2015 TransComm Skills Award Nomination

Idaho Transportation Department

Category: Story w/DOT Byline

Ice Bath: Graves’ River Rescue
AASHTO Transcomm2015 Skills Contest
Entry Form

ENTRY INFORMATION

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*This is the name to appear on the award, if selected

CONTACT INFORMATION

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<th>Idaho Transportation Department</th>
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ENTRY PROFILE

1) Situation, goals and objectives of public relations activity
Our goal was to show an ITD employee in a way unrelated to road- or government work. The public frequently only sees highway workers as a nuisance or uncaring, so it was refreshing to be able to show the human, compassionate side of one of our people. As you can see, based on the comments generated by the story, that was accomplished.

2) Target audience
This story was sent to all media outlets (newspaper, radio and TV) in the north-central Idaho region, where the Lochsa river rescue took place. We also posted it on our department Facebook and Twitter accounts.

3) Measurable results
We’ve heard on multiple occasions that it means so much more to our workers because family and friends get to read about it and/or see it. Graves’ hometown newspaper picked it up and ran it verbatim, as did a radio station in the Lewiston area. They also posted it on their Facebook page, which ultimately generated more than 11,000 page views and helped identify a “mystery couple” in the article.

Entry form may not exceed two pages total, including this page
KOOSKIA, ID - This article is from Idaho Transportation Department Public Information Specialist Reed Hollinshead:
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As Dana Graves can attest, it often boils down to being in the right place at the right time. Luck? Maybe. Serendipity? Possibly. Good fortune? Definitely.

Graves, a worker in the Idaho Transportation Department Kooskia Maintenance shed since March 2007, was on a stretch of two-lane U.S. 12 near Kooskia and the Idaho County border in the late afternoon of Nov. 25. The day had begun with somewhat routine rock patrols and vehicle rescues on the highway, including plowing slush from the earlier snowfall now melting in the area’s rain.

Around that same time, a white Chevy Tahoe eastbound on U.S. 12 was being driven by Branden Spellmeyer, carrying Deborah Lee and Katherine Ottawa. As Spellmeyer rounded one of the many curves in this section of 50-mph roadway, about 20 miles on the Idaho side of the Montana State Line, the Tahoe began to slip from his control. As he lost control of the vehicle, it rotated clockwise, running off the right shoulder of the road.

Click here for a picture of Graves, and here for a picture of the location of the river rescue on U.S. 12.

The Tahoe slid down the embankment, rolled, and landed upside-down in the Lochsa River, victim to the cloudy and snowy conditions, the dark of the oncoming night, heavy snowfall and slushy highway conditions.

Graves came around a bend in the road just a few minutes later. The Tahoe’s cab had crumpled on a large boulder, with the rear end pointed skyward, the front shoved down in the water, and the back pointed upriver.

“A motorist waved me down to inform me of a vehicle in the river. There were headlights in the water and taillights pointing up in the air,” Graves recounted. This was about 5:35 p.m.

Aware that his actions had to be quick and decisive, he started by parking the snowplow he was driving in a turnout, so that its lights shone in the direction of the capsized vehicle. Several other motorists had stopped as well, and Graves arranged those vehicles to also light the path.

Graves then set flares, and walked downriver toward the car to assess the injuries. The spikes on his boots provided just enough traction on the slick and steep embankment for Graves to walk to the river’s edge. Thankfully, the one occupant still trapped in the vehicle, Lee, reported only minor head injuries. Graves returned to his snowplow to call State Communications to report the incident.

“I also knew an Idaho State Police crew who had been dispatched to help out a disabled Freightliner rig and would be on the way toward me,” Graves said.

A young married couple from Lapwai had been trying unsuccessfully to free Lee. The wife lacked the strength to pull her out, and the husband was too big to maneuver through the small opening.

The young wife from Lapwai was instrumental, though, as she had moved Lee’s head and face out of the icy water.

But now there was another problem – Graves’ gear was getting in the way.

He returned to the shore, removed his baseball cap, glasses, radio, reflective vest and his own personal vest to eliminate the entanglements, then waded back out to the vehicle in the river to see what could be done to free the woman trapped inside.

“The water was over the top of my boots, and went just below my knees,” said Graves.
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“The water was over the top of my boots, and went to just below my knees,” said Graves.

Lee was halfway in and halfway out of the water. Removing her from the vehicle would be challenging because the cab had been crushed inward, creating a big hump she would have to be pulled over. The crushed top also stopped the seat from sliding back to give her more room.

“On top of that, the ice in the river had been breaking loose the last few days, making it even more serious,” Graves explained. With the ice melt, the river was running high and cold. The woman reported having no feeling from the waist down.

Lee yelped as Graves pulled — her knees and feet were caught up in some of the twisted metal. After repositioning her legs, Graves pulled on the heavy leather belt Lee had around her waist. With considerable effort, she was inched to the apex of the hump, but was stuck on the plastic lid of the compartment until Graves ripped it off and moved it out of the way. With the help of the man from Lapwai, Lee was finally pulled through the driver’s window and to her feet.

“We then coax[ed] her into walking as we held her up by her belt and upper body,” Graves said. This served a dual purpose — after being in the water so long and being numbed, they needed to get the blood moving again in Lee’s legs and feet. Her walking also made it much easier to traverse the slippery rocks back to the shore.

Lee was almost to the bank when she collapsed. Graves told her she could get on his back and he would crawl up the bank, but she did not even have the strength to hold on around his neck. As Graves contemplated using Lee’s long winter coat as a sled to pull her up the snowy bank, the end of a tow strap appeared from the top of the embankment. Graves grabbed the tow strap and used it to anchor himself to the steep hillside while he pulled her, a foot at a time, up the incline.

“The people on the end of the tow strap were very important to the success in getting her up to the highway,” Graves explained.

With Lee securely out of the river and up on the road, the focus moved to getting her warmed up. Graves grabbed her hands out of the snow to warm them, and a passer-by stopped with a bed already made up.

“People onsite moved her to the car, put her inside and cranked up the heater, piling clothes, blankets, sleeping bags and anything else that could offer warmth,” Graves recalled.

ISP then arrived on scene, and Missoula Ambulance was called to take Spellmeyer, Lee and Ottawa to St. Patrick’s Hospital, according to an Idaho State Police report of the incident. Spellmeyer was ultimately cited for driving too fast for conditions.

“To my regret, I do not know the names of the Lapwai couple, who should be recognized for their amazing efforts,” Graves said. “The number of people who helped in one way or another with this rescue, and the importance of the parts they played...my admiration for them is hard to put into words.”

Graves arrived at home in Kooskia at 8 p.m. His normal 10-hour shift had ended at 4:30 p.m. — and then he went into “extended service” on an unusual, but memorable day. According to the clock in his truck as he headed home, he had been in the water from 5:35 p.m. to 6:39 p.m. helping to extract Lee.

On a typical night it can be hours without a single car on that section of U.S. 12 – luckily for Lee and the occupants of an overturned white Tahoe in the Lochsa River, Nov. 25, 2014, was anything but typical.
On a typical night it can be hours without a single car on that section of U.S. 12 – luckily for Lee and the occupants of an overturned white Tahoe in the Lochsa River, Nov. 25, 2014, was anything but typical.

“I don’t deserve all the credit,” Graves said. “The Lapwai couple — I wish I knew who they were so I could thank them properly — was instrumental. The people with the tow strap were critical. The folks who provided the sleeping bags and warm clothes for that woman were critical, too — it took us all.” — with
Big Country News Connection PHOTO of Lochsa River courtesy of ITD.

Like · Reply · 5 · January 14 at 10:51am

Alesha Arnzen Laine Pratt
Like · Reply · January 14 at 10:56am

Rita Reagan Way to go Dana!!
Like · Reply · January 14 at 10:58am

Tracie Botts Heitstuman Way to go Dana!!! 😊
Like · Reply · January 14 at 11:09am

Connie Cox What a great story with a happy ending! Sounds like a lot of people were heroes that evening! Dana you knew exactly what to do and did it without worrying about your own safety, you are an amazing person!
Like · Reply · 9 · January 14 at 11:31am

Margaret Nachtmann Bravo! Idaho hero & all those people that helped,
Like · Reply · 1 · January 14 at 11:40am

Sue McGary-Schuetze Hooray to the hero's from Idaho!!!!
Like · Reply · 2 · January 14 at 11:50am

J.m. Bishop Wow.
Like · Reply · 1 · January 14 at 11:50am

Cholette Workman A lot of heroes that day.....Great job!
Like · Reply · 4 · January 14 at 11:55am

Krissy Picard That's amazing! What an amazing story!
Like · Reply · 1 · January 14 at 11:56am

Jess Scibek Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrreat job
Like · Reply · January 14 at 12:16pm

Marilynn Hall Real life heroes for sure!!
Like · Reply · 3 · January 14 at 12:24pm

Gina Littlefield Awesome! We love you Dana!! Gary & Gina
Gina Littlefield  Awesome! We love you Dana!! Gary&Gina  
Like · Reply · 1  · January 14 at 12:51pm

Jamy Betzold  Shoni Graves...is he a relation of Brandon's? Amazing story!  
Like · Reply · January 14 at 12:54pm

Amanda Krueger  This is my uncle!!  
Like · Reply · 5  · January 14 at 1:13pm

Cinnamon Thomas  I know that road well. Kuddos for the rescue!  
Like · Reply · 3  · January 14 at 1:17pm

Greg Munden  Good Job Dana! I am a retired road foreman from district 1 33 years at ITD, I admire your dedication to your job and the motoring public. Again Great Job!  
Like · Reply · 4  · January 14 at 2:20pm

Debbie Keller  Great job...thanks to your help  
Like · Reply · January 14 at 4:47pm

Chris Porter  I heard this story from my co-worker who was the helper from Lapwai. It was Jon Paisano & his wife Terrarah. They are good people with good hearts & I told him they were at the right place @ the right time.  
Like · Reply · 31  · January 14 at 5:07pm

Paula Manlick  Jon Paisano and wife Tara. They are amazing. Good job everyone involved 😊  
Like · Reply · 6  · January 14 at 6:17pm

Carol Webb  Someone up stairs was looking out for ALL of you-unbelievable Dana! Did Paula have a really hot meal ready for you when you got home? And did your boss give you a couple paid days off? He should have...............  
Like · Reply · 4  · January 14 at 7:17pm

Trish Thornton  Wonderful heroes and very fortunate Deborah. Thank you to Mr. Graves and the Paisanos.  
Like · Reply · 1  · January 14 at 8:57pm

Charlotte Schilling  You are a hero and so are all the people that help you you  
Like · Reply · 1  · January 14 at 10:15pm

Jacqueline Southwick  Wow!  
Like · Reply · January 14 at 10:16pm

Janine Weiss  Just a super amazing all around American hero!  
Like · Reply · 1  · January 14 at 11:10pm

Shoni Graves  Not sure who this was! Amazing story though!  
Like · Reply · January 14 at 11:10pm

Lorene Chris Middleton  God had the right people there at the right time. Courageous people with compassion- Heroes! Well done, good and faithful servants; well done!  
Like · Reply · 3  · January 14 at 11:43pm
Judy Sledge  Great story of people helping people!
Like · Reply · 2 · January 15 at 4:47am

Jason Forsmann  Driving to fast for conditions....
Like · Reply · 1 · January 15 at 9:04am

Brady Blankenship-Beeson  I like how everyone participating in the rescue was given credit. So humble.
Like · Reply · 3 · January 15 at 11:22am

Tommian Whitten Day  He is great guy he works with my husband. So thankful for him
Like · Reply · 1 · January 15 at 5:12pm

Mark Heuett  Good job Dana!!
Like · Reply · January 15 at 9:06pm

Bill Kalinoski  Great job all
Like · Reply · January 16 at 12:52am

Becky Allen- Brotnov  I remember the night Terry Jackson saved Dana's life from the middlefork river near Syringa. He had gone into the river with the snowplow, he managed to crawl up the bank at 2:30 am. Terry was out assisting another motorist up river. Thank God that he...
See More
Like · Reply · 3 · January 16 at 8:47am

Margaret Mary Schrade  YOU ARE A HERO DANA AND VERY HUMBLE GUY... GOD BLESS. GARY'S MOM Marge
Like · Reply · 2 · January 16 at 1:49pm

Millie Graves  You always loved a challenge!!!
Like · Reply · 3 · January 17 at 10:31pm

Lisa Canaday McCartney  Dana, You are indeed a hero! Great job!
Like · Reply · 1 · January 18 at 1:32am

Judy Hays-Eberts  And this is only one of the amazing stories of Dana Graves. Awesome spirit. [Incredible mom.] A testament, but a tough one. 😊
Like · Reply · January 18 at 11:10am

Gerald Bloom  Awesome Dana
Like · Reply · January 18 at 12:18pm

David Bard  Way to go Dana!
Like · Reply · January 18 at 12:54pm

Sher Helms  GOOD JOB DANA
Like · Reply · January 18 at 1:17pm

Robert Bard  Hell of a job there!!!!
Like · Reply · January 18 at 2:52pm
Maria Dawn Corbit  Give that man a smooch  😊
Like · Reply · 1 · January 9 at 7:18pm

Kathleen Ward  Great job! Thank you!
Like · Reply · January 9 at 8:00pm

Sherie Neal Sweeney  Great job, Dana!! The motoring public is lucky to have you and the other ITD techs keeping our roads safe and providing invaluable assistance.
Like · Reply · 2 · January 10 at 8:54am

Lorraine Eller Smith  Thank you!
Like · Reply · January 10 at 10:09am

Kathi Potts Cross  There are ANGELS among us !!
Like · Reply · January 10 at 4:42pm