

Git-r-Done

by Debra Wolcott-Bowden

Have you ever imagined yourself up in an 18-wheeler, piloting its massiveness carefully through town? What do you think when you see a semi truck? Do you wonder about the lives of the drivers? Do you ask yourself how they can drive all day, every day? Do you wonder how visible you are from the front of all that truck and trailer? How safe are they? What do you think when you see a lady driver? When you envision what a truck driver looks like, what image comes to mind? Do you see long, graying pony tails and beards, tattoos and Harley Davidson hats? Or neatly coiffed, clean, sharp creased pants and work shirt with a name patch above the breast pocket? Would you believe there are self-made millionaires, heirs to family fortunes, and attorneys who are now quite content driving truck for a living? Do you think you could never do it?

So did I! However, at the age of 50, I broke from my lifelong pattern of divine domesticity and applied for training at Schneider National, Inc. You know the one, orange truck and trailer with a wisp of a road insignia on the doors: the "orange on time machine." My husband Dave drove for them. Dave was over-the-road about 25 days per month, and our four girls were grown up and gone. OK, now what? I asked God over and over. When I was ready to hear and accept the answer, He gave it. His answer shocked and delighted me. Really? Can I do that? Become a truck driver and team with Dave? My dad was a trucker. I've always had romantic ideas about the big trucks. Dave and the girls were as surprised as I. Although, I knew if I did it I would be successful because I believed God would help me do what He told me to do.

I made the call, and before I knew it I was completely surrounded by noisy, hairy, and "testosterony" men everywhere! Here I was, this Susie-homemaker, artist, interior decorator, seamstress, wearing steel-toed combat boots and getting stared at a lot.

Training was eleven hours a day with information coming at you so fast, "It's like taking a drink from a fire hose," as the classroom instructor said on our first day.

Each new challenge I faced produced stress, compounded by my shyness around the opposite gender. I was so freaked out that I must have looked like Beaker on *The Muppet Show*. I obsessed on all things truck, had to. Failure was not an option.

After a brief intro of the shift pattern on a simulator, you're vigorously expected to inspect your truck and trailer and get on the road with tiny four-wheelers, pedestrians and other big trucks on narrow city streets, highways and big hills. Bumping and grinding gears with a cheerful trainer in the seat to your right. It's not enough to simply watch your space, a truck driver must anticipate everyone and everything on all four sides of the truck. Mirrors and gauges must be scanned every two or three seconds as well as looking ahead short and long range. To that, add gear recovery, power down-shifting, bump-and-run, and coordinating your RPMs and MPH to make smooth shifting. And this is just the tip of the iceberg.

We were told only 3 percent of all applicants are approved for the training program, and there's a whopping 50 percent drop-out rate before you get your first assigned load.

I smile and shiver with pride that I became a great truck driver. Forwards, backwards, and on snowy icy mountains, I've done all 48 states. I got-r-done, in floral gloves and lipstick, no less.

Now I fantasize a little about the "Ice Roads." Dave and the girls are shocked, and not delighted!•

MCC expands truck driving course with enhanced safety

(Submitted by Muskegon Community College)

Muskegon Community College's successful CDL Professional Truck Driving Course, now entering its third year, is expanding the safety portion of the program by teaming up with the Michigan Truck Safety Commission (MTSC).

The CDL program is led by Tom O'Brien, director of MCC's Lakeshore Business and Industrial Service Center, and newly-named commissioner with the MTSC.

The 180-hour course has averaged 100 students per year, with a 99 percent pass rate on the state CDL licensing exam, according to Chuck Mulder, CDL coordinator at MCC. "Even in today's job market, we are seeing viable employment in this area," he says. "The critical thing employers look for is a clear driving record, and no criminal offenses. If you have that, your chances of finding a job driving a truck are near 100 percent."

Michigan continues to be seen as a leader in traffic safety both regionally and nationally.

The MTSC is recognized as being the only organization in the nation dedicated to commercial truck driver education and training, supported not with tax dollars, but solely by the industry it serves. As a result of their efforts, the number of commercial vehicle-involved crashes in Michigan has decreased by 31 percent since 2000.

Michigan currently has one of the lowest crash and fatality rates for commercial motor vehicles in the nation.

For more information, contact Tom O'Brien at (231) 777-0217, or visit the MCC website at www.muskegon.edu/CDL.•••

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