

# *I had never driven a stick shift*

*Written by Sue Dickens*

Three years ago Ronda Tackett joined the growing number of women who are proud to say they are working as a professional driver in the trucking industry.

“I decided to get into trucking after I met my husband Keith, a driver for over 17 years,” says Ronda, who knows first hand the many challenges women truckers on the road face every day.



*Ronda Tackett*

Growing up in Superior, Wisconsin on the shores of Lake Superior, she went to high school then on to college. It was while working on her Master's degree that she met Keith.

“We met over the Internet – on Yahoo. I was working on my Master's Degree in Communications,” she says laughing. For Ronda it meant her life would change forever.

“Keith told me he used to drive for Schneider International so I told him I used to work for Land's End and remembered the orange trucks. I told him all this and before I knew it he came up to meet me from southern

Illinois, which is something like 980 miles away. He drove 12 hours,” she says with excitement.

It wasn't long before Keith and Ronda decided she should enroll in a truck driving school – but there was a bit of a snag, something she hadn't thought about until her lessons started.

“I was in a class with six other men – and I had never driven a stick shift in a car, let alone a truck,” she says laughing again. “These guys all knew how to drive – so I baled.”

It was then that Keith came to the rescue and “took me out for a month in his truck and trained me.”

In fact Keith had worked as a trainer while at Schneider. He was a company driver for seven years then a trainer for a couple of years. “I've learned a lot of stuff that a other drivers just don't know,” says Ronda with pride.

## **PRIDE IN YOUR RIDE**

Pride is something she and Keith talk about a lot. “Keith has so much pride in driving a truck” ... something she says that a lot of drivers just don't seem to have anymore.

But that doesn't stop this couple from doing something they love to do. They drive an apple red 1996 W900 Kenworth. “We have an older truck that has been rebuilt and it does the job,” she says.

After Ronda got her truck driving licence, the couple drove for Tango transport for a while. They continue to drive as a team and are now leased as owner/operators to UPS freight.

“Keith said if anything ever happened to him I would always have a job and that is why he wanted me to learn,” Ronda says pragmatically.

Trucking is now a way of life for this couple that often spends as much as two to three weeks at a time on the road before they get back to their home in Johnson City, Illinois.

They enjoy each other's company and the company of other truckers they meet while on the road. “I like driving ... especially the interstate,” says Ronda.

When Keith decides it's time to get some sleep she takes over.

"I have thought about going trucking by myself but I don't want to if I don't have to. I've seen the struggles that women have," she says frankly.

"Other drivers know there is a man in the truck because we leave Keith's cap on the dash," she adds. "It's just the way things are."

Ronda and Keith run the roads in a sort of triangle, from South Holland to either Phoenix or Fontana and sometimes they are in and out of Chicago too.

"Keith does all the driving when the winter weather gets bad," says Ronda, who drives about 600 miles a day letting her husband do the rest.

"In the last couple of months I have been able to drive at night ... I've gotten the courage to do it," she comments. Like many women being a truck driver has its own special challenges, but it also has its own rewards.

### **TRUCK BUDDY-PAYING IT FORWARD**

Ronda and her husband made the decision together to take their love for life on the road to classroom and have become advocates for Trucker Buddy.

This is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping educate and mentor schoolchildren via a pen pal relationship between professional truck drivers and children in grades 2-8.

"Keith has a daughter, Katie, who just finished grade 4 ... so we did Trucker Buddy with her class. I made a scrapbook of all the postcards we got from the students," says Ronda enthusiastically.

She saves all the Trucker Buddy letters they get from the class and responds to them all. They plan on doing it again with that same grade 4 teacher and the new class of students next year.

Keith and Ronda enjoy the interaction with the kids and often take their tractor and sometimes the trailer to the school to show them what a big rig is all about. "We let them get in and see where we ride and we helped them into the trailer one time and they went all the way to the end and back out and loved it," says Ronda.

The first time they did this they told the class that they would have a present for the

most improved student and so true to their word they bought a remote controlled tractor and gave it to that student at the end of the school year.

"We also had stickers that say I Love My Trucker Buddy. And we bought T-shirts for them too," she says with excitement.

It was through their participation in this program that they met Ellen Voie. She was looking after Trucker Buddy at the time. Ellen is now the chairwoman of Women In Trucking (WIT), a non-profit organization that was established in the US and is now spreading into Canada.

The mission of WIT is to encourage the employment of women in the trucking industry, promote their accomplishments and minimize obstacles faced by women in trucking.

As their website ([www.womenintrucking.org](http://www.womenintrucking.org)) states: WIT has been created for both men and women, who are either involved in the industry, or have a career interest in being a part of one of the largest networks of professionals in North America.

### **STAYING HEALTHY**

One of the biggest challenges for Ronda and her husband is staying healthy on the road. "We don't like to grab a meal and go. We like to stop, sit down and have a meal at a restaurant. I'd like to see more restaurants at truck stops ... places where you can get healthy food and rest up for the next leg of the journey," she says. "You know I think women gain faster than men," she adds with a grin.

Ronda hopes that visitors to the Transport Fitness website will learn more about how to stay healthy while on the road.

### **TRUCKING A WAY OF LIFE**

When Ronda and Keith are not on the road, which is not that often, they relax and enjoy their satellite TV and their computer. "When we are on the road we like to listen to the 'Truckin' Bozo on XM satellite radio and when we are home we like to go to his interactive website," says Ronda. "We often fight over who can get on the computer first," she adds with a laugh.

And the friends they meet on the Internet and on the road are all part of their world ... a world where trucking reigns.

It's that camaraderie shared by friends they have made in the trucking industry that they enjoy.

And Ronda is the first one to tell people she would prefer to be in a truck than in a car. "I feel safer. The four-wheelers don't know how to drive when they are around trucks," she says.

### **THE FUTURE**

Like all truckers Keith and Ronda each have their own dreams. Ronda would like to get a new truck. "We want to get a 120" sleeper on that truck," she says adamantly. Keith would like to own 10 trucks and be his own boss.

Their plan is to one day sell their house and live their life on the road in a big rig. That's nothing new for Ronda's seven-year-old cocker spaniel named Rose. "She goes in the truck with us all the time. She is my baby

... velcroed to my keestra," she says laughing again, her sense of humor always shining through.

There is a serious side to her, though. Ronda told me about the time she noticed a girl at a truck stop "who was really down ... I went up to her and prayed with her. She had been going around with the truckers. I gave her the phone number of my pastor ... I don't know if she ever called."

For Ronda, her religion is a big part of her life too. But being able to stop at a chapel on the road is not always possible. "I wish they had more chapels open all day long with somebody there," she commented.

As the interview wound down Ronda and I said our goodbyes.

As I wished them both well on the road and said 'drive safe', Ronda replied, "You too because you are a four-wheeler!"