

Changing Behavior Habits

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I was sitting on the ground, when the highway patrol officer came over to ask if everything was all right. I looked up at him, my whole body shaking, and stated ...

“This was Tim’s Nova and he’s dead.”

many years ago, before joining the military, I was much like the young people of today. There was nothing I wouldn't do for a thrill or to draw attention to myself. In fact, in my high school yearbook, my friends wrote I was most likely to succeed in jail.

It wasn't until some years later when I was working at a paint and body shop as a mechanic and wrecker driver that I realized I needed to change my behavior habits. I had built an engine for my best friend and installed it in his '74 Nova. We were the talk of the town. Many nights we would cruise the town

about 95 mph; it made the first left hand sweeping turn with no problem but at the first right hand turn, the vehicle went straight off the road and hit a telephone pole dead center in the grill. With the speed and momentum of the vehicle, it spun around the pole and was cut in half by the pole's guide wire just in front of the back tires where the back seat is.

The officer went on to say it's a "bloody mess." The fire department had to cut the driver and passenger out of the vehicle because the engine and transmission were pushed into the firewall and front seat area. The driver, who wasn't wearing his seat belt, was dead at the scene and the passenger, who wore his, had survived but was in critical condition. They smelled alcohol on the passenger but wouldn't know about the driver until the test came back. I walked back to my wrecker shaking my head thinking: "That sucks."

After about 10 minutes, I was summoned to remove the carnage of the vehicle. My first task was to get

drinking in that car. When we were challenged, we would even make money racing it on the street. I thought nothing of this kind of behavior.

One morning, at about 1:30 a.m., I was at work and received a call to respond to a single car accident. No big deal, I've been to so many accidents it was nothing new. I got into my wrecker and off I went.

I arrived at the scene and waited for the medical team to leave and the fire department and highway patrol to finish before I could start the job of loading what was left of this mangled vehicle onto the back of my wrecker. I asked the highway patrolman what happened.

The vehicle entered a series of left and right hand curves going

the front half of the vehicle pulled onto the bed of the rollup wrecker. Dropping the winch cable and hook through what was once the front end of this car, I hooked onto it and started winching it slowly up not paying much attention to what type of car it was. As it moved up the wrecker bed and came under the lights, I started to take notice of the tire, paint color, and body design.

Then it hit me; I was pulling what was left of Tim's '74 Nova onto the wrecker. Stopping all work I sat on the ground in a daze, thinking the driver is dead — my best friend Tim was gone!

I really don't know if I said something, or if it was the fact that I was sitting on the ground, but the

highway patrol officer came over to ask if everything was all right. I looked up at him, my whole body shaking, and stated: "This was Tim's Nova and he's dead." Sensing that I was having serious issues over this accident, he led me over to his patrol car. After what seemed to be the longest time, the patrol officer finally explained to me that my best friend Tim was not dead. He had been the passenger.

I went to the hospital and saw Tim's mom and dad. She said over and over again how I shouldn't have built that engine for him. What really hit me in the gut was Tim's dad. He was a County Sheriff who had stopped me only 2 weeks prior for speeding with an open container in the car. He didn't take me to jail, but gave me the lecture of a lifetime about speeding and drinking and how it was going to be the end of me. Needless to say, when Tim's 6 foot 4 inch father took one glaring look at me at the hospital, as Tim lay seriously injured, I knew right then and there I needed to change my behavior habits.

A couple of years later I joined the military and started taking to heart all those safety briefings everyone so dearly dreaded hearing. As I listened to each one over and over, year after year, I just pictured Tim's dad lecturing me just before Tim's accident.

So, as a person who now stands out in front of large numbers of people talking about safety, I try to provide the information and stories that you will need to start changing your behavior habits the painless way. Don't be like me and wait for a major tragedy to hit home, because by then it may be too late.

In 2001, I went to my first High School Reunion, it was our 20th. There I saw my old friend Tim, his family, and others I haven't seen since joining the military. We walked together to the table that had pictures of 15 of our deceased classmates. Only two had died of natural causes. I did have my yearbook so all could see how wrong they were about me. You too can change your behavior habits. All you have to do is try. ▶

