

# Hometown Hero

*National Contest  
Renames NASCAR  
Race After Troy  
Farmer, Firefighter*



*Curtiss Shaver holds his favorite memento from the NASCAR race, a model car autographed by Dale Earnhardt Jr.*



*Shaver thought he was just a finalist in the national "Your Hero's Name Here" contest until he was honored in a ceremony at the Troy Fire Department in July. His fellow firefighters rallied around him in front of a banner celebrating his win.*

By Ashley Layson

Troy farmer and firefighter Curtiss Shaver doesn't like being called a hero. Have you ever met an actual hero who did?

However, votes cast all over the United States made him the winner of the "Your Hero's Name Here" contest, and for his prize, Crown Royal renamed this year's Brickyard 400 the Curtiss Shaver 400 at the Brickyard.

So how does a country boy from South Alabama end up with his name on one of the biggest races in NASCAR?

Shaver's path to becoming a hero is unlike any other firefighter's. Many kids dream of becoming a fireman, but Shaver's dream was to be a farmer. That all changed when he was 18.

"I was harvesting corn in my daddy's field, and the feeder housing on the combine kept getting stuck," Shaver recalls. "I had shut the combine off a couple of times, and couldn't figure out what was wrong. The next time, I left the combine on, went onto the header and lifted up the door."

He could see the problem: A bolt was catching. So he slammed the door and stood up to shut

the combine off. What happened next would change his life forever.

“My feet slipped,” Shaver says. “I panicked and tried to scramble up, but the combine grabbed my left leg, pulled it in up to my hip and wrapped it around the auger. I dropped a wrench in the rollers to lock up the header, but the main belt started slipping, and black smoke started boiling up. I thought it was going to catch fire and burn me up.”

Shaver yelled for help, praying hard that someone would hear him. A group of workers from an electric company came to his rescue and shut off the combine before it could catch on fire.

Next, the Troy Fire Department arrived on the scene and tried to extricate him from the combine, but their tools were designed for automobiles and not for farm equipment, which is bigger, heavier and more awkward in rescue situations.

That’s when Shaver met the man he says is the true hero in this story: “A local farm-hand named Malcolm Dickey was driving by and stopped to see if he could help. He went to the farm and got a blow torch, and came back and started cutting the metal to help get me out.”

Shaver was pulled from the combine and flown to Dothan, but in the end he lost part of his leg. For most, this would be a dark time, but not for him.

“When I got my artificial leg, everyone thought I would be depressed,” he says. “I was just happy to be there. I thought I was going to die and had made peace with that. So when I was alive, even with just one leg I was happy.”

Shaver says he was concerned about how this accident would impact his life. He had just finished high school, and all he’d ever wanted to do is the physical job of farming. He persevered and started walking again, and was back to running a combine in two years. But farming was joined by another passion.

“When the firefighters and paramedics came out, I was 100 percent dependent on them,” he says. “That’s when my life path



*Traci and Curtiss Shaver, shown with their youngest daughter, 2-year-old Sophie, have four poultry houses and a corn, cotton, peanut and cattle operation.*

changed. I wanted to be a fireman and help others the way they helped me.”

Shaver signed up for the volunteer fire department and rose from firefighter to assistant chief, then became an emergency medical technician for Haynes Ambulance — all while still managing his farm. He decided to become a full-time firefighter, and applied to the Troy Fire Department.

“It was unheard of to hire a firefighter with an artificial leg,” he says. “Some feared I couldn’t do the job.”

Finally Shaver was given the chance to go through firefighter training in Ozark to see if he could physically do the job. He was determined not to let the department down.

“I gave them everything I had,” he says. “We would run one mile a day and then three miles once a week. I wasn’t the first to finish the drills, but I wasn’t the last, either.”

As a result of his hard work, Shaver was hired as a full-time firefighter.

### **On the Fast Track**

Now an 11-year veteran with the Troy Fire Department, Shaver is a lieutenant paramedic and an inspiration to others.

“You have people counting on you,” he says. “Being trapped like I was, I push

myself and the guys under me a little harder, because I know what it’s like to be that person in a crisis.”

It’s Shaver’s sheer determination that led his firefighting colleague, Lt. Brandy Cox, to nominate him in a 100-word essay for the national “Your Hero’s Name Here” contest.

Shaver’s wife, Traci, recalls the moment she found out.

“Brandy called and told me he had done something that we might not like all that much,” she says. “My mind was swirling with what it could be.

“He told me he’d nominated Curtiss for the contest, and said the folks from Crown Royal had selected him as a top-five finalist. I couldn’t believe it!”

Crown Royal representatives visited each finalist’s hometown, and posted videos of their stories on YouTube and Facebook to let the public decide who was most deserving of the title.

Shaver’s family was told there would be a ceremony at the Troy Fire Department honoring him as a finalist. More than 400 people had been nominated, and the NASCAR fan says he already felt like a winner when he found out that the finalists would get to go to the race.

He was nearly speechless to see 200 attendees and a 17-foot banner unfurled from a ladder truck: “Crown Royal presents the Curtiss Shaver 400 at the Brickyard, powered by BigMachineRecords.com.” Country music star Justin Moore made a surprise visit and performed “Till My Last Day” and his No. 1 hit “Small Town USA.” Indianapolis Motor Speedway President and CEO Jeff Belskus was on hand to unveil a ceremonial Yard of Bricks, recognizing Shaver as the contest winner.

### Doing Good Is Its Own Reward

On July 29, Shaver attended his first ever NASCAR race. The honor finally sank in when he and Traci were about to turn into the Indianapolis Motor Speedway track and saw signs everywhere and a huge Jumbotron with his name on it.

As part of the grand prize, Shaver got the ultimate NASCAR experience. He and Traci rode in the pre-race pace car and hung out on pit row with the drivers. He was interviewed by local and national media, delivered a trophy bearing his name to race winner Jimmy Johnston in Victory Lane, and kissed the speedway’s famous bricks after the race. He also met country superstars The Band Perry, The Mavericks, Justin Moore and Greg Bates during concerts honoring him throughout the weekend. His most memorable moment was meeting his favorite NASCAR driver, Dale Earnhardt Jr.

He talks about what stands out now that the pomp and circumstance has died down.

“If you dream it, it can happen,” he says. “I don’t believe I’ve done anything special, but if you work hard and do a good job with what you do, no matter what it is, you can be happy and successful.”

He says a lot of people think he wishes he’d never been in the accident on the combine.

“I don’t look at it that way at all,” he says. “I love who I am and where I am in my life. I’m so blessed.”

And about being called a hero?

“I think heroes are people like Malcolm Dickey, who came to help me the day



*Injured in a farm accident as a teenager, Shaver has trained his fellow firefighters about farm safety and made sure they’re better equipped for rescues.*

of my accident,” he says. “He could have driven on by and said, ‘The fire department has it under control.’

“It’s my job to help people. Malcolm did it because it was the right thing to do.”

### A Love of Farming

Now 37, Shaver looks back on his years since the accident half a lifetime ago.

Early on, he learned lessons in the ups and downs of the weather and profits. He says he was in limbo trying to figure out where he fit in the farming world when the opportunity arose to purchase some breeder houses. He has built four chicken houses, and now runs a successful farming operation of corn, cotton, peanuts and cattle.

“I am doing what I wanted to do,” he says. “There’s nothing better than watching something grow. Unless you’re a farmer, you can’t fully understand.

“You’re a part of it, but just a part. You do what you think is best, but the Good Lord has to give you rain. You have so little control, but at the end of the day if you’re gathering a good crop, it is such a good feeling. Even though you’ll make a little money off of it, it’s more than that. There’s a huge sense of pride in having a good flock of chickens.”

Shaver credits Alabama Ag Credit for helping him become the farmer he always wanted to be.

“I’ve had a great relationship with Alabama Ag Credit, and really enjoyed working with Lee Hughes in the Dothan office,” he says. “Every year he works with me, and if there’s any leftover money, we talk about using it to do improvements. It’s been a good experience.”

Shaver says being a farmer and a firefighter has made him more aware of farm safety. His advice to other farmers is to slow down.

“You get so wrapped up in trying to get done, to beat the clock, to beat the rain, to hurry up and get to the next thing,” he says. “But in farming, you never get caught up. It’s impossible. So you have to slow down and do it safely.”

The most common farming accidents are tractor rollovers and entanglements in machinery, he says, and he’s trained several firefighters about farm safety. He has also added equipment, and recently applied for two grants to purchase more devices to stabilize farm machinery during rescues.

He says the Troy Fire Department has come a long way since his accident, but his goal is for it to be the safest and best department in the country.

“I love being a farmer and I love being a firefighter. I’m blessed,” he says.

It’s this attitude and unwavering determination that makes Curtiss Shaver our hometown hero.

Want to learn more about Curtiss Shaver and his national award? Watch the following YouTube video clip: [bit.ly/cshaver-alaagcredit1](http://bit.ly/cshaver-alaagcredit1)