

One of the safest truck drivers in the US resides in Central Massachusetts

Paul Piper is one of the safest truck drivers from coast to coast, and he is getting a national award to prove it.



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WORCESTER – We all know it’s tough driving in parts of Worcester. There is traffic, steep hills, angry motorists and snow and ice in the winter.

And rotaries, like the one in Kelley Square, can make any driver squirm.

It's tough to get through all of these challenges without an occasional fender bender.

Now imagine logging more than a million miles on the odometer without getting into an accident, either in Worcester or anywhere for that matter.

Hard to believe, right?

Well, Paul Piper, a truck driver from Leominster, did it. His 1.1 million miles over a 36-year career earned him a national safe driving award.

Piper travels to San Diego next month to receive the Joseph M. Kaplan Driver of the Year Award from the National Safety Council. He's one of 10 drivers in the U.S. and Canada to receive the honor, winning the prize for the New England region.

"I don't like the attention. It's not who I am," said the 58-year-old as he recently sat in the driver's seat of his parked tractor-trailer, all 65 feet of it.

Nominees must have at least 15 years or 250,000 miles of driving under their belt without a "preventable" accident. In other words, one that's not their fault.

Eligibility also includes full-time drivers operating a bus, truck, passenger car or other motor vehicle for a company that is a member of the NSC.

Piper isn't sure who nominated him. He thinks it was his boss at National DCP, who called Piper into his office without telling him why. Call it a stealth way to tell Piper that he was one of the safest drivers in America.

Twelve people were standing there, and not knowing what was coming, Piper remembers asking the group, "Is this an intervention? Am I in trouble?"

Stories on the road

Anyone who has been on the road as long as Piper has stories to tell.

Last fall at daybreak at the Braintree Split, traffic piled up and Piper thought he saw a car with a bunch of tubes in it. He looked again, and then again, just to make sure.

What finally came into focus was a woman breast-pumping while she was behind the wheel.



“It was one of the craziest things I have ever seen,” said Piper, who showed his sensitive side when he remarked that the woman was probably on the way to work while taking care of family responsibilities.

“She was trying to be super mom...I feel for her.”

Then there was the time on Cape Cod when a car drove under Piper’s trailer, while Piper was navigating out of a driveway.

“The man was lucky he wasn’t hurt.”

Piper had a preventable accident 20 years ago when he hit a sign while backing out of a drive-thru. But it didn't disqualify him for the award.

Decades on the road

Piper has worked in the trucking industry for nearly 40 years, 36 of them at National DCP, a nonprofit that provides supply-chain services to the foodservice industry including truck deliveries.

For 20 years, his route was an overnight excursion from the corporate office in Bellingham to Caribou, Maine, minutes away from the Canadian border, to deliver goodies to Dunkin' Donuts stores.

Long trips like that normally require two people in the cab, but Piper told his bosses that he preferred to go solo.

To keep from getting bored as he passed one truck stop after another, Piper had internet access in the cab. He also devoured what he estimated to be 60 to 80 books on CDs over a 10-year period.

Serenity and humor

Piper’s personality is a combination of serenity and humor. Not a belly-laugh kind of humor, but one that appreciates those subtle, unexpected moments in life that bring a smile to one's face.

A trait of professionalism is also apparent, and Piper has a strong connection to his Christian faith as he has driven more than 1 million miles

“(God) keeps me out of harm’s way. I honestly believe that.”

Except for the occasional run-in with a deer or a car that skids out of control that narrowly misses his truck, Piper is unscathed on the road.

But life can present hardships, and Piper hasn't been immune. His wife, Cheryl Carter-Piper, died nine years ago.

“She would be more excited about the award. She loved people to be recognized and lifted up when they achieved something.”

Not predicted

Achievement is something that may not have been predicted for Piper when he was a teenager attending a private high school in Ontario, Canada.

“I was headed in the wrong direction, hanging with the wrong crowd.”

After graduation, Piper took a job in a muffler shop in upstate New York, and then went for his truck driver's license.

It snowed on the day of his driving test, and his trailer skidded during the exam. But he was able to react quickly and keep everything under control.

Piper remembers the instructor telling him, “You had good recognition. You’re passing today.”

No more Caribou

About a year ago, Piper stepped away from the overnight route to Caribou. Now he's strictly a day-route guy, operating the stick shift to deliver items to commercial kitchens that make the donuts and other sweets for Dunkin' stores.

“It’s a whole new gig for me. It’s physically easier, but it’s hard to deal with Boston traffic. My stress level goes up.”

At least another five years is how long Piper wants to drive a truck. Many days it's a 2 a.m. punch-in time.

His job and scores of other truck drivers face the possibility in the years ahead that their positions could be eliminated by driverless routes powered by artificial intelligence.

Piper isn't worried.

Sure, artificial intelligence can run a truck when conditions are clear, said Piper, but he scoffs at AI's ability to handle the roads during New England's treacherous winters.

Not given it much thought

As for what he gets for winning the national safety award, Piper isn't sure because he hasn't given it a lot of thought.

He's not looking for praise.

His life is about enjoying the open road, volunteering for community projects through his church, taking hikes in his spare time and appreciating all that he has.

“Back to Bellingham,” Piper said to announce that it was time to head back to the corporate office to punch out for the day.

“Tomorrow is an easy day, a 4 a.m. start,” he said with a laugh.

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