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A Special Kind of Independence

In or out of his rig, Barry Owens recognizes no barriers.

by Cindy Hazen and Mike Freeman

When Barry Owens goes to work, he kisses his wife and two little girls good-bye. Then, he rolls his wheelchair onto the handicapped lift, rides up to his cab and wheels past the fold-up bunk. He lifts himself neatly onto the driver's seat, secures his chair, and pushes buttons that raise his seat to driving level and stow the lift. He turns the key, grasps the hand controls and pulls his 18-wheeler onto the road.

It was a truck accident in 1981 that pinched Barry's spinal column and left him a paraplegic. "I was five miles from home when the brakes locked and I rolled the cab," Barry remembers. He was engaged at the time, and he and Kathy were married when he was released from the hospital.

They invested his \$30,000 worker's compensation settlement in a small motel near Collierville, Tenn., a small town south of Memphis near the Mississippi border. But Barry soon missed being on the road. "I can't stand to sit around," he says. "I probably could have found something easier. My daddy got killed in a truck. . . . Trucking is what I've always done. I enjoy it."

He and Kathy agreed that she would manage the motel. In 1985, he bought a "hotshot" and began delivering light loads. Changing laws eventually prompted him to invest in a bigger rig. "I would have had to get my CDL to keep doing what I was doing. I figured I'd just get back into trucking."

Barton Truck Center in Memphis helped him achieve his goal. "I couldn't have done it without them. I had to have the truck to take the test." Barton worked a deal so that if he couldn't get his license



they'd take the truck back. It was a big investment to make on a maybe.

For the CDL test, Barry had to go to Nashville. His rehabilitation center provided the paperwork detailing his physical capabilities. Besides driving, he had to demonstrate that he could get into and out of the cab. Then, his evaluators tested all of his equipment. "They've got to be thorough to let someone like me drive."

Since earning his CDL three years ago, Barry has logged some 220,000 miles. Like other drivers, he undergoes a physical every two years with an allowance for his handicap. In addition, the waiver on his CDL is updated every two years.

"All the states are real lenient," he says. "In Missouri one time, I pulled into a weigh station. The trooper said, 'We're not going to harass you. We just want to see how you do it.' It really shocks folks that I'm in a wheelchair and doing this. Everywhere I go it takes me a little longer because everybody likes to check out my truck. Sometimes I'll get in and out 10 times just showing people. Everybody's been real positive."

The lift needs clearance when he parks, but thanks to an automatic transmission and hand controls, Barry handles his rig with ease. Daughters Mollie (above, right) and Katie regard the truck as a big toy.

Still there have been some unpleasant experiences. Although a driver theoretically is paid to deliver a load, occasionally a dock crew will expect the driver to tailgate the freight. When Barry encounters this situation, he pays the dock crew well, and he listens to them grumble. "This is something that needs to be changed in the industry. We're drivers, not general labor," he insists.

He sometimes must make other accommodations to his condition. "I can sleep in my truck, but I get a motel room to use the restroom and shower. Sometimes it's hard to find a motel with handicapped rooms."

His goal is to find a dedicated run. "I'm wildcattin' now. I might haul furniture today and steel tomorrow. I have to look for a load coming back. It's hard on me



because I've got to get a motel to clean up," he says. With an established route he says he won't need to hunt for a motel in a strange city.

But Barry doesn't brood over the difficulties. "I do it all for them," he says, talking about his wife and his two daughters, Mollie, 7, and Katie, 5. "Being handicapped is whatever you make it; I look at it as an inconvenience.

"I still do anything that I did before I got hurt. I can't run a marathon, but I try to do anything I did before. I get depressed, but people who walk get depressed too. I try not to dwell on what I can't do. I try to figure out ways of doing what I want to do."

He can do most of the basic tasks: tip over the hood, check the oil and even crawl under the cab. The only thing he can't do is adjust his brakes. His brother, who also drives a truck, does that every weekend. As for breakdowns, Barry keeps a mobile phone in his cab and trades his truck every 200,000 miles.

Recently, he traded his single-axle for a '95 Freightliner with tandem rears. It was

custom modified by Handicap Unlimited of Memphis for Barry's needs. Two doors were cut into the rear driver's panel to accommodate the air-powered chair lift. Controls on the lift and the door jamb of his cab provide easy access.

This is important to Barry, for his previous truck had a homemade lift that was outside the cab and awkward to use. The driver's seat in the new one has an air cushion which adjusts the seat level so



Barry can move in and out of his wheelchair. Hand levers on the steering column operate the accelerator and brake pedals. The fold-up bunk, television, VCR and mobile phone provide some of the comforts of home.

Altogether the truck represents an investment of \$90,000, which Barton sold on generous terms without a profit, he says. The lift and cab conversions cost \$8,000, and the Allison World automatic transmission cost \$27,000. Barry has pulled up to 48,000 pounds with it. "It cost me a lot of money, but this is something I can do," he notes with pride.

Like most owner/operators, Barry says that what he likes most about trucking is the independence, but for him the word has a special meaning. "When I'm behind the wheel of that truck, I'm not handicapped. I'm just as able as anybody else going up and down that highway." □

To talk to Barry about his rig, call him at (601) 851-3391. For details about vehicle conversions, call Handicap Unlimited at (901) 722-2447 and ask for the owner, Curtis Strickland.