

Taking to the road for safety

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A family tragedy turned UC Riverside's Tami Friedrich into a force for highway safety, a journey that has taken her from Southern California to the halls of Congress and beyond.

By Victoria Irwin

As you tool down the freeway, you might steer clear of a nearby big rig, dimly aware of the dangers of tangling with it. But you probably don't consider how much it weighs, how many hours the driver has been at the wheel or how much training he or she had before being licensed.

Neither did Tami Friedrich -- until her sister, brother-in-law, niece and nephew were killed by a gasoline tanker truck with faulty brakes in December 1989.

On average, almost 4,000 people are killed and another 80,000 are injured in truck crashes on U.S. highways every year, according to the Truck Safety Coalition. Friedrich, a management services officer in UC Riverside's Computing and Communications Department, works passionately to see those numbers drop, letting the story of her family's loss bring a human face to the numbers as she advocates for safety provisions from Sacramento to the halls of Congress.

First called to action in the mid-1990s, when the trucking industry wanted to bring triple trailers onto California's roads, she joined the successful chorus of "anti" voices in Sacramento. While that early win was gratifying, it didn't ignite a love for politics.

"I hate politics, but I do it because I know it's important," Friedrich says some 20 years later. "People say they don't want to get involved because nothing will come of it, but it's the only way you're going to get anything done. You have to try."

Now a board member of CRASH (which partners with Parents Against Tired Truckers under the Truck Safety Coalition banner) and a volunteer with the coalition's Survivor Network, she has seen her fair share of politics, advocating for transportation safety issues on Capitol Hill.



Tami Friedrich

It took 20 years to get some provisions she and her safety colleagues have been fighting for. Last July, President Obama signed a transportation bill -- Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century, or MAP-21 -- that includes provisions such as electronic on-board recorders, which replace paper logs and will help ensure that truck drivers comply with driving time limits, and requirements for truck driver training and medical qualifications.

"Tami is passionate and effective," says John Lannen, executive director of Truck Safety Coalition, noting that Friedrich was recently awarded the organization's Distinguished Service Award at its annual Sorrow to Strength conference. "She embodies the whole thought of Sorrow to Strength, taking a tragic loss and making a difference through hard work and outreach. And she is a great example to families of what they can do to overcome their loss and prevent this from happening to anyone else."

Friedrich's next battles will come in her role as a member of the Department of Transportation's Motor Carrier Safety Advisory Committee (MCSAC). The committee -- made up of representatives from safety advocacy, safety enforcement, the trucking industry and labor -- is developing recommendations for the Motor Carrier Safety Administration to implement the provisions of MAP-21.

"People say, 'you've been doing this for 20 years, why not move on to something else?'" Friedrich says. "But what other organization doesn't see color, age, gender -- what other organization helps everyone? That's why I do it."

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