

# SAFETY SPOTLIGHT

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*The "Safety Spotlight" feature of The Green Light shines the spotlight on safety professionals to gain insight into their background, and their thoughts and ideas on safety in our industry.*

Meet Debbie Henderson, Safety Director for Eagle Motor Freight in Montgomery, Alabama. She began her career in safety over 30 years ago and has a passion for it that inspires everyone around her...

## **How did you get started in Safety?**

In 1986, I went to work for Interstate National Lease as the office manager assigned to a dedicated account, Whatley Transportation. Sometime in 1989, Whatley decided to take over the operation of the leased equipment. At that point I was out of a job.



During the transition, Joe Whatley approached me with a job offer. He needed a safety director for his company, and I could start immediately. I didn't have a clue what the job included but he assured me the outgoing safety director would train me. I agreed but told myself "I'll do this until I find another job." I absolutely fell in love with my job and never wanted to make a change.

## **What do you view as the main duties of a Safety professional?**

Safety, Compliance, Training, Communication and Prayer throughout the company. With these in place we feel good about getting drivers home safe and sound. When the unthinkable happens, prayer is the only way to get you through the hard times.

## **Why is safety important to you?**

Safety has always been important to me. My Father and Grandfather both worked for the railroad. I still have some of his safety manuals. The railroad had more advanced safety training than trucking in the 70's and 80's. My father was all about following procedures even at home and he instilled those values in me. I also know how it feels to lose someone you love in a car accident. I don't want anyone to go through what my family and I have been through.

## **What has been the most challenging task in your role/career as a Safety professional?**

The most challenging task would be the implementation of CDL's in 1992. Yes, I have been doing this for a long time. At the time, I had a lot of older drivers who were excellent, safe and had more knowledge of truck driving than I would ever have. But they lacked reading and comprehension skills. Some just stopped driving, others needed a lot of study classes to pass the written test. It was challenging for many drivers.

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### **How do you promote your company's safety culture? How do you get employees to "buy in" or get involved?**

Number one is communication and training. We promote safety in various ways. Online training, messages sent through our elog system, weekly newsletters, text messages, ability to login to our camera system to view their safety score and face to face if necessary. I always keep drivers up to date on our CSA scores, so they know how we are doing. I stay on top of any issues and communicate them to drivers, dispatch, shop, the boss, everyone in the company. I also keep everyone informed and up to date on the good and the bad. My goal is to act quickly to address positive and negative behavior. Safety has an open-door policy for drivers to discuss their concerns, questions or they may have an idea that would help us improve in a certain area. I'm always willing to listen and open to new ideas or suggestions from others within the company. Eagle is a small company, and this seems to work for us.

### **What advice do you wish you had received early in your Safety career? What advice would you give to someone who is starting out in their Safety role?**

Always respect your drivers, ask and never demand, never talk down and always stay calm. This will be difficult at times but you're only as successful as your drivers. Drivers need to know you are there to support them.

Attend webinars to continue learning, have a good mentor, get involved with ATA. Do not be afraid to call the state Federal Motor Carriers if you need clarification on a regulation. When I started out, Judy Van Luchene was State Director, her crew Alan Brooks, Dave Griffin, Dave LeMaster, and Karen Owens Brooks were very helpful.

### **What would be your "safety quote" or "safety message" that you want to share?**

Control what you can control: speed, following distance, distracted driving etc. because there's so many things you cannot control, people cutting you off, road rage from others, tailgating etc.

At Eagle we invest a lot of time getting to know our drivers and their families. We celebrate, pray, and grieve with them. They are all part of our family and Eagle is always willing to help.