

Hooked On Recovery

September 29, 2006

Mad Skills 2

The word is out. Henry Street in Manchester is the new Mad Skills Demonstration Area. This is not a busy street, or a dangerous street, it's a quiet typical neighborhood street. This is getting weird, because it happened again...

I was snuggled under the heavy winter comforter, fan blowing in 50 degree night air. Sandy was sleeping soundly next to me. The Sunday night ESPN game was barely holding my attention. The Patriots were losing to the Broncos in a boring defensive struggle. I'm a Giants fan, but I watch the Patriots by default living in New England. I finally gave up on Tom Brady and the boys, flipped the TV off, turned onto my right side (my sleeping side), nestled in against my wife when "POW!" "Oh my God, what was that?!" Sandy bolted up immediately and said, "car crash". Getting dressed quickly, I flew down the stairs, opened the door, and immediately saw a car on its roof in front of the house. The engine was running and smoke billowed. My first thought was "please, no fire." Broken glass littered the pavement. The neighbor from across the street was at the window of the car already. The driver was suspended upside down. "Can you reach the car keys?" "Yes, I can", came from inside the car. "Turn the car off." The engine stopped and the smoke from the engine subsided.

I ran in to get a light bulb to replace the burned out one on our lamp post, so we could see a little better. About three minutes after we heard the crash, the first police officer was on the scene soon followed by the paramedics, the fire engines and the neighbors. People from up and down Henry Street gathered in our driveway and watched the drama unfold. I asked Sandy, "How did you know that was a car crash?" "From living on Park Avenue in Windsor, I used to hear that a lot. But this time there was no squealing tires." True, there wasn't.

I crossed the street where the neighbor first on the scene was standing. We began to piece the accident together. The neighbor was pretty cool considering the guy had just slammed into his red pickup truck parked on the street and totaled it. The Nissan Sentra must have gone airborne, rolled over on to its roof, then spun around facing the other direction settling right in front of my house. There were no skid marks, no sign of braking. A police officer asked if anyone had seen the accident. No one had. We had all heard it though. The officer said this was the second rollover on this street in the last 6 months. Actually it was closer to 9 months (see Mad Skills from January 27, 2006). Unlike the young whippersnapper who ping-ponged at high speed off two cars and was quite boisterous while pinned in his Chevy Blazer, the guy in the Nissan Sentra was strangely quiet and compliant as he hung upside down. Obviously an experienced veteran in the field of mad skills driving, he had been through this scenario before (my opinion).

The firemen stabilized the car while the paramedics released him from his seat belt suspension. As the man backed slowly out of the car and stood up I could see he was an older gentleman. Gray hair, big bald spot on top, kind of like me – maybe a little older. Wait a minute – I knew this guy! Not only did I know him, he lives across the street, two houses from the guy whose truck he totaled. The guy's poor wife, who had been in the crowd of neighbors, didn't recognize the car until people started whispering his name. It's hard to recognize your husband's car when the windows are all shattered and on its roof. She was pretty rattled as she climbed into the ambulance.

With the driver headed to the ER, I watched as the tow truck attached a chain and winched the car onto its side, then over onto its wheels, leaving a pile of debris from inside the car on the street. I saw a lot of papers (mostly mail), empty boxes of Marlboro cigarettes, dozens of coffee cups, several golf balls and three or four bottles of mouthwash. Some said they saw a beer bottle or two, but I didn't. I saw enough. The cops were reading his mail and it looked like they found some interesting reading, something about a job termination. Finally, the firemen shoveled all of it into a big plastic garbage bag (broken glass, dirt and all) and put it back in the car.

I overheard an off duty fireman was talking to another neighbor in my driveway. He had called a local neighborhood bar and asked for the driver. They said he had just left. I don't know if he was pinched for DUI. I didn't see them do a field sobriety test. Sandy went to their house the following day and talked with the wife. She said her husband was fine, a few bruises and somewhat sore. She said her husband had a coughing fit: that was how the car ended up on the roof. Turns out she had totaled her car the week before. She also made a point of telling Sandy that she made her husband go look at the car; that he needed to see what he had done. Hmmmm. I wonder what they think of the Recovery Walks! signs in our front yard.

I also wonder why 9 months earlier I got a staunch reminder of the way I used to be. Seeing this guy roll his Nissan gave me a glimpse of what my future might have become. Would this have been me had I not found recovery? I could picture myself using golf as an escape to drink, hanging out on Sunday nights in a gin mill, smoking butts like a fiend, trying to camouflage my breath with mouthwash and scrambling for excuses after crashing. Not a way of life I envy today. Not at all.

But for the grace of God, there go I.

Hooked on Recovery is a biweekly message from CCAR Executive Director Phillip Valentine, person in recovery since 12/28/87, devoted husband, a father of five and just another surf fisherman. These thoughts, views and opinions reflect on his personal recovery and are not meant in any way to speak for the entire recovery community. He welcomes all your comments and suggestions on this column, email him at phillip@ccar.us. Visit the website at www.ccar.us to read the entire series.