

Rob Davis on Lenard Hill Car Wash

At the very beginning of my career I encountered one of the last things I thought I would ever see within the car washing business. I was thirty-five at the time and was the manager of two car washes- Lenard Hill on 28th street and a second location on the West side of Grand Rapids. I was extremely proud of my title within that company as I had been working with them for ten years. They had helped me gain so much knowledge and experience about the industry that I felt I could handle just about anything this career threw at me. On what initially seemed like just another Saturday night, I received a phone call from one of two employees working. They were suspicious about an air leak happening somewhere within the tunnel. As soon as I tried to reassure myself and those on the other end of line that everything was going to be fine, I heard a high-pitched shriek. The line went dead.

I struggle to remember a lot about that day, not just because it was a little over twenty years ago, but also because it was one of the most devastating days of my career. I don't remember what immediately happened after the phone call ended, but the next thing I knew I was passing the exit for East Beltline on I-96 and got my first glimpse of smoke pouring out of where the carwash used to be. I struggled to keep my attention on the road as the weight of what happened kept crashing over me. I felt like I was continuously blacking out in thought, barely noticing the line of red brake lights rapidly approaching me. While I was still cognizant, I realized the sudden congestion was a result of leftover traffic from the annual Metro Cruise, a car parade that happens at the beginning of summer on 28th street and decided to pull off at 29th street in hopes to be the first at the scene. Hope can only get you so far.

Before I could even reach the light, I was met by a brigade of flashing blue and red lights and news trucks lined up to the entrance of the wash. I attempted to cut my way up through the crowd of spectators, but didn't make it far before I was stopped by one of the police officers asking who I was and why I was attempting to go down a closed street. I quickly exclaimed I was the manager and was escorted down the street to see a scene worse than I could have ever imagined.

Every building's windows within eyesight had been blown in from the wave of the explosion. The roofs once covering sturdy concrete walls had been lifted up and slammed back down— leaving large dips that could give away at any moment. Past the 40 foot flame soaring high above the gas main, the cars of the two employees working that night were unrecognisable under the pressure of the blast, their only tell being the employee lot their debris remained in. The once lively area was now reduced to rubble.

My eyes scanned desperately through the smoke looking for any sign of life. Finally, on the other end of the parking lot stood the two employees that were working that night. They were tending to a DTE worker who had answered the call and suffered the consequences of the blast upon his arrival. The entire surface of his skin, including the flimsy white t-shirt he was wearing, was stained with blood. It looked like something straight out of a horror movie.

I made my way over to the group and began to piece together what happened. It began when the two employees working—two boys fresh out of high school—heard a crash and a sudden burst of air rushing into the room. When they looked outside to investigate, the cause of the noise was instantly recognised. The entrance to the carwash shared a driveway with the car dealership next door, making it easier for dealers to get a clean car before they roll them out to customers. A customer who was meaning to come to the car wash got sidetracked looking at the showroom

next door and by the time she had turned back to look where she was going, she was piggybacked on top of the gas main. Miraculously, both employees of the car wash made it out from the blast relatively unscathed- despite the images of the day leaving a wound on their brains forever. The timing between the initial crash, the phone call, and the explosion seemed a bit muddy between the two boys. Thankfully they were able to make it out and across the street before things really took off. The DTE worker who was called to investigate and shut off the gas main barely made it out of his car before the explosion happened. The charge from shutting off his van and opening his door enough to spark the blast. Before he could even grasp the situation, his car had imploded leaving small tears and a thin layer of blood across the entire length of his skin.

As soon as the owner arrived, we were flocked with reporters asking out of touch questions and faking their sympathy for the camera.

“Sir, how does it feel to have your business blown up overnight?”

I remember standing next to John, the owner of both car washes, and hearing the hurt in his voice as he moved from interview to interview, just trying to pull together what was left of his business.

It felt like the career I had been building for most of my life was quickly taking a new shape into something drenched in anxiety rather than excitement. You often hear horror stories of customers confusing their brake and gas pedals or items getting tied up into brushes and creating a projectile at the blink of an eye, but this day marked a completely new and unexpected fear I never expected myself to get past. Although a customer running into a gas main is in no way tied to the carwashing field, I couldn't help but create a mental connection between one of my biggest

passions and this day. As I sit here and attempt to recall everything, I feel like I'm trapped back in the whirlwind of trying to keep my cool during a series of tragic events.

Within a week everyone had moved to the second location—roughly 25 minutes from the site of the explosion—forced to put the recent tragedy in our back pocket until after business hours. Although there was no way to predict what happened, the guilt still gnawed at me. John had quit smoking roughly six months before the incident and I was sure he was going to start back up again after what had happened. I was able to find our safe deep inside the rubble, the money still locked inside felt like pennies compared to the amount of damage that occurred.

Leonard Hill car wash never reopened. John sold the land— and what was left of the foundation—to a new car wash. Unfortunately, it was later turned into another Mister Car Wash. I have scoured the internet looking for any reports on the damage, but it seems the story has been lost to time. The news stations have since then covered much bigger and more serious stories, but I will forever find it difficult to move past that day.

As a current owner of a carwash, I still struggle to find what keeps me coming back to this industry. I started working at Leonard Hill midway through pursuing a sociology degree at Central Michigan University, and haven't been able to escape this field ever since. John was one of the first people to see my worth and take a chance on me, fostering a learning environment where I would grow for a total of fifteen years. Car washing doesn't seem to hold the same weight in my heart as the people I have met through this career do. I have made great connections through my journey in this industry, and have earned some great stories along the way. Even though he had retired shortly after everything happened, I made sure to keep in touch and deliver a yearly life report on both my personal life and career until John ultimately passed away in 2020. Although there's not many exciting moments in this industry and car washing

from an outsider's perspective may seem as simple as getting a car wet and it coming out clean, moments like this remind me to never get lost in the simplicity of things and to appreciate every moment as it happens because you never know what might come next.