



LIFELINE

Dewanna Hopson... Professional Driver

The roaring waves colliding with the solid bottom of a waterfall entices an explorer, as the warming purr of an idle engine awaits its driver. The magnificence of a semi-truck can only be truly appreciated through the eyes of the enthusiastic. Long roads, stretched in silence; day after day, no single view the same. Trucking is a unique lifestyle well-known for its weight in uncertainty and complicated ordinances. But if you're one of the lucky few to take notice, there is joy in the journey of discovery.

For generations, truck drivers have dominated our highways, providing the daily essentials of survival. These men and women choose a line of work that offers a deeper value than most typical professions. Solitude, independence, and a support system unlike any brotherhood among associates.

By withdrawing oneself of the chaos in the midst of society, if only by the confinement within a semi-truck, it has been commonly declared that brief private



space enables an ability to connect and focus – allowing headway for personal improvement. The freedom of one's own decisions empowers a much greater standard of determination.

Over the course of this *Legend* driver's 37-year driving career, she has accumulated over 4-million lifetime miles. From pulling doubles cross-country, to classrooms as a CDL instructor, Dewanna Hopson now transports containers to locations throughout the Southeast region. Known to everyone as, Dee; she has gained the respect of her peers through experience and leading

by example.

Born in Mississippi during the late 50's, Dee was raised by her parents, Sidney and Jean. Sidney - her stepfather and mentor, served in the U.S. Air Force, later settling into retirement for the second time from the postal service. Jean was a successful beautician, and also the town's library director until the age of 70. As a young teen, Dee's parents purchased a local grocery store. With two young daughters, Dee and her stepsister, Malinda, the household was united with one common goal: work hard. They shared responsibilities as a team, 13-year old Dee was tasked with running the cash register, stocking shelves, and anything in-between.



Dee & Sidney

Remaining with the family business until high school graduation, she continued her education as a health major into college. Two years later, another opportunity presented itself. Her uncles were police officers, whom she admired for their bravery and courage. So, naturally when Dee was accepted into the Jackson Police Training Academy in Jackson, Mississippi, college was put on the back burner. However, an unexpected turn of events derailed her future plans, yet again.

While in transit to the Mississippi academy to begin law enforcement training, she was pulled over for speeding. After a friendly, yet thorough exchange of information into the specifics of joining the police force, Dee zipped into a U-turn and headed back home - opting to decline the offer due to personal concerns as to the dangers and risks on the job. Reassessing her options, she set her eyes on another potential career move... one she had unintentionally been training for since childhood.

ANYTHING WITH A SET OF WHEELS

Dee and Malinda grew up in the small town of Holly Springs, popular for its charm and historic downtown venues. The two

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are same in age, but as children were opposite in every which way. Dee describes her younger self as extremely mischievous. In school she excelled as a natural athlete, participating in sports year-round. She also enjoyed building projects with her father; any activities that allowed her to get involved hands-on piqued her interest – particularly, mechanical detail.

The enormity of car engines, taking them apart only to re-assemble them became a fascination. For many years Dee worked on several older model vehicles, learning the trade and becoming familiar with the variety of components and tools. With an innate ability for attention to detail, Dee's skills as a mechanic paid-off as an owner operator later down the line.

In 1983, Dee enrolled at truck driving school in Clearwater, Florida. There, she discovered a number of personal strengths, reassuring her that she was on the right path. In the process of learning, she also encountered a few obstacles that had to be overcome in order to attain her goal of becoming a professional truck driver. Leaning on her prior experience, she found her footing and succeeded with flying colors. With access to open fields as a kid, when given

permission to drive she practiced tirelessly. Stating,

"Back then, I always had my hands on some sort of steering wheel, whether it was equipment or a vehicle... I drove anything with a set of wheels. Growing up in the country, I had the perfect training space to polish my driving skills.

So, while at the truck driving school they recognized how easy it was for me to operate a semi-truck, especially backing up a trailer. I eventually became an instructor to better assist other drivers and help them gain a bit more insight into the craft. Again, that boosted my confidence – knowing I was doing exactly what I was meant to do."

Once on the road and out on her own, Dee states that her biggest challenge was driving through tunnels when ascending down a mountain. Unaware of the issue beforehand, with time and experience, her fear subsid-



ed. She likes to share her struggles in hopes to better prepare the next driver. Another issue she addresses is the safety for women while on the road. Similar to her brief time pursuing a career on the police force, she analyzed the bigger picture in anticipation, studying the dangers of the profession – knowing that all work environments require a safe and protected atmosphere; the trucking industry is ruled much the same.

With a career expanding over three decades, closing in on four – Dee expresses her concerns due to fatalities that may have been prevented if made aware of certain defensive measures. When women become victims of senseless crimes within her line of work, it hits home for Dee. Understanding the realization of the subject serves as her motivation when sharing with other female drivers information that will hopefully resonate long-term, and also get passed on.

“Most of these safety measures seem obvious, but we become so complacent out here once we get into a routine. We let our safeguards down, and as women that is dangerous. Stay aware of your surroundings at all times; bend down and look for legs or feet under your trailer. It only takes a second! Once I park at night, I don’t get back out

of my truck. Ladies, while you’re at the fuel isle, that is your time to go inside and purchase your stuff, etc. Your life is not worth putting yourself in a bad situation. Think safe, stay safe.”

AN ADVENTURER AT HEART

Dee credits her long-standing career to being a vigilant driver and using discretion at all times. In conjunction with the urgency of training one’s mind to heed with an attentiveness, Dee feels that all aspects of the trucking industry appeal to the female work force. Claiming that women by nature are organizational creatures in reference to habit. Meaning, women are great at multi-tasking, trip planning, and diligent business professionals with an image to uphold.

As a female trucker during the 80’s, the adversities laid before Dee never led her astray. The words of encouragement spoken from her father; Sidney were instilled in her early on. She was taught the importance of taking pride in everything she pursued. Sidney elaborated on the value of money: earn it and save it. While also pointing out the positive influence of comradery – how being compatible with others in harmony helps make any day more pleasant. But most importantly, Sidney expressed to

his daughter the privilege of becoming independent as an adult will open doors of opportunities unimaginable. Stating,

"My father helped make me the person I am today. I learned that I can stand on my own in an industry predominately male oriented and succeed all the while! That is why I think our profession as truck drivers is ideal for women who are strong-willed, determined, and ready for an adventure. It's a lifestyle full of opportunities... you get to see the country and make a good living in the process. The best part is that you don't have to rely on anyone but yourself."



(L-R): Dee with her parents, Sidney & Jean

Dee's most memorable part of her career has been the breathtaking views from coast to coast, and meeting so many wonderful people from all walks of life.

Entering the trucking industry at age 24, she admits to becoming somewhat of a tourist – taking photographs of state line signs – when visiting all 48 adjoining states. She had zero hesitations from day one, never backing down from a challenge. The travel alone spoke to her adventurous streak.

As for her personal journey to become a professional driver, the learning curve was finding trucking companies that allowed her the means to develop a good work history and gain experience. But the key was to do so without bouncing from one company to the next too quickly. As a woman driver in the 80's, she had to break the stereotype and knock down barriers in order to attain the recognition and claim her place among the trucking community. Continuously having to demonstrate her abilities for validation provided the element of surprise.

The growing number of women within the trucking industry has created a beautiful diverse blend of female drivers who continue to impact lives and influence further than the transportation realm. Daughters, sisters, and wives are inspired. Fathers, spouses, and children are supportive. The trucking industry has flourished as more women

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venture behind the wheel. Dee states, *"I believe the biggest misunderstanding of female drivers is that we are underestimated."* Her passion to serve as an adviser for others aiming to achieve success as a truck driver is undeniable. Her encouragement for the underdog speaks from a familiar place, stating that with perseverance a person can overcome anything they put their mind to.

In the beginning of Dee's driving career, the government did not regulate the trucks; the equipment was not as efficient and convenient as today's market. Her earlier days spent as a mechanic were made useful once on the road running solo. With older equipment to drive, having the ability to handle her own maintenance and mechanical issues prevented less down-time. Over the years, Dee has grown to appreciate the comforts of her own space - secluded and serene - a safe place free of concern and judgement; total peace of mind. Often, she enjoys listening to audio books: thrillers and mysteries, many by author, Anne Rice.

When home, Dee hops on her 2019 Harley and joins friends for a fun ride. Or you can find her out on the water relaxing on her pontoon boat. Staying true to her roots, she loves the outdoors. As we wrap up our interview, I ask



Dee how would she describe her life journey thus far?

"Fulfilling! I have lived a lifetime of beautiful experiences, one after another. I'm happy to have made it this far in life and still be able to enjoy it... and trucking has had a great part in that aspect, serving as my lifeline. As a professional truck driver I have visited many places, seen some amazing sites, and met people that I may not have had the opportunity to cross paths with had it not been for this industry. I'm very grateful and look forward to what each day has in store for me."