

High Octane

Driven to Help

By Katie Dodd

[Truckers answer the call of others in need](#)



For August Grulich, the realization came on a cold Christmas morning. For Mark Taylor, it was September 11, 2001. For Jeff Mather, it was the day his doctor delivered some bad news. Inspiration may have struck at different moments for these three drivers, but the message was the same: Someone needs my help.

Seeking Shelter

August Grulich has always felt he was called to help those less fortunate. A devout Christian, he became involved in his church's overnight homeless shelter in 1998. But on Christmas Day 1999, as he prepared to send a group out into a bitterly cold Wisconsin morning, he felt frustrated that he couldn't do more.

"I thought, 'It's Christmas Day! Where are these people going to go?' " he says.

So August founded his own homeless shelter, the Kenosha New Hope Mission, which he hopes eventually will operate 24-7. For the moment, it's a floating overnight shelter where his guests can get a hot meal, a warm bed, counseling, and access to job training and job hunting. A company driver for JDC Logistics, August is on the road Sunday through Thursday. Sometimes he stops at a TA to cash in his RoadKing Club points for practical gifts he can distribute at the shelter — duffel bags, blankets, etc.

At home on Friday and Saturday, he runs errands for the mission and hangs out with the guests, cooking meals, praying with them, or helping them find work — sometimes in the trucking business. After church on Sunday, he climbs back into his truck, where he continues to do mission-related business over the phone.

He's currently focused on finding a permanent location for the mission, so it can serve the community at all hours of the day and night. But it hasn't been easy.

"When it comes to the homeless, a lot of people will say, 'I like what you're doing, but not in my backyard,' " Grulich says.

Still, Grulich is persistent, spending most of his spare time — on and off the road — fielding calls from people trying to help, writing grant proposals and lobbying local government agencies for help.

"A lot of people in August's position would just say, 'I give up,' but he doesn't," says Joyce Siewert, a mission volunteer and friend of Grulich. "He's just one person, but he does more than most."

Worlds Away

Mark Taylor also took a leap most people wouldn't when he found himself deeply affected by the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11. He wanted to enlist in the military, but at 38 he was just past the upper age limit. Luckily, he discovered that KBR, a division of Halliburton, was looking to hire experienced truck drivers as civilian contractors. Before long, Taylor had closed his trucking company, Ugly Puppy Exploration, which he ran with wife Renee, and shipped out to Iraq for 18 months.

Taylor was assigned to deliver mail to the soldiers as part of the "Iron Pony Express" — a nickname inspired by their heavily armored trucks. Based out of Baghdad International Airport, the Iron Pony mission put him in some of Iraq's most dangerous zones nearly

every day.

“We’d go through the scrap piles to find anything to shield us,” he says. “Some of our trucks really looked like something out of Mad Max.”

As the war went on, the trucks’ armor got better. But the missions were still dangerous. The reward, though, Taylor says, was the response from the soldiers when the Iron Pony trucks pulled up.

“They would hold up signs saying ‘Thank God for the Iron Pony Express,’ ” he says. “It was just tremendous. I could not ask for a better reward.”

When he returned home, Taylor and his wife turned their company’s official website, uglypuppy.net, into an online community for truckers who have gone to war and their families at home.

The Big Picture

Jeff Mather also relished the chance to help his fellow drivers when he received some life-changing news. Last year, at age 37, Mather was diagnosed with diabetes, which he must control with insulin injections. Unfortunately, FMCSA regulations forbid insulin-dependent diabetics from operating a commercial vehicle.

“When I found out I had diabetes, I saw my career just go out the window,” he says. “I just sat in the hospital and cried.”

As he expected, Mather lost his company driving job, but he didn’t spend too much time feeling sorry for himself. He immediately began writing letters to everyone from the Governor of Maryland to Vice President Dick Cheney in an effort to earn a waiver and to persuade officials that the FMCSA rules are too rigid. He argued that scientific evidence shows that insulin-dependent drivers who are managing their diabetes successfully aren’t any more dangerous on the road than other drivers.

Before long, Mather got in touch with the American Diabetes Association (ADA), and he’s now one of their most vocal spokesmen. In June, he appeared before Congress to testify on the organization’s behalf.

While Mather still longs to get back on the road, he’s realized that this battle is not just about his career anymore. Instead, he believes he has a higher calling — to help educate drivers about the dangers of the unhealthy lifestyle that trucking can sometimes promote. His dream is to get a truck, solicit diabetes-related sponsors and drive around to truckstops and truck shows, demonstrating to drivers how they can make healthier choices about diet and exercise while they’re on the road.

“I’m more interested in the big picture — seeing drivers take better care of themselves,” he says. “I’m going to make as much noise about health-related issues for drivers as I

can.”

For all three of these drivers, what began as a small idea has blossomed into a second career of sorts. And all three welcome the change.

“I really enjoy doing it — and I kind of feel funny telling somebody about it,” Grulich says. “But how do people know what they can do to help if you don’t tell them?”

Every Penny Helps

If you’d like to help any of the drivers profiled with their charitable efforts, contact them through the information below:

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