Friends in deed . . .

With this issue of Transcript, we share some stories of ODOT employees who came to the aid of citizens in dire need this snow and ice season. See their stories on page 4.

John Beckley and Bob Griffith spotted a barn fire. Their quick action averted further tragedy. Photo by Mark Manfull, District 11

Darian Grant tracked down the owner of credit cards and cash he’d found in a drainage ditch. Photo by Rebecca Akosi, District 2

Russell Bencivengo (left), Roberto Garcia-Muniz, and Brian Kirksey helped safeguard a motorist who had crashed until safety forces arrived. The trio are pictured with Transportation Manager Brian Jung (right). Photo by Amanda Lee, District 12

In tough times, count on leadership

David Rose, Central Office

We all know times are tough; especially in the transportation industry. Budgets are shrinking and costs are rising. During these difficult times, organizations boldly look for answers. One unlikely candidate for hope and inspiration is the Lorax, a mythical creature created by Dr. Seuss. For those unfamiliar with the story, it’s a story of responsibility and leadership, two very important elements in creating a long-term, reliable, professional and highly-productive organization.

During a strategic planning session, Director Jerry Wray welcomed everyone and reminded them why they were here: to work on ODOT and make it the best it can be. It was refreshing to see the leaders of the department deliberating about how ODOT can achieve its mission and critical success factors.

Even more amazing was the discussion about the people of ODOT and how valuable they are to the success of the department. But there was also discussion about what approach to use with the types of employee who hold others back from achieving the department’s strategic goals, as well as their own personal ones. Great employees are truly the most valuable asset of any company, but negative employees can adversely affect their work environment.

When looking inward at an organization’s workforce, there are two ques-
What happens in Vegas, doesn’t always stay in Vegas. At least not when what happens in Las Vegas is aired on national television’s mega-popular reality show, Pawn Stars.

Richland County Highway Technician 3 Greg Smith found that out when he visited the Gold & Silver Pawn Shop made famous by the hit TV show and was featured in an episode that aired in early January. Smith flew to Vegas hoping to sell his circa early-1900s time-lock from a bank safe to the shop’s leader Rick Harrison.

At the beginning of the show, Smith said he was hoping to get $500 out of the piece that was originally broken apart, which he then repaired.

When Smith presented the time-lock to Harrison and the show’s resident knucklehead Chumlee, he explained that he found the time-lock in a box of supplies from a former watch maker. Harrison examined the time-lock and found it to be wound-up, causing it to not work properly, which could likely be remedied by a thorough cleaning and tune-up.

Upon inspection of the historic 1910 piece made by the Illinois Springfield Watch company, Harrison offered Smith a mere $200. Smith countered and the two settled upon $350 for the time-lock.

“When he offered me $200, I thought he was being a little bit cheap with me,” Smith said after his sale. “I settled for $350, and now I think I’ll do a little extra gambling with it.”

Smith was able to gamble a little on his earnings and hopes to earn more cash when he is featured on additional episodes of the show at future dates.

By purchasing a former watch maker’s cabinet full of old parts and supplies, Smith continued to feed his interest and collection of antique watch-making pieces tinkering with them for about 20 years. He considers himself a part-time jeweler and enjoys working on gold pieces especially.

Smith lives in Ontario and has worked for Richland County ODOT for 15 years.
MEET THE DDD
Ferzan Ahmed, District 6
Nancy Burton, District 6

Ferzan Ahmed
was born in Pakistan
and grew up in Asia
and North Africa. He came to the
United States in 1985 to attend
Kansas State University where
he received a bachelor of science
degree in electrical engineering.

After two years working in
New York, he joined ODOT in
1992 as an EIT. He worked in
District 6 Construction until
2007, and then in Production at
the district through 2011, where
he served as acting production
administrator.

Ahmed lives in Powell with
his wife Cathy, who recently re-
tired from ODOT, daughter Yas-
meen and dog, Scruffy. His hob-
bies include exercising, reading
fiction, poetry and watching old
movies. Ahmed’s favorite singers
are Kishore Kumar and Frank
Sinatra. He says his dream job
would be either a heavy weight
boxing promoter or the manager
of the USA Cricket Team.

Count on leadership

questions to ask: How does an organization nurture its
employees to participate in greatness and become
empowered? And what should an organization do
about those employees who actually hurt produc-
tivity and deteriorate the organization’s values and
culture?

The answer to both of these questions is actually
the same: An organization must create a culture
that allows participation in decision making and
the assignment of meaningful work. This type of
culture can have a profound impact on even the
most negative employee.

ODOT believes everyone can achieve if their
work culture allows it. But it is up to us to take ad-
vantage of this; to be inspired to have a positive im-
pact with, and through, our work. In the words of
the Lorax, “Unless someone like YOU cares a whole
awful lot, nothing is going to get better, it’s not.”

We are fortunate to work in the transporta-
tion field. Few professions have such a widespread
impact on society and its quality of life. One thing
is for sure: we have a team of leaders whose desire
is to help us succeed through a culture that fosters
leadership and achievement throughout the organi-
zation. We can count on that.
AN ACT OF KINDNESS
Rebecca Akosi, District 2
While performing routine field work along State Route 105, Wood County Transportation Manager Darian Grant discovered the contents of a woman’s purse—checkbook, credit cards, and loose bills—all scattered throughout an adjacent drainage ditch.

Grant collected the items and brought them back to the Wood County Garage, where he did a Google search and found the items belonged to a nearby school teacher. Grant contacted the school and left a message with the principal to contact ODOT.

The grateful owner, who later claimed her possessions, revealed she had placed her purse on the roof of her car and driven off. By the time she realized her error, her purse was gone. She was later able to find her bag but feared she had lost the contents forever.

“Darian has all the best of qualities important for an employee working for ODOT,” said Wood County Transportation Administrator Violet Courtney. “Honesty, integrity, and a clear sense what is right versus wrong. His returning of the personal property plus the loose cash exemplifies these attributes. I am very proud of him and his ‘Golden Rule’ mentality.”

AN ACTION TAKEN
Amanda Lee, District 12
When a driver lost control and crashed into a cement median on Interstate 90 near the Chester Avenue exit in downtown Cleveland last December, highway technicians Roberto Garcia-Muniz, Brian Kirksey and Russell Bencivengo from the Cleveland Garage halted their operations of combatting ice and snow and jumped into action.

Using their snowplow trucks, the trio blocked an inside lane to protect the driver and the disabled vehicle until police arrived on the scene. Kirksey and Bencivengo stayed with the driver while Garcia-Muniz walked toward the Prospect Avenue exit and waved flares to warn oncoming drivers.

“It was a blind bend,” said Garcia-Muniz. “We wanted to make sure motorists knew that there was an incident ahead. It helped to prevent any secondary crashes.”

Thankfully, no one was injured in the incident. The driver expressed his gratitude to Garcia-Muniz, Kirksey and Bencivengo for staying with him to ensure his safety. Their efforts were reported by the local media.

“The crew stayed with the vehicle until the police arrived: I’d like to think we saved a life that day,” said Transportation Manager Brian Jung.

AN ACTION TAKEN
Lauren M. Holdsworth, District 11
In January, during a routine roadway patrol on State Route 39 in Carroll County, seasonal worker John Beckley and Highway Technician Bob Griffith spotted smoke moving across the road at around 5 a.m.

The two assumed the smoke was from an outdoor wood burner, but closer investigation revealed that a nearby barn was on fire.

The men quickly called the Fox Township Fire Department, and alerted the owner who was asleep in his nearby house and unaware of the blaze. Beckley and Griffith remained at the scene to help with traffic control for necessary emergency vehicles and personnel.

The owner and his family, members of the Amish community, lost the barn and many possessions, including livestock and their buggy. The family is very grateful to the two ODOT employees whose quick actions prevented the fire from spreading to their home or their neighbor’s.
Bicycle safety campaign wins local award
Carolyn Kirkland, Central Office

An OSU campus-based program focused on making bicycle education desirable and fun was honored as the 2011 winner of the Innovative Transportation Solutions Award, sponsored by the Columbus Chapter of Women in Transportation.

The “How We Roll” safety campaign works in collaboration with ODOT to teach student riders the fundamentals of bicycle safety while exploring the neighborhoods and small businesses of Columbus, reducing the occurrence of accidents and crashes in the process.

“In addition to teaching people how to ride, we’re taking customers directly to a small business, showing them how easy it is to get there by bike,” campaign founder, Meredith Joy, explains.

The program attracted over 900 students in only two months, exceeding expectations and successfully impacting the safety of our roads.

Denis de Verteuil, President of Bike OSU, expresses his excitement over the How We Roll program at the October Launch Party. Photo courtesy of Liz Samuelson, Fulcrum Creatives LLC

Stephanie Lentz, Bridge Specialist
Sharon Smigielski, District 8

March is a very important month for District 8 employee Stephanie Lentz: the eight-year veteran was recently promoted from Highway Technician to Bridge Specialist.

This month marks the start of her new duties, inspecting culverts, pipes and bridges. She was inspired to apply for her new position several years ago, when she found she enjoyed working on structures during her assignment to the Interstate 275 reconstruction project.

As part of her training, she participated in a ropes-climbing class at the Jeremiah Morrow Bridge in Warren County last fall. Though she had canoed on the Little Miami River under the bridge before, it was quite a different experience actually climbing the structure!

In her spare time, Lentz enjoys hiking and staying busy with her grandchildren, ranging in ages from newborn to teen.

Stephanie Lentz, Bridge Specialist
Sharon Smigielski, District 8

Photo by Sharon Smigielski, District 8
A happier you is a healthier you
Carolyn Kirkland, Central Office

Recent studies have brought to light a health phenomenon that is both appealing and easy: the practice of positive thinking. It seems making gratitude an attitude—that is, cultivating a positive mood by spending time reflecting on the good things in life—is a worthwhile habit backed by neuroscience.

A study asked one group of volunteers to keep daily or weekly gratitude diaries, while another group recorded their hassles. A third group just recorded random events without dwelling on their good or bad feelings. The result was a significant and consistent difference: People who were in the gratitude group were a full 25 percent happier than the hassles-tracking group.

The gratitude group was more optimistic about the future, they felt better about their lives and they even did almost one-and-a-half hours more exercise a week than those in the hassles or neutral events groups.

Research reveals that giving thanks is a potent emotion that builds on itself, and helps connect us to others.

In order to develop a more permanent, positive attitude, it helps to be more attentive to the things that promote relaxation and happiness.

Start by taking some time out every day to think about the things you are grateful for. They can be small or large, and can be written down or exist as a mental list. It can also be beneficial to think about positive things you have to look forward to. And you can benefit by deliberately making a big deal out of your private triumphs, no matter how small they may seem to others.

As we head into spring, start laughing more, reflect on the positives in your day, and make time for the things you enjoy. You’ll be creating a happier and healthier you!
Mother Nature helps clear winter roads

Brent Kovacs, District 4

Though Ohio’s mild winter has been a notable phenomenon, inclement weather can still cause difficult driving conditions. One simple way ODOT has been using to help control snow and provide a better commute for motorists is off the side of the road. ODOT District 4 formed a partnership with local farmers, asking them to leave rows of corn in their fields adjacent to rural highways. The corn stalks act as natural wind breaks, helping prevent snow from drifting across ODOT maintained roads.

Ashtabula County ODOT officials have been working to use this innovative and “green” approach to the problem, starting with the 2010–11 winter season. It proved to be a more viable approach in controlling drifting than a traditional plastic snow fence.

“The first year was a great success,” recalled Rebecca Armstrong, Ashtabula County transportation manager. “Visibility and road conditions were greatly improved throughout the winter at last year’s site. This provided a much safer roadway to travel during snow events when the winds are high in rural Ashtabula County.”

ODOT officials have formed agreements with local farmers with fields along the susceptible state routes to keep 24 rows of corn in place until April. With the reduction of drifting snow on the roadways due to the corn rows, snowplow drivers can clear their routes faster and more effectively.

The use of cornstalks and other plants as natural snow fences to protect roads has been implemented in both Iowa and Minnesota. The Franklin County Engineer’s office began using corn crops along rural county roadways in 2001.

An honest and frank discussion with Dr. Tom DeCoster

David Rose, Central Office

During February’s strategic planning session, ODOT invited Dr. Tom DeCoster, Professor Emeritus of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University, to discuss organizational culture and its impact on achieving success. It was a candid presentation.

According to DeCoster, creating a sustainable culture can be difficult for public sector organizations such as ODOT. Public agencies are constrained by HR policies and state laws which enable employees to get by with the minimum. Furthermore, this alienating culture produces friction between the majority of hard working employees and the few unproductive employees. This environment makes it difficult for managers to create a leadership culture.

If you don’t believe DeCoster’s assessment, ask yourself this: do you know someone that you would fire?

Great organizations reward and develop their productive employees whilst letting go unproductive employees who damage culture, safety and productivity.

According to DeCoster, until ODOT changes its policies and management feels empowered to discipline unproductive employees, ODOT will never be able to create a sustainable employee-centric culture.
ORDC gains commissioners’ approval on much-anticipated long-term lease

Julie Kaercher, Ohio Rail Development Commission

For more than four years, commissioners and staff have been working with the Ohio Central Railroad, a subsidiary of Genesee and Wyoming Inc., on a long-term lease of the state-owned Panhandle rail line. After much dedicated work from members of the Ohio Rail Development Commission, this lease finally became a reality this month.

The Panhandle line stretches from Columbus (east to Mingo Junction) to just south of Steubenville. Ohio Central has been the operator since the rail line was purchased by the State of Ohio in 1992 to save it from partial abandonment and scrapping.

Ohio Central currently operates the line under a five-year lease agreement, which expires at the end of June 2012. Rather than renewing the agreement under the current terms, ORDC has been pursuing a 25-year lease as a longer-term continuation of a very successful public-private partnership.

“If you take into account the western portion of the then Conrail-owned line was almost torn up in 1992,” observes ORDC Vice-Chair Thomas McOwen, “Then we consider the survival of the line in general to already be a huge success. By taking control of the line, the state has not only saved it, but has enabled the line to thrive, increasing its carload amounts from 13,000 to over 100,000 in the past 20 years. This translates into keeping over 300,000 trucks off state roads annually, avoiding additional wear and early maintenance.”

The lease was unanimously approved by the commission at the March 8 meeting, with nine votes cast in the affirmative. The lease will go into effect July 1 when the current lease expires.

“Both the ORDC and Ohio Central have long anticipated the completion of lease negotiations,” said ORDC Executive Director Matt Dietrich. “We believe we are getting the best deal for the state in terms of monetary return as well as long-term protection of the asset and shipper interests along the line. The railroad also receives the long-term stability desired to make sound investments in line infrastructure.”

Ohio Central 1800 exits a tunnel on the former PRR Panhandle line at the head of a photo freight special during the NRHS 2006 Convention.