

FINAL: Desiree Wood Interview

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Even though there's a shortage of truck drivers in the US, women find it difficult to get hired for these jobs. With us today is Desiree Wood, driver, President and founder of REAL Women in Trucking. She'll explain why. Desiree is featured in the documentary "Driver," which recently screened at the Tribeca Film Festival. Welcome to the podcast, Desiree. Thanks for joining us.

VC: Tell us when and why you decided to become a trucker.

DW: About 2007 my kids had grown up and moved out. I was just having a lot of changes in my life, a lot of difficult times. I actually at one point became homeless and just could not find a direction for myself. For some reason, trucking came to my mind. This might be something good for me. I'm an unsettled person, I like moving, I have a lot of problem-solving skills. I think I could do this. And so, I went to truck driving school and I loved it right away. But I did not love the way they were rushing me through it and trying to push me faster than I was comfortable with, because I'm a responsible person and wanting to do a good job, a safe job.

KK: Can you explain a bit about the lifestyle of a trucker. You were also trained by somebody before you did it yourself. What's the lifestyle like, especially for a woman?

DW: A lot of people really don't understand that you might see truck drivers around your town that are, you know, day cab, and then there's these other trucks that are a little bigger and that's called a sleeper cab. And those drivers are going over the road, they're going town to town, they pick up something, whatever it is you buy, its pancake syrup, or shoes that somebody manufactures. Very few people manufacture anything in the United States and the very few that do we go get it at the port, came in at the port, we pick it up in the trailer and then we sleep, basically, in there and drive it across the country. So inside of the cab is bunk beds, if you're lucky you have a little tiny refrigerator, most don't, and you just sort of live in this space, it's about, a little smaller than an elevator. For those of you who feel like you're always driving to go to your desk at work, for me it's like, I just cut out the commute time. I roll out of bed, change my clothes, get some coffee and start driving.

KK: Now what about showering?

DW: Truck drivers are under Federal hours of service. They're allowed to drive 11 hours a day and then they have to park ten. And that ten hour is called a sleeper break. We do have to take a 30-minute break in the afternoon so one of my other big projects is truck parking. When you have a 75-foot vehicle you're supposed to stop and sleep, you've got to find somewhere to park it. And that is a big problem for drivers. If you drive at night, you might see trucks parked all over the ramps on the highways. That's what they're doing. They have to sleep, there's not enough truck parking so we park wherever we can. We go to the truck stop to take a shower. Sometimes we have to wait two hours to take a shower. Sometimes when it's our turn the shower has no more hot water. We also have to wait to do our laundry. So, we do our laundry at the truck stops. So, you're always on the go. You're grabbing food at the truck stop, refueling, walking the dog, paying the bills by Western Union, sending money home, all these things. When I started, of course, we didn't have Venmo and everything, but you'd see a line at the Western Union at the truck stop, got to send money home because the electric bill's due and I need someone to run over there and pay it.

VC: Why is additional training required once you get your CDL from the trucking school?

DW: Insurance. Most new drivers are going to have a fender bender in the first six months. It is a lot to learn. First of all, the whole way they have set up the training is, you see all of these how to become a truck driver CDL schools around your neighborhood, they'll tell you you're going to have a CDL in four or five weeks. That's not enough time to learn how to do this job. It's a big piece of equipment. You could kill people with it. You need to be a responsible driver. You need to understand it takes a lot of effort to stop it. It's not like a car; it doesn't stop on a dime. It takes a while to set in a different weight of freight. If I'm carrying dog food it takes a lot longer for me to stop the truck than if I'm pulling potato chips. So, you start having to learn the truck. So, the schools are really rushing you through the system because they're making a lot of money on the students. That's the inner industry of trucking. So, you've been sort of rushed through this four- or five-week program and they led you to believe you're a licensed driver now. But you don't really have the experience level that the insurance companies want you to have before they say yeah, I'm going to vouch for you, you can go drive for this big company, their equipment. And a lot of companies won't hire you either. They want you to have over-the-road experience. You can't just go get a local job. There's a lot of misleading advertising in truck driver training to make people think they can go to CDL school and get a local job, and that's a lie. You have to often go to an over-the-road company and over-the-road companies have figured out; we can use

these students for a cheap labor force. We don't have to pay them very much and we can make them do team driving. And that's kind of what's happening. You get there and you're like, OK, this is going to be where I'll get the real training, training that's going to make me a qualified driver to get a good trucking job. But in fact, you're put in a truck with somebody that's called a trainer who really only has a few weeks more, a few months more experience than you that found out they're not making the money they thought they would make when they entered trucking and now the company's coerced them essentially to become a trainer. And they're resentful and they have an agenda and you're a second log book and it is a nightmare in many cases.

KK: This sounds like a perfect opportunity for these drivers or quote unquote trainers to take advantage of these women truckers. I know that you work very hard regarding sexual assaults and everything in that area. Can you tell us about that?

DW: Right away I saw that—well, I had a female trainer. It was in the back of my mind and I didn't really understand the extent of it but I did get lucky in the sense that I requested a female trainer and one happened to be available and she was a non-smoker which is a real unicorn in the trucking industry, a female trainer non-smoker. So, the problem was with her is that she was popping prescription pills the entire time during my training. So, she was impaired, and she was verbally abusive. She was pushing me to do things I knew were unsafe, speed, tailgate people, screaming and yelling at me to drive faster in residential areas where there's kids playing, there's ice on the road. She eventually wanted to leave me at a truck stop because she ran out of pills. She was doctor shopping across the United States and never taught me to back. So, at the time she decided I've got to go, I got to go get my pills, I was pushed to take my test out, final test. And I had no backing. So, I failed it.

VC: You had no backing? Meaning, you couldn't back up the truck?

DW: She didn't teach me that. (VC/KK: Oh, wow!) This happens a lot, it's pretty common. So, I got a second trainer, a little East Indian man and he taught me to back, in two weeks he taught me the things I needed to know to pass my test and I was on my way. But the hell was not over because the company had this business model that I found to be the most problematic. That is, once you're done with your trainer you have to find a co-driver and do another six months of team driving. So now you've got to go wander around the company asking random people, will you be my co-driver? Will you be my co-driver? To complete the six months. And you have to take whoever, you have no right to know where they came from, if they have issues, and that's

kind of what set me into seeing how horrible a system this is to teach people. So yes, I was on a truck with somebody who had been previously incarcerated for attempted murder. I was on a truck with somebody who said he used to be a pimp who threw my clothes off the truck and sprayed me with bleach and left me stranded after I rejected him. I had another guy that screamed in my face that he would never force me to have sex which was like, why are you saying this to me? He would leave me in remote places when I wanted to go to the bathroom, he would move the truck so I'd have to wander around looking for him, someplace that was not a great neighborhood. So, I had been sexually assaulted before I entered trucking in my late 20s and I had a lot of changes in my life as a result of that. Some of these things that happened during my training triggered some nightmares again and some really bad physical manifestations of shaking, so at one point I got off the truck because I couldn't hold the steering wheel. I have a lot of self-control but this was something I couldn't control. When I reported it to the company they started targeting me. And that's when I was like, wait a minute, what's going on here? Why are you coming after me when I'm following your company policies that you have in place here, you say that I'm doing, supposed to follow this procedure, you're gunning for me. That led me to join a women's trucking association that had newly formed called Women in Trucking. They too started coming after me for talking about this (KK: Are you serious?) They started stalking me online (KK: Explain why?) Because those are their corporate sponsors. That's their money. So, this went on for quite a long time, through 2008, 2009, I started going on the Internet writing about it. My membership was eventually revoked from that organization for talking about it (VC Wow.) And that's how REAL Women in Trucking was formed. So, in the movie Driver, when I became an expert witness, I was an expert witness up against the other expert witness for the companies and that was the president of Women in Trucking, Ellen Voie who revoked my membership all those years before and she was the woman in the scene when I am giving the petition to the Federal agency. There's a woman sitting in the audience with blond hair, that is her. And she declined to sign that petition. So, the reason REAL Women in Trucking was formed was because this industry has deliberately covered this issue up. They know that it's happening in a lot of companies that women are being sexually assaulted during their training. They want to paint a picture that we want women to enter because they get a lot of money and accolades for doing that, but they don't really care what happens to you two- or three-weeks in. And that just made me so angry, I felt like somebody has to say something.

VC: It seems, REAL Women in Trucking your organization has made a difference in the industry. So, can you talk about that?

DW: We've made a difference in the industry up to a point. Like I said, I was stalked online by other women, female executives, HR women. I was taken aback by how much women would attack you when you came to a trucker forum, or HR office, it was like, well, what did you do? What were you wearing? How were you behaving? Everything was shaming you. (KK: I'm shocked). And I was just like, where have you all been? What is going on here? It was like the Stepford Wives. And it still is. It still is. They will willfully ignore what you're saying to them and point the finger back at you. And I said, I want to find a group of women who are not like this, who are strong enough to stick together to show, we don't have to act like this. You can have each other's backs and we can overcome this. And as far as the men, there are male allies in trucking but they're so drowned out by these corporate apologist women executives who do not have the courage to step up and speak truth. And don't point the finger and slut shame these women that are coming here from formerly being homeless, formerly being incarcerated, domestic violence, they're trying to change their life. They're willing to live in a truck all by themselves and move this freight across the country. You're telling them trucking is welcoming them. And then when they have a problem, they're like, we don't know anything. What did you do? What were you wearing? I read a brochure one company put out, I have it on my computer, where they give female trainees advice on how to behave with their trainer that includes making sure they have enough tampons because they don't want to be an inconvenience (VC: Oh, my God...) to the trainer to have him stop. Like where are we, 1955?

KK: I know how difficult this is, but I'm surprised to hear what you're saying about the other corporate women.

DW: This has been like a human study for me. Why are they like that? I think a lot of them, they call themselves women in trucking. They're not truck drivers. They've never been in a truck. They've never been near a truck. They don't know how to drive it. They don't know the lifestyle. They don't know what it's like to go take a shower in a truck stop where somebody's playing a video game right outside the door, you're completely, no clothes on inside of there, having to go to the bathroom in a cup because the shipper you deliver to won't let you use the bathroom. Your life changes. These women, they get so into the title, women in trucking. They don't want to lose their seat at the table with men.

KK: How did you get the other women that are part of your organization?

DW: It's not been easy. Basically, there've been people who have come and gone because they didn't get it. There's no politics or religion allowed in my group, number one. And we talk about controversial issues. And you'd better have a thick skin. I'm a straight talker. So, if you want to talk about how to make beef stroganoff in the truck, this is not the group for you. I'm trying to make a difference. I have seen people like Michelle, who is in the movie, she joined the organization. She made a phone call to me when she heard me on a podcast saying I really need help, so she stepped up. We had other people who have stepped up. A lot of them are in it for the notoriety. We do get a lot of attention, we've done so many interviews, Dan Rather, New York Times, Yale, we've gotten a lot of press.

KK: That's one of our questions. Did those interviews with these top notch...

VC: Yes, Dan Rather, the Times, did they make a difference?

DW: They didn't, because the trucking industry has such a stranglehold on the media, they can just wait until the dust settles, pretend like nothing ever happened. They control the trucking media enough so that none of this news trickles down there so that the executives have to look in the mirror. This has been going on since way before the Me-Too movement. The Me-Too movement came and I'm like well, finally, something's going to happen that's going to help me move this forward. What they've been able to do is monetize it. So now you have not just Women in Trucking, you have the ATA has formed their own, ATA Women in Motion, there's a couple of other groups formed, and everybody sees they can make money off the word "MeToo" and not do shit about it. Pardon my French. It's not French. That's been a hard pill to swallow for me because I'm trying to make real change, not tag lines.

KK: Tell us how, because Vanessa and I saw the Driver at the Tribeca Festival. We were amazed and we learned a great deal that we are talking about today. How did that happen?

DW: Yeah, Nessa came to me. We get calls all the time from journalists that want to do a ride-along, they want to do a story. A lot of student journalists, student documentarians and stuff. I had done a few and I just, I was tired because they never go anywhere. The trucking industry extinguishes it before it gets out to the general public. But when I saw Nessa's background, she had done Frontline and National Geographic, I was like, maybe this could be something that people will really get. Even though I was having a very difficult time in my personal life, I was like, that's how this all started. I entered trucking at one of the most difficult times in my life, I went on social media and just laid myself bare. I had nothing to lose. Let me take this story further

and let people see and maybe we can get people to help change because I really do think it's the general public. The trucking industry is never, ever going to change what they have going. A cheap labor force, a meat grinder, its taxpayer subsidized. They always claim there's a driver shortage. There's no driver shortage. It is a toxic workplace. They use people and they spit them out. They do not want to pay these drivers by the hour. They like paying them by the mile. They like using people that have no voice and I want to give them a voice.

VC: You had been invited to the White House for the Trucking Action Plan event. Can you tell us about that?

DW: There has been a revolving door of people in the Federal Motor Carrier Safety administration leadership. I think there's been nine people in that office just since I've been a driver, which is a tremendous amount of turnover. So, it's hard to get the conversation going with somebody about what's going on, and then they leave. But I did happen to get to meet the women at the Department of Labor Women's Bureau, and they introduced me to some people at the White House Gender Policy Council. I'm not really sure exactly who it was from all of these connections that put my name on the list, and I opened the door for others to be put on the list as well, because even if we got a 30-minute meeting I always made sure another little small group would come with me too, to let all of us have a chance to say something. Some of those people didn't stick with it because this is hard, you know. You think you make progress, then you get pushed down, they got all the corporate people in there, so we went there. They wanted to promote their Accredited Apprenticeship Program. But I still had a lot of questions about it because it didn't have any tie to retention. So, it was thrilling to go to the White House. Some of the people that were there, Steve Viscelli, who wrote the book, *The Big Rig: Trucking and the Decline of the American Dream*, and Michael Belzer, who wrote *Sweatshops on Wheels*. Labor sociologists, both former drivers, telling the same story that I'm telling all these years later that still has not been addressed, to be there with them at the White House, still there with Ellen from *Women in Trucking* and Chris Spear from the ATA, it was kind of bittersweet. I wanted them to see what was really going on. Don't start another training program and dump all this government money in it unless you're going to tie it to retention. Really get down to the root of the problem, why people are falling through the cracks, especially women. They're getting raped, they're getting assaulted, and they're being introduced to a job they love and they're like, this would be awesome. Why are you putting me through this hell to get it?

KK: Now is the compensation different, you had mentioned before, how many miles you drive?

DW: Drivers are mostly paid by the mile, and this needs to change. It causes speeding. It causes unsafe behavior. You have hours of service. They're telling you that you can only drive 11 hours a day. If I'm driving in traffic in the Northeast, I'm not gonna be able to cover very many miles in 11 hours. So, if I'm only getting paid 50 cents a mile, I'm not getting very much pay. If I'm at a loading dock and I arrive—often this is the case—and they say, the product's not ready. We don't know when it's going to be ready. I put something out on my Twitter feed yesterday. I sat 14 hours at a loading dock before, waiting to get loaded. (VC Wow.). I'm not paid for that time. And nobody is doing anything about it. This went on my Twitter feed; Trucker Desiree is my Twitter. "The current wait time to get loaded is 12 to 16 hours. Sorry for the inconvenience." Who does that? The truck drivers do. This mostly happens at food facilities. They do not have their act together. And nobody's advocating to say, you have to get paid. We have come to learn that shippers are paying fines for this detention time but it's not trickling down to the drivers' pockets. Not getting in their paycheck, so you have to fight for it. The standard is, it used to be, you get two hours free before detention pay gets paid. Then the FMCSA, the government agency over trucking, Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, implemented this electronic logging device, ELD mandate. As soon as that thing went into effect, it's four hours free. Four hours free, sitting in a loading dock before detention pay. And they say, OK, after four hours we'll give you \$25.00 an hour. But there's still no guarantee you're going to get that \$25.00 an hour. You'll go there and at some of these places, at the three and a half hours mark they'll start loading you. And you're loaded in 30 minutes and they'll say, well, it's only 30 minutes. So, they have every trick in the book down to make sure you don't get paid. Now your clock has run out on that ELD because it's clicking the whole time, of your time. You have 11 hours to drive and you have to do it within 14 hours. So now they've wasted that time you could drive, so what are you going to do? You're going to hurry up to get someplace. They do all of these things that defy logic and defy highway safety and they put it on the driver and make it look like the drivers like a rogue, bad person. You know, pay them by their time. They deserve to be paid by their time.

VC: So, Desiree, are you still driving, or are you pretty much working with your organization these days?

DW: I stopped driving in November. It's not practical for me to drive because I have so many other responsibilities. You can't just get invited to the White House and park your load in the middle of the United States and hop on a plane. It made it very difficult for me to have the flexibility to attend to things. REAL Women in Trucking is completely out of funding right now. I have to work seven days a week just to keep the website going and keep things going so I have a full-time job in transportation, and I have a part-time job in transportation, and I can't really talk a whole lot about that. But I fund the website and activities. We got a

little bit of grant money from supporters of the film to help us get through the last couple of months, take the heat off of me, which has been very nice. A couple of people who went to see Driver made a donation directly on our website which helps pay the bills this month too, that was much appreciated. So that's kind of where we're at right now.

VC: Hopefully some of our listeners out there will be motivated to send some donations your way, and, how can they do that?

DW: My website is REAL Women in Trucking dot o-r-g. There is a donate button on there. We're a membership organization but drivers are not, they just don't have the money to support our membership so donations, one-time donations or recurring donations help us. We are a 501-C-6 so we're not tax deductible because we're a trade association. We have to do that so we can make a difference. However, we do have a 501-C-3 charity also, called Truckers Emergency Assistance Responders. The website for that is www.cdltear.org. What that organization does is help drivers who get stranded on the road like I did in the film and they don't have the money to get a bus ticket home. This often happens when a driver works for a company that's paying you on a 1099 when they're really a company driver. They have maybe a dispute or the truck breaks down and they will just leave them stranded, they won't pay them their last paycheck and they have no resources to get home. So, with TEAR we're able to help them with a bus ticket, food, get them a motel room for the night and sometimes they just go on to the next trucking job.

VC: So, if anybody wants to donate, that's also a great organization. Tell us what, in your view, what, for you are the greatest rewards and the greatest challenges of being a trucker?

DW: I really appreciated how it made me feel, one, that I could do it, it's a hard job, it's hard to be alone, you feel like it's purposeful. When you go and pick something up, it's like, I buy that! The whole idea of the trip of this item that you buy in the supermarket and the trip that it's been on to get on the shelf was so exciting to me—coffee pots and in all these little tiny towns and having to go through all these weather conditions, horrible accidents and kids asking you to honk the horn, you haven't had a shower in five days and you're like, I'm here, I made it on time! You feel like there's gonna be a party for you but there never is. But you do feel good inside because you're like, I overcame all these things and I'm here on time! There's a lot of rewarding feelings about being a truck driver. But it's also a roller coaster of emotions. It definitely changes you to be more grateful for things like clean laundry, hot and cold running water, the simple pleasures in life.

VC: So now you've given us some really good resources where people can learn more about the trucking industry and make some donations and... now what advice do you have for other women who are thinking that they might want to get into this industry.

DW: What we're seeing now is, there is a rise in hiring discrimination, and a lot of companies will not hire women, and tell them they have to be on a waiting list, which is illegal, violates the Civil Rights Act, Title 7, and the trucking industry just feels like it's above labor law, it's above what the EEOC says. So, we have a lot of work to do. I have a lot of women calling me to tell me that they're not being hired, they're told they have to be on these waiting lists. Some have experience. I would suggest to women before you go rushing into this, do not believe all of the bells and whistles of this misleading recruiting that's out there. None of these "best fleets to drive for, for women" are real. They're all pay to play baloney. You have to do your research. So go to a community college, get good training, it's usually an eight-week program, it's usually cheaper, there's grants available. You'll be discouraged from getting the grants from some of these CDL schools because then whoever has their hand out for kickbacks doesn't get it. Take your time, there's no rush. You want to learn. Do not become a lease-purchase operator. Spend the first two years just learning how to be a safe driver. Get through your first winter safely. And absolutely do not go to a training company that's gonna ask you to do team driving with another person for six months. There's a couple of decent companies, but you've just got to do a lot of research. There is no silver bullet, unfortunately.

VC: Desiree, thank you so much for this. This was so informative. You're really taking us inside the trucking industry, exposing all of these terrible things that are happening. So, keep up the great work!

KK: If anybody out there wants to see the documentary *Driver*, it's going around the festivals, is that correct, Desiree?

DW: It's been at Tribeca and it's been in DC which, we had a great audience in DC of people from many agencies and we hope to get it there for some private screenings also. We would like to get some community screenings and they're working on an impact campaign so we can raise more awareness, to keep our work going. Everything comes on a truck. And if it's not a truck, it's a human being that's really giving up their own life's luxuries to make sure it gets there on time for you.

Tag: For the latest information about upcoming screenings of Driver, check out the film's website, driver.film.
To schedule a screening, email the filmmakers at info@driver.film.

END