



SEEING RED

Red-light runners bring out the nark in Sarah Lang. But dobbing in offenders, she argues, just might save a life.

The afternoon after our son was born, my husband left Wellington Hospital on foot to get his first real meal of the day. At a busy intersection in Newtown, Michael was crossing with the green man's blessing when a car ran a red light and nearly mowed him down, close enough that he felt the air whoosh by. The driver was on the phone and had two children in the back.

When the car pulled into a nearby supermarket, Michael followed it and shouted at the driver. The man looked shocked, and said nothing. So Michael walked off. Maybe he should have filed a formal complaint at the closest police station, but it would be his word against the driver's, and he had something important to get back to.

I still think about this. About how one man running a red could have left me husbandless and my son fatherless. I don't care whether you're a harassed dad rushing out for milk, or a keynote speaker off to a climate-change conference. You're not too important to stop at a red. Because someday, somewhere, someone dies because of someone like you.

In New Zealand between 2011 and 2015, there were eight deaths, 139 serious injuries and 1358 minor injuries resulting from crashes where running a red was a factor, at a social cost of close to \$50 million. Seven of the eight killed were motorists, and three-quarters of casualties were caused by one vehicle hitting another side on. In December 2013, Hamilton mum Lynelle Bray was killed by a bus that ran a red. Her car was third



LIKE A NINJA

A company does the right thing after a red light-running close call.

Power-walking down Vivian St one summer's morning, I began crossing an intersection with the green man flashing and without checking for red-light runners. Silly me. A grey hatchback sped around the corner, missing me by maybe a metre.

Adrenalin flooded through me. The car parked nearby, and a skinny guy emerged carrying a food-delivery box. I walked over, keeping my tone even as I spoke. "Hey. You ran a red and nearly ran me over."

He replied, "Yeah, so what? I've got a job to do," and walked off. It was his aggressive tone that got me. Had he been apologetic, I probably would have let it go. Instead I photographed the number plate and the Food Ninja notice on the inside windshield. Half an hour later, I emailed Food Ninja to complain, asking what action they would take.

CEO Siang Lim replied six minutes later, apologising profusely and saying he was investigating. By day's end, he'd emailed me a report, having asked the police for advice, and having interviewed the driver. The guy admitted he was at fault and that he should have apologised – and offered to apologise in person. Lim, whose driver had breached a vehicle-use policy, handed over the employment consequences to me. Three days' suspension, a week's suspension, or did I want him fired? I suggested three days' suspension, accepted his apology, and said I wouldn't be making a police complaint. Lim also cut half the driver's shifts and monitored him for a time. A bouquet to Food Ninja for the prompt, thorough way they handled it.



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through the green light.

I've seen more than a few near misses. I live in central Wellington and walk most places, so I'm often standing idly at intersections. Well, not so idly lately. Seeing vehicles run reds during nearly every phase used to irritate me. Since I pushed out a human and started pushing his pram, it's turned me a Violet Beau-regarde shade of purple. Because those two tonnes of steel are going to crush my boy, as well as me.

For me, the green man is now merely a prompt to check for cars running reds. When it happens, I gesture (yes, sometimes that's the middle finger). I yell (yes, trying not to swear). When I'm on my own, I sometimes sprint to catch them at the next lights, then yell and gesture from the footpath. Some people don't see me. Some look at me as if I'm mad (and I am, if by mad you mean angry). Others pretend I'm not there. If I see cars pull in somewhere, I confront the drivers, who are only occasionally apologetic and sometimes apoplectic. Some have shouted and sworn at me. After Michael yelled at one red-light runner, the guy pulled over and chased Michael on foot, threatening to hurt him. Luckily Michael's fast.

Recently, while walking along Vivian St in Wellington, I saw a car run a red so late that another car was coming through the intersection from Victoria

St. Both veered wildly to avoid the other. The culprit only just missed my son's pram, while I was crossing with the green man flashing. I would have filed a complaint with the police, but it's not easy to do a three-point turn with a mountain buggy, and I was so disoriented I didn't catch the number plate.

So I'm coming out as a nark. Beware a woman with an orange bag and a purple face wielding her iPhone at central Wellington intersections. If I'm quick and standing in the right spot, I take a photo that captures both the offending vehicle and the red light. More often, I note down the number plate and call *555: a police number to report urgent, but not life-threatening, road incidents. However, the vehicle's usually long gone by the time patrol cars get the alert.

So now I usually just fill out the police's Community Roadwatch form online, designed to report unsafe driving when you don't want the driver prosecuted. Superintendent Steve Greally, national manager of road policing, says "up to 500" of these forms are submitted a week regarding risky driving, but he was unwilling to count the ones alleging red-light running. I must have filled in a good few dozen myself. As a working mother, it's not like I have anything better to do with my time, right?

Then what happens after the form is

received? The police send the registered owner a letter about the risky driving, nearly always with no consequences. Greally says if the forms point to high-risk patterns of behaviours, the police may intervene directly, but he doesn't give specifics. He also points out people can lodge a formal complaint at the nearest police station. But I suspect they'd laugh at me once I'd left, given no vehicle was damaged and no one was hurt.

Many times, I've seen company names on the car, from taxis to builders, a coffee chain to a charity, health professionals to funeral directors. Not a good look. That's what I say when I email or call the business concerned. This tactic has proved my most effective. The chief operating officer of a high-profile sports team took my email seriously enough to respond extremely quickly, but also tried to downplay it as unrepresentative. Once, a car dealership issued an employee with a formal warning under its vehicle-use policy. Do I feel bad about this? I do not.

It's not just me seeing red. In January, the Automobile Association (AA) released the results of an online survey of its members about red-light running. Many respondents called it an "epidemic". More than three-quarters said they witnessed red-light running at least weekly, and nearly one in five said they see it every time they travel.

The best way to tackle this is installing red-light cameras. International research shows they're the single most effective way of stopping red-light running and subsequent accidents when used in appropriate locations – particularly high-risk intersections – and that they work best as signposted deterrents rather than as punishments.

Local research bears this out. Begun in 2006, the Auckland Red Light Camera Project – a collaboration between various road-safety authorities – released its findings in 2011. It found red-light running decreased by 69 per cent at problem intersections where trial cameras were installed.

Consequently, in 2013, the New Zealand Transport Authority (NZTA) developed New Zealand's Red Light Camera Position Paper in consultation with other road-safety agencies, including the New Zealand Police, the New Zealand Transport Agency and local government authorities. The paper acknowledged red-light cameras were



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a useful road-safety tool. Subsequently, the government announced a national red-light camera programme, and floated installing up to 30 red-light cameras using new radar technology at high-risk intersections countrywide.

Since then, one red-light camera has been installed in Wellington, at the intersection of Karo Dr and Victoria St, which feeds cars onto the motorway. In Auckland, the police operate two cameras, while Auckland Transport rotates four cameras around 13-15 sites (depending on transport works). Seven red-light cameras – that's the lot. And it compares unfavourably with many other developed countries. Over the ditch, there are 200 red-light cameras in NSW alone.

It's not a question of cost: the aforementioned Auckland trial showed red-light cameras paid for themselves more than eight-fold. The police issued 2221 red-light notices with \$150 fines in the 2015-2016 fiscal year, earning around \$330,000 for the government's consolidated fund.

Yet our government is idling at the intersection. The NZTA has been working on a national-level strategy for the rollout of more red-light cameras, says Barney Irvine, the AA's principal advisor for infrastructure. "But progress is frustratingly slow." He's calling for at least 10 new red-light cameras in Auckland,

and 10 more in other main centres. Drivers actually want them. Nine in 10 respondents in the AA survey supported more cameras, and 46 per cent agreed with the AA's suggestion of signposting them, which surely quashes concerns about a surveillance society.

I've been pondering the psychology behind running reds. Do people on automatic pilot forget they're wielding two-tonne steel weapons? Do people feel immune from consequences?

Though we tend to under-report our own misdeeds, the AA survey asked respondents why they ran reds. Selecting multiple choices from seven options, 53 per cent said they'd failed to see the traffic light until too late, 30 per cent said they misjudged the length of the orange phase, 27 per cent said they considered it safe to run the light, and five per cent admitted they thought it was unlikely they'd be caught. None of those excuses fly with me.

When I've mentioned my narking, friends have asked if I felt guilty about it. Not for a second. I want to stomp on the stigma surrounding being a nark. Because perhaps a red-light runner who opens a letter from the police – or gets told off by their employer – might think twice next time. The other option is to wait until someone gets hurt, or worse.