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Deaths stir grim memories for retired train engineer

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'You offer your life up for a couple of minutes'

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It was a country railroad crossing where Barney Wilkins came face to face with the fate of a 5-year-old boy.

After 36 years as an engineer for Union Pacific, this memory affects the Benton resident the most.

The boy was standing in the front seat of the car his dad was driving. Wilkins, the train's engineer, didn't see the car at first.

It came up on the left side of the train's engine, and Wilkins didn't even know the car and his train had collided until his brakeman told him.

"When we got to the wreck, the man had been thrown in the back seat and broke his back," he said. "We didn't know (the boy) was in the car until the man said 'Where's my son?'"

The boy was 50 feet away. Upon impact, he was thrown through the windshield and died at the scene at state Highway 1 near Armistead . His dad died a week later.

"We had to close his eyes," Wilkins said of the boy.

And Wilkins, now retired, still feels guilty, for the boy dying.

That was 18 years ago.

When a tragedy occurs at a railroad crossing -- as recently happened on Barksdale Boulevard -- the victims' families aren't the only ones stricken with trauma. Train conductors and engineers, many of whom helplessly watch as cars try unsuccessfully to beat their train, endure the aftermath as well.

"The conductor and the engineer on the train will have to live with this memory," said Harry Stewart, locomotive engineer and peer support coordinator with Union Pacific based out of Tyler, Texas. "They'll remember it for the rest of their life. It's not something that goes away; it just gets dull with time.

"Each time those individuals mount up on the train ... the location of each incident

they've involved in ... each time, they're reminded."

Wilkins has found that to be true. He remembers the accident like it was yesterday.

"People are going to try and beat a train," he said. "You can't beat it. You're outweighed in the first place.

"You offer up your life for a couple of minutes; that's what you're doing."

He said that placing yield signs at crossings would make people think twice. His reasoning comes in the aftermath of the July 10 deaths of Samuel Tidwell and Devie Sabalza, both 22 and of Bossier City. They died after their Honda Civic was struck by a southbound Kansas City Southern freight train at the crossing of Robert E. Lee and Barksdale Boulevard.

Their obituaries in The Times were a poignant reminder of young lives lost: Sabalza was a cheerleader for the Bossier Battle Wings, and a member of a sorority at Louisiana Tech, where she was a junior majoring in interior design.

Tidwell was scheduled to graduate from Louisiana Tech Aug. 14 and was to be commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant with the U.S. Air Force. The obituary said he was preparing to propose marriage to Sabalza.

Would more safety measures at the crossing have made a difference in this tragedy?

"The typical rules of the road are, even the cross-arm signs, when you see that sign, you are to yield to the train," said Stephen Glasscock, Department of Transportation and Development traffic engineering and service administrator. "That's the intention of that sign. We follow our signage to national standards. The cross-arm signs are to be installed at all intersections."

But people don't understand those signs, Wilkins said, "because they don't say 'yield.'"

Bud Chauncy, a presenter for Operation Lifesaver and owner of 1st Class Driving School, said there's so much "highway media" that it becomes easy to ignore, bend and miss signs.

Operation Lifesaver is a national, nonprofit education and awareness program dedicated to ending collisions, fatalities and injuries at highway-rail grade crossings and on railroad rights of way.

"Signage is not the solution," Chauncy said. "Education is the solution, and changing our thinking is a solution.

"It's understood with the flashing lights that you yield the right of way. Don't take it for granted that a train's not coming. The (tracks) you cross every single day are the most dangerous ones. Ultimately what we teach is ... you need to be proactive -- cover your brakes, hang up your cell phone, turn down the radio." Chauncy said 30 percent of fatalities in train-related crashes are people hitting the side of the train.

"The road users aren't preparing," he said. "They're going 50 mph. You can't stop fast when going 50 mph.

"We pride ourselves in our freedom and independence as Americans, but when you put yourself in that situation, your freedom is taken away."

As is a life.

The voluntary support group that Union Pacific's Stewart coordinates helps engineers who witness lives lost.

"I think it works very well for the simple reason that this person has the opportunity

to talk to someone, to vent his frustrations, or vent the hurt feelings he has, and we listen," Stewart said. "We don't counsel, we just listen. If the person is hurt past our help, then we try to refer them to a professional counselor.

"But our basic job is to listen and let this person talk to us and talk the grief out and get that baggage off their shoulders if possible."

The support lasts as long as it needs to based on individual needs -- some are back on the train the next day, some take weeks.

"We do this as long as it takes," Stewart said. "There is no set time. Rather than the theory of getting back up on the horse and get started again you need someone to speak to. The more you talk about it, the easier it is to get the hurt and trauma away from yourself.

"A critical incident is a very traumatic thing," he added. "It has different effects on different people. Some can shoulder the effects well, and some don't shoulder quite as well."

Stewart said the program has been very successful. Rather than having a person sitting by himself, picking at himself, he has someone who understands and listens. As for Wilkins, the images of accidents linger, despite his best attempts to clear them from his mind, he said.

"You don't."

Online

For more information on Operation Lifesaver, visit its Web site at www.oli.org.

To call

To get in touch with Union Pacific's voluntary support group, call (903) 238-2956.

By the numbers

30 -- train speed in miles per hour at which most collisions occur.

50 -- percentage of vehicle/train collisions that occur at crossings with active warning devices (lights, gates, bells).

64 -- percentage of all collisions that occur during daylight hours.

24 -- percentage of vehicle/train collisions that are caused by the driver running into the side of a train.

3,000 -- miles of rail in Louisiana.

200 -- number of feet a mid-size car takes to stop at 55 mph.

5,280 -- number of feet an average size (150-car) freight train takes to stop at 55 mph.

Operation Lifesaver

Photo Captions:

A rose and some pompoms are left in memory of Samuel Jackson and Devie Sabalza who were victims of a train-car wreck on the tracks near the intersection of Robert E. Lee and Barksdale boulevards in Bossier City.

Jim Hudelson/The Times

Samuel Tidwell and Devie Sabalza died in a train-car accident July 10.

Mug:

Wilkins