



THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

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WTA driver says concentration is key to his award-winning safety record

JARED PABEN - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Steve Sage was driving a bus along Magnolia Street in downtown Bellingham when he saw a police officer leave the Federal Building and gaze across the street at a bank. The cop stepped off the sidewalk and behind a parked delivery van.

Sage, who was driving a Whatcom Transportation Authority bus, had an inkling the officer would walk straight across the street, so he braked.

"If I hadn't picked up on that, I would have just run him over," Sage recalled recently.

The officer stepped into the street and turned, wide-eyed, to the bus.

"He put his arm out, like this, and I touched his hand," Sage said. "He left a handprint on the windshield."

It's that level of concentration and defensive driving that recently won Sage, WTA's longest-serving employee, a safe-driving award from the National Safety Council. WTA estimates he's driven 875,000 miles without any crashes where he was at fault (once, a driver ran a red at Third Avenue and Main Street in Ferndale and T-boned him).

'DANCING' A BUS

Consider the challenge: The full-size buses are as long as a four-story building on its side. If they were one inch wider, they'd require a wide-load sign and special permit.

"You're trying to dance it around delivery trucks, and a lot of the streets we drive on still have tracks from the trolley," said Mark Lowry, another driver and head of the local union. The volume and technology have overtaken infrastructure, and WTA has had to adapt, he said.

"To say that Steve has been a machine is to give machines too much credit," Lowry said. "They would fail more often than he has."

Sage likens bus driving to juggling. He counts 75 different tasks requiring a driver's attention: monitoring warning lights and switches, inputting fare box data, changing electronic route signs, watching passengers, navigating traffic, to name a few.

RECREATION

Sage, 59, a Bellingham resident, has worked for WTA for more than 37 years, always as a driver. He's driven most of the agency's routes; when he started, there were only five routes. In his first couple of years he had two fender benders where he was at fault, although one didn't even leave a mark, let alone bend a fender.

He more than qualified for the award, which requires a minimum 15 years and 250,000 miles of driving without a crash where the driver is at fault.

Sage credits the safe record to concentration, but he jokes that it's because he simply hates filling out paperwork.

"I guess it's a matter of keeping the focus, applying your focus and not letting that lapse," he said. "It's a skill you try to cultivate."

He doesn't come home exhausted, he said, because driving is "recreation," not a chore. He's always enjoyed it. He first drove at 14, when he used a truck to pick up hay. Since then, he estimates he's driven nearly 250 different vehicles, including about 100 at WTA.

He could have retired by now, but he's not interested.

"Literally, I still am having fun getting up and going to work every day," he said. "Why retire when I'm having so much fun?"

MORE ON AWARD

Check out these links for:

- A list of safe-driving award recipients.
- Information about the safe-driving awards.
- More information on the National Safety Council.

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Read more: <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/2011/11/28/2286036/wta-driver-says-concentration.html#ixzz1f1Wm6Av3>