

UC Monthly Safety Spotlight, September 2012

Careless Chris Has a Busy Morning

By: Kitty

"Vacation's over, let's get to work out there," Dan said cheerfully as he handed out the day's assignments. "And don't forget the vehicle inspections are due this week."

Careless Chris rolled his eyes as he took the PM sheets. The summer season had been the usual chaos of extra projects, short staffing due to vacation absences, and trying to get too much done with too little money. With the fall classes starting already, the workload in facilities maintenance seemed to have doubled once again as requests for repairs poured in to the work order desk. Running his eyes down the list for the day, Chris expertly calculated that he had enough time to do all of the required preventive checks, but would have to skip doing either the full vehicle inspection or going over to his favorite coffee shop for his mid-morning break. "That's a no-brainer," he decided easily, heading out the door toward his vehicle. "My van is in great shape."

The facilities maintenance van that Chris drove was his domain, and he practically lived in it. It was big enough to carry all his tools and a good collection of the spare parts he needed most often, plus all the personal protective equipment he might need out on location. Like most of the other physical plant trucks that only got cleaned up once a year when inspection time rolled around, it looked like a hurricane had gone through the inside. But he knew where everything was so it didn't really matter to him whether anyone else could find something in it. As long as he knew the fire extinguisher was accessible, he didn't think he had to do extra work keeping it looking neat.

His first assignment was in one of the science buildings. It wasn't very far away but class change was about to start so he knew it would take a little longer to get there. Tossing the clipboard with the assignment sheets up on the dash, he shoved the smaller roll of building plans under it to hold it steady against the parts catalog already there, then set his coffee cup in the holder that stuck out next to the radio. He waved to his buddies who were scattering to their own jobsites and rolled sedately out of the parking lot with the other white university vehicles.

Watching the students cross the intersection ahead of him, Chris sipped his coffee and shook his head at how many of them were oblivious to their surroundings, totally occupied by texting while walking or whatever their headphones were playing. Chris had never understood the need to have a constant stream of sound accompanying him everywhere and didn't even play the radio in his truck very often. He was proud of the fact that this made him a safer driver, always more alert to what was happening around him and better able to react quickly to any changes in his environment. It made him feel quite superior about his attention to safety, especially when he recalled the number of times he had needed to stop suddenly to avoid hitting a person who had stepped off the curb into the street without any sign of awareness there was oncoming traffic. At nearly every safety meeting the crews reminded each other to drive carefully, especially this time of year when there were so many preoccupied pedestrians, and told horror stories of the near-misses they had experienced on campus. "Only a matter of time until somebody gets killed," they would conclude, "so be extra careful that you're not the one who does it."

Chris checked one last time for any stragglers wanting to cross, then started across the intersection. Suddenly, a speeding bicycle cut straight across in front of him. He slammed the brakes and yelled reflexively, "Stop means STOP for you too!" but the teenager, messenger bag slung over his back and the inevitable white plugs jammed in his ears, was already long gone. Loose tools thrown forward by the rapid deceleration creaked and clanked as they settled back into place in the rear of his van and a bag of small parts dropped noisily from its shelf into the chaos below. "Or didn't you see the enormous white thing about to run you over?" Chris finished irately, feeling his heart pound from the sudden surge of adrenaline. He sighed, looked both ways again, and continued on his way. "Not going to need the rest of that coffee to wake up now," he muttered philosophically.

When he reached his destination, Chris found a mail truck was already there, taking up the prime parking spot at the loading dock. Although he was aware the delivery guys often left their keys in their vehicles rather than locking up every time they left, he didn't seriously consider moving it out of his way. There was an unspoken agreement between departments that only emergency services had the real right to move someone else's vehicle. Not wanting to carry his heavy toolbox any further than he had to, Chris decided to back between the bollards onto the walkway that went by the mechanical room he was headed for. He'd done it plenty of times before, so he knew he could just fit his fenders between the posts without having to get out and remove one of them first. Besides, it was a total pain pulling the heavy wood sections to the side of the pavement and then having to stop, get out, and put them back in place again when he left.

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Fleet Safety

The challenge was going to be doing it with his passenger side rear-view mirror missing. Some time in the last few months it had gotten broken and he'd never gotten around to putting in the request to have it fixed. But he swung around and started backing slowly toward his goal, having approached this particular location often enough in the past to be confident he could make it through the narrow spot by watching the clearance on only one side.

The rear bumper edged past the bollard post, then the back tire, and Chris relaxed a bit, his concentration having paid off. From the space between the seats, the loud strains of his new AC/DC ringtone blared out of his cellphone, and Chris instinctively shifted his attention to lean over and grab for it. As he got his hand around the phone, he heard a yell from behind him, and belatedly moved his foot to the brakes. His clipboard, the rolled plans, catalog, and his notebook all cascaded down off the dashboard, hitting his coffee cup on the way and spilling the hot beverage onto his leg. He yelped at the pain, but didn't have time to deal with it. Shifting into park, he scrambled out of the van and hurried around to the back of it to see what had happened.

On the far side nearly under the fender a man was sitting on the ground, clutching his right ankle and moaning. Chris had seen him before and knew he was one of the newer researchers in the building. "Are you OK?" The outraged glare was answer enough. "You're right, you're right, stupid question. What happened?"

"You ran over my foot! Why didn't you stop? Oh, I think you crushed it." His face crumpled with pain. "Why didn't you stop? They always stopped before."

Starting to shake, Chris quickly called 911. As the distant wailing of sirens closed in around him, Chris realized how much trouble he had brought on himself by ignoring so many basic safety details. Making time for simple inspections and better housekeeping would have saved the day and left him feeling good, instead of sick with regret and worry.