

Cory Caletti

From: Karena Pushnik
Sent: Wednesday, June 08, 2005 3:12 PM
To: All RTC Staff
Subject: FSP article in SJ Merc

Posted on Mon, Jun. 06, 2005

Guardian angels on wheels

STATE-PAID TOW TRUCKS GIVE FREEWAY FIRST AID

By Gary Richards

Shawn Gilgo and I are rolling on Interstate 880, bouncing in his tow truck one hot afternoon when we spotted them: two young women on the dusty, weedy shoulder near Brokaw Road, struggling to fix a flat on a worn 1996 Chevy Cavalier while cars zoom by – inches away – at 60 mph.

“Believe it or not ladies,” I cheerfully blurt as we pop out of the cab, “this is your lucky day.”

Cheer isn't in Evelyn Contreras' rolling eyes. “Yeah, right,” the 29-year-old San Jose State instructor mutters.

Exactly right. “Here's your Guardian Angel,” I tell her and Cecilia Marte, my arm on Gilgo. Each weekday, Gilgo and his trusty tow truck rescue dozens of drivers as part of the Freeway Service Patrol program.

Transportation wonks try lots of things to help motorists. Wider roads, metering lights, Fastrak, express trains. But this is the best.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission, Caltrans and the California Highway Patrol joined forces to begin the program 13 years ago, contracting out with Bay Area tow companies. Today, nearly 80 tow trucks roam area freeways during commute hours and, on some roads, weekends, helping 436 stranded drivers a day, or nearly 10,000 a month.

For free.

Run out of gas? Here's a gallon of precious fuel. Radiator overheat? Get you some water. Car stalled? Look under the hood. Debris on the road? Move it out of the way. In a fender bender? Tow you off the road and get help.

Flat tire on the side of a busy highway? Pull it off and put on the spare.

“People will see me pull up and they usually say, ‘No, no, I'm fine,’” says Gilgo, 31, a three-year tow-truck veteran. “They don't think they need my help. Then I say it's a free service and they look at me funny. ‘Free, are you sure? You aren't going to charge me nothing?’”

Actually, \$1 of our auto registration fee in the Bay Area pays for this program, along with a variety of federal and state funds. But when the tank's empty or the tire's out of air, that buck is a bargain.

The idea is simple. Send an armada of tow trucks out on the road, looking for problems and often arriving to help before a

RELATED CONTENT



Nhat V. Meyer / Mercury News

Shawn Gilgo talks to a motorist, Peter Ho of Milpitas, whose car battery died on Highway 237.

More photos

RELATED LINKS

- [Roadshow: Study indicates state's drivers among dumbest](#)
- [Advice for stranded motorists](#)
- [About Freeway Service Patrol](#)

17-3

stranded driver can complete an emergency call to police or an auto club. (You can't call the FSP directly.)

For every minute a car blocks traffic, it creates a delay of three minutes. And there's the danger. Far too many people are killed or injured when struck as they stand alongside a highway.

The risk is always on the mind of Officer Dan Clapp of the state highway patrol, our escort this day, who issues a stern edict before our outing.

"If you hear me screaming my head off," he says firmly, "run for cover."

Got my attention. State rules won't allow me to assist Gilgo. Or so they say. I fear that previous Mr. Roadshow outings – you know, where I spilled gas, streaked windshields and left oily asphalt on my pants – may be the real reason behind the hands-off edict. Probably afraid I'll accidentally whack someone with a tire iron.

But I can console drivers and explain the service to them, so we're off as a team, one of three trips I make with Gilgo, who covers 250 miles a day from Great America Parkway on Highway 237 to the 101 interchange on I-880. Maybe 140,000 miles in his three years on the job.

Contreras, our stranded driver on 880, was headed to a bridal shop at the McCarthy Ranch shopping center to meet bridesmaids for her August wedding – her white wedding dress lies on the back seat – when she heard a "pop" and pulled over.

No fear. Within minutes, Gilgo and his notepadded sidekick are here.

"Got a flat, huh?" Gilgo says. "I'll fix it."

Contreras mutters again, only this time it's a "wow" and her frown turns into a smile. The spare also needs some air. Gilgo takes care of it.

"Today, I feel like God is looking over me," Contreras beams, almost giddy that her day has been rescued. "I'm so grateful."

Up next: Peter Ho of Milpitas on 237, stalled. But he's not surprised when we pull up. Ho and his lime-colored 1999 VW bug – with 190,000 miles and a testy transmission – have been saved before by the FSP.

Ho likes the help. Then with a laugh, whispers, "And it's free."

Up and down the two freeways we cruise. No dispatch calls come in, then the radio crackles: "Three cars on westbound 237. A crash."

Gilgo is antsy. He's headed north on I-880 and can't get to the scene as fast as he wants. "ETA five minutes," he radios back. "I'm coming."

We arrive 4 1/2 minutes later and find a smashed Toyota Corolla and a dented white pickup and sport-utility vehicle. Michael Pinn, a machinist in the pickup, explains:

"Freeway traffic was moving at full speed, like 70 mph," he says. "Then traffic backed up and I had to stop."

"The lady in the Corolla stopped behind me. Then she got hit in the rear by the SUV. It was violent. I think she's pretty shaken up."

She is. Can't talk. At least help is here.

Gilgo checks each driver. Except for some frazzled nerves they are OK. Soon two CHP cars pull up and we're free to go.

You meet all kinds on South Bay freeways. An old man sitting forlornly in his car on northbound I-880, pointing toward Fremont.

Lost.

17-4

He wants to go to Los Gatos, but can't figure out the way. Gilgo points out the next ramp and gives directions.

There's Rigo and Herlinda Ramirez of San Jose. She, too, has a flat and calls her husband for help. But in mere minutes Mr. FSP arrives.

"Probably five years ago I was stopped and a tow truck pulled up, saying he'd get me started for \$20 or \$30," said Rigo. "I said for two minutes of work? Forget it.

"But this is free. They are like angels. They solve your problems."

My favorite is Mary Ruiz of San Francisco in her sparkling, new Toyota Prius, the hybrid which gets a zillion miles a gallon.

She's off to the side on I-880. Her check engine light is on. The car won't budge. She's on the phone to AAA when we arrive. Gilgo asks if she needs gas.

"Oh," says Ruiz, 28, surprised that help has arrived so fast. "I don't think it's the fuel. This car runs forever when it's on empty."

Empty? Hmm. Gilgo looks under the hood, then saunters over to Ruiz. "You sure you're not out of gas?" he repeats.

"I'm . . .," she pauses, an embarrassed look appearing. "Maybe."

She is.

And that's OK. Gilgo grabs the gas can.

Mr. Roadshow has pumped gas, filled potholes with Caltrans and driven 55 mph around the bay to see how much fuel he would save. What task should he handle next? Contact Gary Richards at mrroadshow@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5335.

- Karena Pushnik
Senior Transportation Planner
Santa Cruz Co. Regional Transportation Commission
831/460-3210 (fax 460-3215)

17-5