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## **PTDI Celebrates Twenty Years of Improving Driver Training and Safety**

By Pauline Hovey

When a group of trucking industry leaders, concerned about improving driving safety and the industry's image, met 25 years ago and established the Professional Truck Driver Institute of America, they could not have foreseen the impact of their efforts and dedication. Recently, this national, nonprofit organization, now known as the Professional Truck Driver Institute, or PTDI, reached a milestone: 20 years of certifying courses at entry-level truck driver training schools across the United States and Canada.

“I have to believe that the things we did and the current methods of truck driver training schools as a result of the standards we put together have led to improved, safer drivers out there, and this began with the PTDI,” said Ed Kynaston, who served as the organization's first president for 10 years.

Spearheaded by Peter Griskivich, then with the Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association, and other industry leaders, including Jim Johnston, with Owner Operator Independent Drivers Association; Bob Calvin, Highway Users Federation; Lee Crittenden, Associates Financial; and Lana Batts, American Trucking Associations, the PTDI initiative required countless volunteer hours as industry stakeholders focused on truck driver training and the adequacy of that training, traveling around the country to hold hearings about what constituted quality and responsible truck driver training. Kynaston said the interest began when the Federal Highway Administration (FHA) published guidelines on motor carrier safety entitled “Model Curriculum for Training Tractor-Trailer Drivers.”

“The federal rulemaking was too cumbersome and impractical from a working standpoint,” Kynaston said, so industry stakeholders seeking a more streamlined system to train CMV drivers, worked to develop what would eventually become the first industry and government-recognized voluntary certification standards for school entry-level truck driver training courses, carrier driver finishing programs, and younger driver programs.

When Griskivich asked Kynaston to take over as president, “it seemed natural to take a nationwide interest in trucking safety,” said Kynaston, who had retired as chief of the California

Highway Patrol and was instrumental in founding the Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance. “We had a strong group of people who knew we had a need and what we were doing was right.”

At that time, Kynaston said, “in some states you didn’t even have to prove you could drive a truck; you could apply for a driver’s license by mail.”

Kerry Kearn, Vice President of Company Fleets at Crete Carrier Corporation, who served as a PTDI Board member in the early days, recalled how his initial involvement grew out of that same concern about the quality and ability of drivers on the road. “So-called CDL mills were taking individuals, some of whom would not normally be employable, and turning them out as drivers,” Kearn said.

Based on his extensive experience and background in trucking and safety, Kearn knew what constituted a good driver and wanted to make a significant contribution towards standardizing a training curriculum. He joined the board during the organization’s “revitalization period” and served until “we finally got all of the elements necessary into the curriculum, measured the end product, and were certain it served its purpose.”

Crete Carrier was one of eight schools that received the first PTDI course certification in January 1989 and one of two—the other being American Truck Driving School (ATDS), in Elm Mott, Texas—that continues to offer PTDI-certified courses. “PTDI has had a positive effect on a lot of schools, even those who haven’t gotten PTDI certification,” Kearn said. “I think companies have seen the value of these standards. The fact that PTDI is still around says a lot for the organization.”

Kearn, whose carrier hires only graduates of PTDI-certified courses, believes that “PTDI’s most significant contribution was to establish the amount of hours required and topics covered for entry-level driver training and to make the schools accountable. It’s a tough industry for an individual as a career, and sometimes I think there’s a tendency to settle for a lesser quality employee.”

Establishing the amount of behind-the-wheel hours was challenging, however, as Kynaston recalled. “This was the first time the industry had a required number of hours for behind-the-wheel training, and it was the most difficult thing for the schools to agree to because of the high cost involved.”

Initially, some were skeptical. “We didn’t see the benefit of PTDI standards, because we already had an accreditation process,” said Harry Kowalchuk, Jr., president, National Tractor Trailer School. But in 1996, when PTDI again brought stakeholders together to review and update driver standards and Kowalchuk got involved through the Commercial Vehicle Training Association, “That’s when I saw that PTDI certification differed from accreditation. Certification pertains

particularly to driver training courses and specifically concentrates on improving the training,” he said. “We needed uniformity [in driver training], and PTDI brought the public and private sectors very close together, freely sharing information for one common goal—to turn out a safe driver. Let’s face facts: We all want a safe driver out there on the road.”

Overall, 250 stakeholders, including schools, carriers, government agencies, and insurance companies, were involved in revising the standards published in 1999. “It’s incredible the amount of hours,” Kowalchuk said he has volunteered over the years. “And we continue to support PTDI with a great deal of pride.”

NTTS graduates, like Bror Lindgren, who has been driving since January 2000, share that pride. “All of us say the same thing: how good the training was and how lucky we were to have landed there rather than somewhere else,” Lindgren said. “After being out here on the road and talking to guys that have been through other programs, I know I got a lot more experience than they did. There wasn’t a single day I didn’t think back on the practical experience I received and say ‘man, those guys knew what they were doing.’ Their program was right on the money.”

Kowalchuk said Lindgren is not alone in his beliefs. “The feedback we get from our graduates is that while they’re in school, they may question the effort and time they’re putting into this program, but later they call or write us and say how much they appreciate what they learned, especially when they come across other drivers who can’t even back up a truck.

“One thing we’re guilty of is we have the best kept secret,” Kowalchuk said. “We should do a better job of publicizing and branding PTDI. When you sit down at a Board meeting and have representatives from the trucking companies, insurance companies, Truckload Carriers Association, and at least a half dozen private and public schools, all under one roof, coming together for a common purpose, that’s saying something.”

Now, as the industry awaits the federal government’s final ruling on regulations expected this spring, some believe it could strengthen the future of PTDI. Robert McClanahan, director, Central Tech Transportation & Safety Education, whose school received PTDI course recertification in December, explained. “If federal regulations required schools to be certified or accredited, since PTDI is the only program out there, for the most part, schools that have PTDI course certification will already meet those regulations.”

McClanahan noted that 2010 marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of PTDI certification for Central Tech. “Each time we go through the recertification process,” McClanahan explained, “it gives us a chance to look at our entire program and to make adjustments, if needed. PTDI has helped us over the years to make our program more successful.”

A PTDI Board member since 1996, McClanahan has fully supported the certification process and given “as much of my time to PTDI as I can. I got more involved to have a voice in the standards and give my input to make PTDI even better.” As director of the National Association of Publicly Funded Truck Driving Schools, McClanahan plans to “work with the schools, to explain PTDI standards, because there’s a lot of misunderstanding out there about what PTDI standards are.

“In my 14 years of involvement, I have seen PTDI improve by continuing to review and revise standards, keeping up with training and technology changes that have come up over the years, and making sure we are right there as an industry with standards.”

As for the insurance industry’s role, Terry Burnett, owner of Burnett Insurance Corporation and PTDI Board chairman, chairs an advisory council that is working closely with insurance companies regarding the PTDI driver finishing program. “I’m looking forward to helping insurance companies understand how solid PTDI standards are,” Burnett said. “Years ago an underwriter told me if you control the driver, you control the risk, meaning the driver is the greatest risk a trucking company has. If you can improve the knowledge and ability and skills of the driver, then you’re going to drastically improve the overall safety record of the trucking company, which means lower insurance costs and greater productivity and safer roads for the motoring public.”

For this reason, Burnett said he is “very candid when talking to insurance companies about their need to support PTDI and the dedication of those people involved in raising the standards of drivers in America.”

One of those dedicated people, Kynaston, who received several awards for his extraordinary contributions to highway safety over the years, said, “I’m proud that we actually established standards for training truck drivers—the kind of training they should have—and the fact that we certified programs throughout the country. We actually saw the results and the willingness of the truck driving industry to hire these drivers. PTDI is still influencing the quality of training of drivers today, and that to me is quite an accomplishment.”

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*PTDI is a national, nonprofit organization established for the twofold purpose of developing uniform industry skill, curriculum, and certification standards for entry-level truck driver training and motor carrier driver finishing programs, and certifying entry-level truck driver training courses at public and private schools and driver finishing programs at carriers for compliance with PTDI standards. PTDI is based in Alexandria, Virginia.*