

Box Truck Debacle



So I'm sitting with Bob Neal in the Fall of 2020 at his lake house on Highland Lake. Technically, it's Brenda's lake house because she is the queen bee and I don't want to lose my lake privileges due to a silly short story. Brenda is also a red head which scares me a little. It's a gorgeous place with what I consider to be the best waterfront lot on the entire lake. Bob is a distinguished man with a headful of flowing gray hair and tan skin. Well dressed, well spoken and well respected. He's seventy two years young and has been around the block a time or two. I love hanging around with these types of people. The stories are the best, and the

knowledge you can glean from a single conversation with a person like Bob could be life changing. I know because it happened to me on this day. We were talking about family and connecting the dots of who I might be related to that he knew. Being from Oneonta, Alabama, population 6,800 in a good year, you usually don't have to drop many names before somebody starts telling you stuff about your kin folks that you never wanted to hear. I had told him about a couple of my brother-in-laws that were retired full time truck drivers. I soon learn that in his current semi-retired life, Bob owns a big rig and hauls things around the country for various logistics companies. "The money is great and the loads are easy to find, you should buy a truck and start hauling freight". I was trying to decipher if he was serious or just used this to get away from Brenda from time to time. If the old saying about redheads being a handful is true, then Brenda was a Caterpillar D11. I laughed it off by saying I was too busy with my current job. The truth was that I can not, **and let me stress this**, I can not back a trailer to save my life. I'm a fifty year old man. I've jackknifed more pull behind trailers than I care to admit. But out of pure stupidity, on a professional truck driver's deck, with a cold beer in hand, and ribs on the grill, and other men around, I blurted out, **"I can't back a trailer to save my life."** Silence filled the space. In the distance I could have sworn I saw a tumbleweed roll across the perfectly manicured yard. He looked deep into my eyes and leaned forward as if he were waiting on a punchline. I was waiting to be asked to leave or at least to go sit on the dock with the lady folk. "You should buy a twenty six foot box truck.

They don't require a C.D.L. and you won't have to back a trailer". Just like that, the life changing conversation had begun.

The year 2020 was a horrible year for small advertising agencies like mine. We represent car dealerships for the most part and between lockdowns, chip shortages and general hogwash I discovered that I may have to find a new career after twenty years in business. No one was advertising, but the supply chain shortage brought opportunity in the trucking business.

Immediately, my entrepreneurial mind sprung into action. The first call was to my oldest son who was also in the car business so I knew he had time for a side hustle. Second call was to my two retired truck driving brother-in-laws, Eddie Dempsey and Ricky Reeves. As it turns out they were tired of being cooped up with my sisters in quarantine. They both told me that they would pay me to let them drive. I took the deal immediately and probably saved two marriages in the process. Next was to buy a truck, register for my DOT, LLC, MCC and to jump through the hoops and federal regulations. Needless to say, eighty thousand dollars and a kidney later we were in business. The truck we had bought was a 2012 Ford F-750 box truck that rained on the inside as hard as it rained on the outside. The cab had a smell similar to onions and ball sweat. Our engine had close to a million miles on it but the tires were round and that was good enough for me. We loved it right away and slapped a sticker on the door with the name Alpine Trucking. To say it was all downhill from there would be an understatement.

On the maiden voyage, we took a shipment to North Carolina. I chose Eddie on the first run. My other brother in law had just had his 26th stent put in his heart and I felt my life was in enough danger already in this rolling box of rust. Off we go as we plan to drive through the night, taking shifts to make it there by 7 AM the next day. Eddie drove first because I had never been in a box truck this big, plus it was raining. My job when it rained was to towel the dashboard electronics off so we didn't short out the flux capacitor and explode going down the road. After about five hours of driving we had to stop for our first re-fueling and bathroom break. I walk out of the truck stop with a bag of snacks like a twelve year old on the way to Panama City Beach. Life on the open road. Cool wind in my hair and the smell of diesel fuel in my nostrils. This was the change of pace I needed to get back on my feet. As I'm walking to the truck I see Eddie pumping gas into the rolling rust cube. I also see a young lady backing out of a parking space located directly behind our 26 foot money machine. Unfortunately she did not see it, slamming hard into the back of the truck and running under the liftgate. First trip, first insurance claim, five hours in business.

The next eleven months was quite the adventure. We went through drivers, tires, fuel filters and towing services with a commitment that only a Mormon kid on a bicycle would understand. Basically we traveled around the country hauling stuff. We also managed to run into a lot of stuff, like retaining

walls and low overpasses. My brother-in-law Eddie Dempsey drove the wrong direction down a street in New York City with my sister, Cookie, in tow. On another occasion Ricky Reeves, the proud owner of 26 heart stents, made a right turn into traffic and took the front end off a Subaru Forester. Did I mention he is also a brother-in-law? It must be a family thing because the very next month I was delivering a load of pesticides in Hoover, Alabama with my middle son Andrew, and ran under an awning and completely ripped off the top of the box truck and tore the awning down in the process.

Months rolled on and so did the accidents and mishaps. The final straw was the trip my wife and I took to Punta Gorda Florida. By this point she knew I was struggling. I had worked my way up to owning three box trucks so we were literally crashing into things all across the country in separate trucks. I was sleep deprived and had no business driving 11 hours to Punta Gorda. Leanne comes home the day before we leave with a big smile on her face and announces that she had gotten her Health Card. Basically, on a 26 foot box truck you have to be able to do two things in order to be a driver. First you have to be able to fog a mirror. If that works out and you're breathing then you go get a 30 second medical exam for a health card, and just like that.....you're a truck driver. Remember this low bar next time you're barreling down I-65 next to a box truck. Be sure to have a conversation with Jesus before attempting to pass.

Off we go! Two “truck drivers” in the middle of the night, in the middle of Covid and in the middle of a mental breakdown for the next 11 hours. We made it on time and dropped off our freight and were fortunate enough to get a load to haul back out of Tampa to Pensacola. Sidenote, If you’ve ever been in or know someone who has been in trucking, you know that it is nearly impossible to get a load of freight coming out of Florida. In fact, it’s said in the industry that Florida is the place where things go to die. I plan to die while retired in the Florida Keys myself.

On the way back it was Leanne's turn to drive so I pulled over in a Target parking lot just outside of Punta Gorda to show her how everything works. I know this sounds dangerous to even ride 11 hours with someone who has never even driven a truck of this size but my eyes were crossing from lack of sleep and I was ready to meet the Lord anyway. “Here is the gas, here is the brakes. The Seats and braking system are controlled by an air system so they may feel a little different until you get used to them. Also, since this thing is so long you're going to need to make really wide turns. Oh, and you can't go under any overpasses or awnings that are under 13.8 feet or you'll rip the top off”. I could see pure panic and fear in her face. I didn't care at this point. All I wanted was that passenger seat and a pillow. If I woke up dead at the pearly gates, so be it. “Leanne I'm going to get at the other end of the parking lot and you drive to me and stop, just so you can get a feel for it”, I announce. I ran full speed across the parking lot like a man that just robbed a 7-11. She

began to pull forward and made it about two parking spaces and stopped. I waited about five minutes before running back across the parking lot to check on her. She was fine. In fact she was really good! In that period of time as I was going to the other side of the parking lot, she had booked a one way Southwest flight out of Tampa to Birmingham and an Uber was on the way to take her there. "I quit," she says. "This is insane and I'm going home". Minutes later the Uber showed up and I watched her car pull away. My mind was playing the song "Never Say Goodbye" by Bon Jovi as the exhaust hit me in the face from the Uber driver's red Kia as it pulled away.

This is the day I quit too. After leaning the seat back and getting a couple hours rest I made that final drive to Oneonta with a stop over in Pensacola along the way. We sold the trucks and paid off the debt and insurance claims we had racked up and that was it. I said this story was life changing for me and it was. It taught me that I've got a lot of "quit" in me and that's not entirely bad. Sometimes while I'm out on the lake fishing and it's so peaceful, the water actually looks like glass. I'll float past Bob Neal's house and think about throwing a match inside his pontoon, but then I remember that I've never learned a damn thing in victory. Everything I know in my 50 years has come from loss and hard lessons. Thank God for hard lessons learned through tough circumstances. Plus he's married to that red head and I don't want to lose my lake privileges.

