he was not supposed to be driving at all because it was a learners permit, it was not a licence, and he was not legally allowed to drive in another state. I kept thinking, 'I used to live in Albury-Wodonga, and we used to always drive in each other's states. It wasn't ever an issue. Why is it an issue in Western Australia?'. I sent an email to the minister and never got a response, but this is the way things happen.

Mr THOMPSON — Darren, thanks for your contribution and lighter insight into life in Myrtleford as well. There has been evidence provided to the committee that country roads are more dangerous than city roads, either owing to the quality of the infrastructure or as a result of the applicable speed limits in those zones. There has been an argument advanced by road safety agencies that the mobility of a small group of people should not be achieved with a cost to safety. What is your view on that?

Mr MURPHY — I probably do not drive very well in the city myself. I do drive well in the country. I think that city people come up here, and the near misses that you will see up here are generally people who do not know how to drive in the country on the country roads. You drive to the conditions on dirt roads and when there are potholes. As I was driving over this morning I had my wipers on all the way. We have a lot of road traffic between Myrtleford and Albury now. There are a lot of potholes, and because the road was shining I did not see half of them. I hit a few, and I was thinking, 'God, the last thing I need to do is change a tyre on the side of the road in the rain when I have only got 10 minutes to get here'. Those thoughts went through my mind.

Once again it is an experience factor. The example I gave is that the graduated licensing program is restrictive so that you cannot tow a trailer until you have got your green Ps. When you get your red Ps, that means mum and dad do not have to take you motorcycle racing, but they have still got to take you because you have not got a licence to tow a trailer. How do you learn to tow a trailer? By actually driving along with a trailer. Road conditions change and weather conditions change. We are a four-season society up here, and I think that is part of the learning with mentors and having the hazards perception test and all those sorts of things. I think all the key building blocks are learning. It is just the experience that the kids need. If they drive at 17, one variable is taken out because they are not drinking legally. You can argue for and against that, but I do not think there are any more young people dying on roads because they learned to drive at 17 than if they learned to drive at 18. It is just an experience thing.

Mr TILLEY — Just continuing that conversation, I thank my colleague Fiona for raising the issue of rural isolation and car dependency in getting around, particularly in Myrtleford. It is not exactly the same as Wodonga, as you say, with a population of about 3500 and being some miles away from the major population centres. Regarding volunteerism, in principle you are saying that if we were to encourage better, enhanced volunteerism, that would better prepare drivers or younger people to drive a motor vehicle.

Mr MURPHY — I think it makes them more worldly — that society just does not rely on public services provided by your taxes that are generated through state and federal reserves. I can tell you that in Myrtleford you have volunteers who drive elderly people over for treatment at the new cancer hospital in Albury. We have people who come over for medical appointments for chemo and this sort of stuff. You do become isolated. As I said, our public transport system has been designed for one reason only — that is, to get people to Melbourne, not to get people to schools or to do their business in towns.

You cannot be all things to all people. My mother has just returned at 80 from San Francisco and she says that Uber is just fantastic. I just think of all these one-person driver cars that go between Bright, Myrtleford and Albury-Wodonga, and for the sake of having another person in the car and a little bit of money — it is all done electronically; it is just fantastic. We have a long way to go to learn in how to reconnect our communities. But, as I said, our train service is designed to get people to Melbourne not to schools and about their business in regional centres.

Mr TILLEY — I just want to mix it up a little bit and talk about your defence career as a long-serving soldier in our defence force. Thank you for your service. How old were you when you joined the army?

Mr MURPHY — I was 18 when I joined —

Mr TILLEY — You were already 18.

Mr MURPHY — and I did an electronics traineeship out there at Bandiana. Then I got posted to Brisbane and worked in the supply unit and then to Adelaide on air defence and then to Middle Head in Sydney. Then I was asked if I wanted to do officer training, so I got the opportunity to go through Duntroon. From there I went to Townsville. As I said, I had 16 moves. I did a bit of training in Papua New Guinea and America.

Mr TILLEY — So no doubt, with your management skills in being a commissioned officer, you would have seen young men and women who can join the permanent or regular forces at the age of 17, where they undertake training under their ECN 109 training to drive trucks, armoured vehicles and those types of things even before they can get a car licence. I suppose it is more of a comment, but with your experience from your defence career and participating as an L2P mentor and your experience with hand-eye control and the cognitive scores what is the difference between a 17-year-old and an 18-year-old? Can you enhance that part of the conversation?

Ms PATTEN — Good. I have another question on that.

Mr MURPHY — Okay. Very impressive you know what the ECN 109 was. I thought that was a great thing. I have not heard that for a long time. I will have to replay some information in the back of my head.

The army has well-established driving programs, but a lot of that is with experienced drivers and mentorship. Certainly I remember getting my truck licence. I got it in Adelaide. I just drove around the camp a few times, was given a restricted licence and then authorised. The first drive was from Adelaide to Darwin in an International truck with an eight-speed crash gearbox.

Mr TILLEY — Those were the days!

Mr MURPHY — The fuel was worked out at five gallons to the mile and we did it in 4.5, so we had to drain the fuel out of the generators to get to the fuel spots, but it was all experience and all learning.

But to answer your question, this is Brockley Street. I can tell you that when I was the adjutant at Bandiana at the army training centre around here I had to attend an accident where one of my soldiers was killed. He hit a bus sign — just a post in the ground this big. What had happened is that he and his mates in the car — he owned the motorbike — followed all the way down and they had McDonald's down there at the bottom. They said, 'Instead of me riding my bike back can I ride your bike home?'. He came round the corner and hit a 2-inch post and it killed him. He only had a learners permit. Once again it is an experience factor. It is speed, it is bravado. You can talk about all those things that happen whether you are 18, it happens whether you are 17, it happens if your 16. But I am the one who had to write out the fatal casualty and send that to his parents to be informed that he had passed away. Those things are life moments that I have learnt from. I have never owned a motorbike — I have ridden one — but it is a life choice and we all make our life choices and we learn from them.

In another situation in Townsville, at a Christmas party, soldiers were delivered back to the barracks after the Christmas party in buses. We counted them all off; we had got them all home. The first thing they do, 'We are a bit hungry, we will hope in the car and we will go for a spin'. So alcohol comes into play. There were 105 soldiers in that unit; 105 knew the situation and they would learn from it. It is a bit survival of the fittest, but that is life. I do not know how sobering it is.

In the small community of Myrtleford we have had young kids roll utes over with five in them and 4.5 of them got out of it. We all have these life experiences. But to get back to your question, time is the teacher. You drive and then I think you hit a critical point where you start to lose your skills. I remember telling my father, 'We put indicators in a car for a reason, Dad, perhaps you should use them'. I remember my father going up to my grandfather at 90 and saying, 'I think it is time you gave up driving'. He said, 'Why is that?'. He said, 'Because everyone is ringing me and telling me you are dangerous'. He said, 'Come out and look at your car. Look at the side of the house. How many times have you hit it?'. He went and sold his car and said, 'Here's the money. When you run out of money we will give you more money for your taxi'. So as family units we all have to manage our own situations.

In the bottle shop I have had one of my Lions member's sons come through. He had borrowed mum and dad's car. He was not driving the car; he was in the back full as a goog. I just rang them up and said, 'I just want to let

you know that this has happened'. It is called looking after one another. He said, 'Look, thanks very much. He's a bit like that, but I will have a talk to him'.

Mr TILLEY — I just want to be very clear, with your experience now — —

Mr MURPHY — Does this go into the public domain? I would hate that to get leaked out in Myrtleford.

Mr TILLEY — That is all right. I suppose with your mentoring with the L2P program, particularly if you are doing it in Myrtleford, when you are taking a learner driver of around 17 and a similar learner driver at the age of 18, with the cognitive and the eye-hand control, are you seeing any difference when they are getting their hours up?

Mr MURPHY — It comes back to what I said before. You get mature 16-year-olds; you get immature 19-year-olds. I really cannot compare them. It all depends on their family unit, their life skills. If they come off a farm, if they have driven tractors or ridden motorbikes, they have an understanding of a clutch or whatever. Most of the vehicles in the L2P program are automatic. But, yes, after the 110 hours, they go with a professional driving instructor and he puts them through the test before they then go and meet the final requirement, which is through managed licensing. Our role is to give them some of the skills and share some of the stories that I have shared here now and they are the sorts of ones that I would do. I used to drive up to Wangaratta and instead of the kids coming home on the bus they used to drive home. We do a certain amount of night driving and those sorts of things.

Mr TILLEY — Just one last one. The committee has heard from other statutory bodies that with Victoria maintaining its driving age at 18, which is different to other jurisdictions where it is 17 — and I am just looking for a comment and a view — it is leading the way in road safety by maintaining the driving age at 18 and the other states should come into line with Victoria.

Mr MURPHY — Yes. I could not quantify that. To me, it is just how long is a piece of string? I joined the army 10 days after I turned 18. As a consequence I did not get my licence. Then I went through Kapooka for three months with no ability to get a licence. When I came back I was actually 18 years and 10 months before I got my licence. Did I want it? Absolutely, because the first thing I wanted to do was to be able to travel and whatever.

Most of the kids in rural towns count the days until the day they are 18. Most of them get their licences, if not on the day of their 18th birthday, the day after or within a week anyway. They are desperate to get their licences. For a 17-year-old, is it going to be better for them? Well, if they are sitting at home for 12 months, it is of great benefit to them to be able to go and obtain employment and develop a life.

Ms PATTEN — I just have one quick one following on your experience with the L2P program. If we were to see a reduction in the driving licence age to 17, that only gives people 12 months to do their 120 hours. Do you think that is sufficient or do you think we might need to consider extending the training period, because I think what we are hearing is that getting the experience of 120 hours is one of the most crucial parts of having a safe driver?

Mr MURPHY — I think you could assess it at certain age groups. When we went for our licences, it was not 120 hours. Do we think we are good drivers? Of course we do, because we have survived. That is the proof. At 16 it is 120 hours. I was talking to a kid in the supermarket. He is one of these guys that found work in the town. He said, 'What are you doing today?', and I said, 'I've just been studying for an exam. I am doing research and whatever else'. I told him, and he said, 'How can a 16-year-old get 120 hours?'. I said, 'Well, when you are sitting at home doing nothing, it doesn't take very long. You have got time to do 120 hours'. It all depends on mum and dad and whether they have the ability to take them out and do that sort of training.

I am sort of inactive as an L2P mentor at the moment — the reason being that I was taking kids out and both mum and dad had cars but they were not taking them. I do not mind helping kids who need assistance, but I am not going to be there providing support if they are too lazy to get off their bums and do it themselves. As I said, if a kid leaves school at 16, 17, 16½ or whatever it might be, 120 hours can be accomplished very quickly. If you nag enough, mum and dad will look after you.

The CHAIR — Earlier on you did talk about the legal driving age and the legal drinking age — those at the moment in Victoria being the same age. As somebody who works in a bottle shop, does the legal drinking age of 18 mean jot? In other words, how many young people do not start drinking — or suddenly start drinking at 18 when they did not drink at 17 or even maybe 16 — and suddenly they can legally drink and so therefore they drink. Does that actually mean anything, or is the reality that if you are going to drink at 18, you have probably been drinking plenty at 17 as well?

Mr MURPHY — The legal drinking age is 18. I think you know the answer to that question. You have your own family unit.

The CHAIR — I am asking for your input as somebody who works a bit in the industry.

Mr MURPHY — I do not serve anyone in the bottle shop under the age of 18. I am involved with events in town. Certainly you see different age groups who are obviously under the influence of something, be that alcohol or whatever. We have an Italian background in our community, and the kids start drinking very young at home under supervision, so by the time the drinking age comes around it is just a gate to walk through because they already know about alcohol. They know the effects of it. They understand it is there for social enjoyment and not for intoxication.

As I mentioned in my original submission about binge drinking culture, you will find that the kids that binge drink have parents that binge drink, and they are my age. It is just that society has changed in that way. That is why we have a police force. That is why we have education programs in our advertising and so forth. It is just awareness and education.

As I said, with the kids that I put through the L2P program I tell them how many hours it will take them to get their licence and how easy it is to lose it. They certainly miss it when it is taken from them. My stepson has lost his licence, and he has to have an interlock device in his car. He reckons his nephews will be on their full licences before he will be into his. Anyway, I hope that does not go on the public record; otherwise I will not be able to go home.

The CHAIR — It does. Everything you have said is on the public record. I said that at the beginning, or it will be. We will have a discussion and talk to our executive officer about that when the transcript comes out.

Mr MURPHY — What was my name again? We did not say my name, did we?

The CHAIR — Thank you, Darren.

Witness withdrew.