

When safety is a lifelong achievement



Because Mike Southards is a modest man, he did his best to refuse me an interview. I persisted. The Washington Trucking Associations (WTA) recently honored him with the Lifetime Achievement Award for Safety.

Years ago, Mike helped craft the award and determine its requirements so he claims he doesn't qualify – that he was only doing his job, not doing anything extra like the other recipients.

Mike recalled former honoree Dave Kerns for his work training teens on visibility (or lack of) around trucks. Dave used to take a Haney big rig out to Yakima high schools, park a personal vehicle beside it and have the students climb in the truck to see how little there was to see. In many respects, Dave introduced the “No Zone Training” that is now known nationally. I wonder how many collisions were prevented and lives were saved by Dave's work? Even though it is hard to quantify the impact on the lives of those teens, I'm sure most will agree that it was time well spent.

Mike described the efforts of Dennis Morgan to promote safety training from the North American Transportation Management Institute (NATMI). He was the first to attain their Certified Director of Safety (CDS).

He remembered Jack Morris of Great West Casualty Co. and his volunteer work teaching and supporting safety classes from NATMI. Jack willingly presented safety to anyone who needed a speaker or presenter, whether or not they were clients. Jack's career has been spent molding the safety directors who follow in his footsteps.

You see, the impacts of improving safety are often hard to quantify. Counting injuries that don't happen and deaths that don't occur is not the same as counting widgets sold. Yet without healthy trucking workers, widgets can't get from point A to point B. I'm glad we are honoring those who have dedicated their lives to keeping these workers safe.

When Mike joined the WTA as Safety Director in 1999, he, like the others, committed himself to improving the safety, and thereby the profitability, of the trucking industry. He may think he was just doing his job, but the impacts of his commitment to safety are widespread.

Mike has had a big impact – in 2002, he worked alongside others in the WTA to protect the motoring public and carriers from the liability of an impaired driver by strengthening rules surrounding positive drug or alcohol tests (See Chapter 272 pg. 1260). In 2006, they proposed and attained legislation to maintain fairness in the industry and protect the motoring public by removing carriers that break the rules that everyone else abides by (See Chapter 327, pg. 1498). In 2007, Mike and the WTA worked to improve the training required to become a professional truck driver and hold a CDL. As Mike noted, no one can learn enough to earn a CDL in 8 hours. Drivers need to be trained well so they don't find themselves in situations they aren't prepared to handle (See Chapter 419 , pg. 1941). These are just a few examples of Mike's commitment to safety.

Additionally, Mike has worked to create a relationship between the trucking industry and the Washington State Patrol Commercial Vehicles Unit that is unparalleled in any other state. There is an open-door policy between the two where the Commercial Vehicles Division Chief gives out his card to those in the industry and tells them to call with questions or concerns. Ask around and you'll see this doesn't happen in other states – which is why Chief Batiste awarded Mike the coveted “Chief's Coin” twice for his contribution to this relationship.

Through Mike's outgoing personality and gift for remembering faces, names, and details about people, he brings the local industry safety people together. Curt Burhenn, WTAs' Safety Management Council Chairman shared that Mike knows EVERYONE in the industry and that Mike is a walking-talking Federal Regulations book. “He's like the internet, only a phone call away. If Mike hears you have a problem you can't figure out, he'll put you in touch with someone who just went through it.” Mike has a way of brightening the gloomy environment and stressful atmosphere that sometimes surrounds safety professionals.

So, thank you Dave Kerns, Jack Morris, Dennis Morgan, Mike Southards and all the other leaders in safety who have invested your time and talents in making the trucking industry safe. It might not be the same as counting widgets, but you are making a difference to each and every one of us that goes home safe.

www.KeepTruckingSafe.org

*The WTAs' Lifetime Achievement Award is presented on an as-needed basis. Some of the criteria include 20+ years of dedication to safety and significant contributions to safety in the industry. Nominees must be a trucking professional and a key participant in various industry events.

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