

Nation's best taxi driver steers his way into hearts

The nation's top taxicab driver is not a traffic-weaving, horn-honking hard-charger on the bustling streets of a metropolis like New York City.

He's a 50-year, cab-driving veteran in Norfolk, who wears a baseball cap, an easy smile and his faith on his sleeve.

Frank Brooks was named the 2011 Taxicab Driver of the Year by the national trade group Taxicab, Limousine and Paratransit Association.

It's not just Brooks' impeccable driving record or his lack of customer complaints that propelled him to the top, but his genuine kindness to the thousands of people who pay him to take them where they want to go.

"When you get in his cab, you become the most important person," said Judy Swystun of Black & White Cabs of Norfolk, who for the first time nominated one of her drivers for the award. "He makes you feel at ease and you have a better day because you rode with him."

She said his cab is about as spotless as his driving record; he often "Windexes" in the middle of a shift.

Swystun likes to tell stories that Brooks is too humble to volunteer. She said Brooks once had a regular customer, a blind woman who often went to Southern Shopping Center to sell pencils. Inspired by her positive outlook on life, he'd only charged her a pencil, which he gave to neighborhood children.

She also said that Brooks' award came with two free airline tickets, which he gave to a neighbor on a fixed income who has always wanted to go to the Grand Canyon.

"He's just a sweet, sweet man," Swystun said.

For Brooks, who draws much from his Christian faith, it comes without effort.

"I want to instill a sense of compassion and love for our fellow man to as many people as I can," he said.

And he has lots of opportunity. He said driving a cab isn't much different from being a bartender. There's something about trusted strangers.

"They get in my cab and they like to get things off their shoulders, things they don't want their friends and family to know what's going on," Brooks said.

Secrets about marital problems, work woes and health issues are shared from the back seat of cab No. 124.

"I tell them there's not a problem they can't overcome if they take a positive attitude," he said. "I feel like I'm doing something to help people enjoy life more."

There's not much that's off-limits in the cab.

On the economy: "Government can only do so much. It's the private sector that creates jobs."

On war: "The political factor can't change the world until mankind changes."

On love: "Sit down and talk, I know. My first marriage, I was young, she was young. It didn't work out."

On vices: "No smoking in my cab. You're coating all the organs in your body with tar and nicotine. What's that accomplish?"

On GPS devices: They "give you the highways, which are not always the best way."

Brooks, 76, continues to work behind the wheel although Social Security would allow him to retire.

"I do this because I enjoy it," he said. "I'll retire when I expire."

Driving five days a week for eight to nine hours, primarily from Norfolk International Airport, is semi-retirement for him.

To make a living driving taxis in Hampton Roads, Brooks said, you have to be willing to work long hours - 12 hours a day for seven days a week - but you also have to be lucky by being in the right place at the right time.

"The airport is not a place for a young driver," he said. "You can wait three hours for one 15-minute drive."

But the tips are generally a little better. And he gets to take his daily walk while waiting in the taxi queue.

These days for Brooks, luck is picking up an air traveler going to the Outer Banks or Williamsburg, not just downtown, which is about \$27. Most customers will give him \$30.

One airport customer packed her money in her luggage, which had been lost by the airline, and had only about half of the expected fare. Brooks took her anyway and she gave him all she had - \$8. He said he gave back \$1, telling her he couldn't take her last dollar, and she cried.

At Black & White, drivers pay a fee to lease their cabs, then make their money collecting fares and tips.

"We don't get that much money from tips," Brooks said, adding that \$10 to \$15 is a big tip in Hampton Roads.

Sometimes, he gets no tip. Sometimes, customers jump out of the cab without paying.

"Yeah, people run on me, but, thank the Lord, it doesn't happen that often," he said.

He's especially grateful he hasn't ever been robbed.

Brooks started driving while he was in the Navy in 1961 and worked part time for about a decade before going full time.

He prides himself on being a safe, defensive driver. He had one ticket 35 years ago, for going 30 mph in a 25 mph zone.

While Brooks said he still enjoys meeting people, one thing that's made his job less enjoyable is growing congestion and aggressive driving.

"It makes it hard on you and can stress you if you let it," he said.

So in his semi-retirement, Brooks avoids working too early in the day, saying, "One rush hour is enough for me."

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