

Posted on Thu, Jan. 26, 2006

Knowledge and preparation can prevent roadside tragedy

BY SHANTI HALL
firefighter@MiamiHerald.com

Earlier this month, one of my longtime fears and worst nightmares became a reality for a firefighter in Broward County.

Captain James Dillon was on his way to work early in the morning and experienced car trouble on I-95. When he pulled his car over and got out to tend to the problem, he was struck by a large truck and killed.

This tragedy hit the fire-rescue family particularly hard because we have all responded to this type of emergency on so many occasions.

It is especially difficult to know that someone who has dedicated his life to rescuing others could not be rescued.

This loss was also tough for firefighters everywhere because we all follow the same routine as Dillon. Our shifts begin early, so we are on the road before dawn, commuting on highways, sometimes from long distances. We are out there when it's dark and there is little help in case of emergency. This could have been any one of us.

In reality, though, this tragedy should be felt by every driver and passenger. The odds are that most people will experience car trouble at some time or another in their lives and will have to pull over and get help or try to fix the problem on their own.

While many car emergencies cannot be predicted or anticipated, you can help minimize the potential for problems by making sure that you adhere to a regular maintenance schedule for your car and never delay attending to a known or suspected problem.

Even cars with the very best maintenance history are susceptible to unexpected breakdowns, so you should be prepared to know exactly what to do in the event of an emergency:

- Know your limitations and plan accordingly. If you know that you would be unable to handle even the simplest car emergency, consider a membership in a reliable motor club and make sure to always have a mobile phone available to call for help.
- Create and maintain a car emergency kit, which should include flares, reflective triangles, flashlights and extra batteries, a tool set, gloves, water and a first aid kit.
- If you experience car trouble, turn on your hazard lights and try to make your way to the shoulder and out of the flow of traffic. Call for help immediately.
- Get as far as you can away from the traffic lanes to give you as much space as possible between you and fast-moving cars. Keep your hazard lights on and open the hood of your car. An open hood is the universal sign of a car in distress, so leave it open even if you are not working on the engine.
- If you have flares or reflective markers, position them beginning at your car and set them at intervals going at least 200 feet in the direction of the traffic that is coming closest to you.
- If there is a safe area outside of the car and farther away from traffic lanes, wait for help outside of the car.
- Never attempt to fix or work on a car that is stuck in a dangerous location.
- If you suspect a fire somewhere in your car, do not attempt to locate the origin of the fire. Get out immediately and

make sure all occupants are out. Find a safe place away from the car to call and wait for help.

- If your car becomes disabled after dark, the danger level rises significantly because visibility is poor and drivers are often less alert at night. Take extra care to stay far away from traffic lanes and do not assume that drivers can see you.

You should never underestimate the danger of being disabled on an active highway. There are few drivers on the road today with more knowledge and experience in emergencies than Dillon had in his many years of fire-rescue service. But it was only matter of seconds that took his life.

In memory of Dillon, take the time to plan and prepare for a roadside emergency and help prevent another tragedy.

Shanti Hall is a veteran firefighter and a spokeswoman for Miami-Dade Fire and Rescue.

© 2006 MiamiHerald.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miami.com>