

THE ACCIDENTAL TOWWE

Story Dave McLeod
Photos Gerald Shacklock &
Southern Districts Towing

International 9800 is one of Southern Districts Towing's heavy duty flagships. The unit, with an underlift and an extendable boom, is rated up to a 60-tonne GVM





Above: Pam Watson has come through the awful traumatic times heading SDT and says she and the company are both now in a good place

Below: Pam and Evan, around 2005. He died four years later



WHEN AUCKLAND TOWTRUCK BUSINESS OWNER

Evan Watson died 11 years ago, for wife Pam things could hardly have been worse.

In two harrowing years she'd seen him slowly, inexorably lose his battle with cancer.

Now she was facing, alone, the fight of her life – forced to push aside her grief and focus everything on saving their business.

It demanded the 47-year-old step up from her past role looking after the admin side of Southern Districts Towing, to fully take over running the whole show.

The challenges of being a woman boss in the male-dominated towing industry scarcely rated – not compared to what else she was confronted with.

The rent on SDT's sprawling Manukau City base was an eye-watering figure per year...and while Evan had been terminally ill, the towing industry, the country – in fact, the whole world – had plunged into a recession, thanks to the Global Financial Crisis.

Thirty people either employed or contracted by SDT were depending on her. Not only that: If she walked away from the crippling lease, she'd lose the business...and her home as well!

So there was, as she says firmly, no other option: "You dig in and get on with it!"

So here she is now looking back on 30 years in Southern Districts Towing – the last 11 of them as an accidental towie (or, more correctly, transport operator).

She'd never wanted to get involved in Evan's business: It was simply what he did...while she did her own things.

Back in 1990 the young entrepreneur already had her own business – a little seamstress shop (or "sweatshop," she says with a laugh), making women's fashion clothing. She'd started that when the 1987 US sharemarket crash brought an end to her



career in real estate.

And, at 28, she was looking at starting a little alternative medicines health clinic – “which was my passion” – when boyfriend (soon to be husband) Evan asked her to help him with the admin side of SDT...which he'd owned for about eight years.

“The office administrator had walked out. I got thrown in the deep end....but Evan said ‘you’ve got to help me out. Can you just come in here for a couple of weeks until I can find someone to take over?’

“Well, two weeks turned into two months, then three years, then five...” And now three decades – sadly the last 11 years without Evan.

Back when Pam started working fulltime in the business, SDT ran to three or four trucks – all V8-engined one-tonners that were typical of those times. The business had started in 1978, with Evan taking it over in '82.

SDT had struggled along, working out of what Pam reckons was “a horrible little dive” in Papatoetoe – kept alive, as often as not, by the panelbeating shop down the road that Evan also owned.

As she soon found out: “It wasn't being run very well. There was never any money. It was terrible, stressful – because I had to process the wages and every week the drivers would ask: ‘Is it alright to cash my cheque today?’

“Unlike the previous pay clerk, I never prepped a cheque for them unless there were funds. There's nothing worse than standing in a bank queue, then to be told: ‘Sorry - no clear funds.’ That's how bad it was.”

Things looked fairly bleak for the business until SDT won a contract to tow and store vehicles impounded by the Police in the South Auckland region: The work dramatically grew the business – to the extent that its existing premises were soon too small to accommodate the number of impounded and/or stored vehicles.

“It got bigger and bigger and bigger. We just ballooned – so we had to find more storage space. I think at one time we had three buildings to house all these cars. We were just inundated with work – it was flat tack all the time.”

Hard on the heels of this development, Southern Districts also picked up a much bigger police contract for the district, in 1997. It obtained a heavy-duty MC Mack towtruck from the previous contractor – Papakura Workshop & Salvage – and began its involvement in towing heavy trucks and buses.

The Watsons, who'd married in the early 1990s, had also started another business, selling vehicles by tender on behalf of insurance companies – as well as selling off impound vehicles they'd been left with.

And so the business continued to flourish – prompting SDT's expansion into a bigger building in nearby Wiri.

A decade on, with SDT up to 20 fulltime drivers and the same number of company trucks, plus four or five owner-drivers, Evan believed the time was right to commit to leasing an even bigger building down the road – to accommodate the ever-growing demand for storage on behalf of insurance companies and Police impounds.

The annual rent was “astronomical” and Pam was worried about it....but, based on their workload at the time, it did seem to make sense: “It was a huge site – maybe 20,000 square metres – but it was full most of the time. And we had an inhouse workshop there too.”

But soon after the move something way, way outside the Watsons' control – namely a slump in the US housing market – triggered the GFC....soon seeing NZ plunge into a recession.

It was a worrying time....that quickly got much, much darker for the Watsons: Evan got sick.

He'd been suffering persistent back pain – and a series of doctors and specialists consulted were unable to find out why.... until a kidney specialist came up with a grim diagnosis: He had multiple myeloma and, at best, might have five years to live.

The next two years plunged the couple into the world of chemotherapy, fading strength, hope-inspiring bounces... each one sadly followed by another setback: “It just kept coming back aggressively and he got weaker and weaker.”

On a “good day” Evan would go into work for a few hours “to keep an eye on things.” In between looking after him, Pam would work maybe three days a week.

She says appreciatively: “We had staff in place to keep things running. I had competent managers – they were very, very good. And you know, the guys were really good – they knew the drill... what they had to be doing.”

After a two-year battle, Evan died in July 2009. Aside from having to deal with the emotional side of the loss Pam was now thrust into running the business on her own – and all that entailed.

“It was really stressful. You don't get much sleep, that's for sure. I had to weigh up the pros and cons of where we were at, because we were in the middle of a recession too.”

The business was on a knife-edge: Not only were the company's overheads huge, the drivers were worried...and, understandably, SDT's contracted customers “were asking ‘what's going to happen?’ ” Was she going to sell?

That, says Pam, simply “wasn't an option: I had a big mortgage (on their home) and I would have had to pay four years' worth of rent that was personally guaranteed. So there's a million dollars over there, there's two million over there.... I really had to work it out.

“To walk away from my lease I would have lost my home. And



Ten-year-old Mack Trident, fitted with American-built Jerr-Dan boom and underlift, tows a truck claimed by fire



Top: The heavy-duty vehicle towtrucks work all around the greater Auckland region...and beyond, if necessary

Above: Lay-flat deck on FUSO Canter is specifically for low-riding saloons or sportscars...or motorcycles

Right: Allan Hearn has brought a lifetime involvement in the towing, roadside assistance and car insurance industries to his current role as SDT's operations and business manager

the business. Everything.”

Being fiscally shrewd – “unlike my husband...he was a spender” – Pam started cutting away parts of the business that were leaking more money. And, she says, there were a lot.

She sold the panelbeating side of the business and set about rationalising the equipment and vehicles the company owned – because some of the fleet “was getting tired and old and I wondered how I was going to maintain it. Sometimes I don’t know how the bloody hell I did it. But I did it.”

Of course, she does actually remember exactly how she and key staff members, supported by her close friends, did it: A lot of hard work, for one. And they got “creative.”

Pam gives an example: “We had this crappy Hiab. We had to replace it because it was just shocking...a bucket! But we couldn’t afford to. So me and two friends (one a builder, one a jack of all trades) took the Hiab off the old truck in the yard, bought a (much better) cab/chassis and built a new deck.

“It was hard, backbreaking work – but, rather than having to

pay somebody, we built this big timber-frame deck.”

With help she also “bought smart” – for instance, buying a truck with a refrigerated body at auction, removing the body and selling it...and then installing existing towing equipment on it. The result? A much newer truck...that cost almost nothing.

There were many other money-saving ventures like that: “It was about having the smarts and no money – but needing to move forward.”

She had meetings with the staff to let them know her plan was to keep the business going as best she could: “Because it’s their jobs, their livelihood – and I felt obligated, because they all had families.”

By then, many of the towtruck drivers were subcontractors, “so if they didn’t get the work, they didn’t get paid.” The recession meant less work, which made it particularly hard on them – and some left, which saw the SDT fleet contract a little.

Understandably, the “unrest” extended to Southern District’s customers too. At the time of Evan’s death, Allan Hearn – now



Scania 400 10x4 Hiab unit, capable of lifting up to 12 tonnes close in, recovers a wreck

SDT's business and operations manager – was working as a manager for one of the company's big customers, the First Assistance roadside assistance network.

He recalls: "I was asked (when Evan died) 'what's it (SDT) going to be like now?' I said 'there'll be no difference. It'll be exactly the same, if not better,' because I had the confidence."

Says Pam: "The Police asked the same question and we said 'no it's fine, we'll carry on.' We had to dig our heels in and carry on regardless of what people were saying about us."

SDT's landlord gave her rental holidays, which helped....but also saw the company at one stage owing \$250,000 in back rent! "Just so we could make it through to the next month – and the next month. Yeah, it was very, very stressful."

She does smile though at one memory: "Everybody laughed at me when I bought two (light-duty) Hyundais. It was a matter of finding cheaper ways of replacing some of our equipment because some of it was so old!

"I tell you what, I still have those trucks...and they have paid for themselves over and over and over. They're cheap to run – great for our little breakdowns."

For four or five years after Evan's death, the business was "a struggle that whole time. You know, God knows how we survived it. But we did!"

For sure, she says, the recovery wasn't entirely down to her efforts – it also needed the economy to pick up for Southern District's financial health to recover....and it did.

And for those who stayed – staff and contractors – returning confidence saw the company's work snowball once again.

Pam's next target was getting rid of the massive rental overhead: That, she says, was another "big challenge – because I had to bide my time trying to get out of that lease. I had to work

through it."

The aim was for SDT to buy its own place – something much more modest, with easy access to Auckland's motorways. As the end of the lease (in 2014) neared, she found the right place – in nearby Takanini.

"I went to the bank that I'd been with for 20 years and said 'look, we obviously have the ability to pay huge rent – what can you do for me?' They were crap – didn't want to know.

"And so we went to another bank and then they had me sorted in two weeks. I topped up the mortgage and they lent me 100% of the finance for this place."

SDT moved into its current home six years ago – the move "a big boost....and it helped the growth of the business." In fact, she adds, "if we hadn't moved we would have died. So this was the best move ever."

SDT's Takanini base covers 8000 square metres – which sounds like plenty....but the company is now also leasing another 3000 square metre building across the road.

Pam explains: "October last year we were so full we just couldn't fit anything else in. So we took a short-term lease across the road – and now we've had it for nearly a year."

The company's major clients now include First Assistance, the Counties Manukau Police District, the IAG insurance group, the AA and many more.

To service them, SDT now has 30 staff and 22 trucks – most of them medium-duty and light-duty towtrucks...a mix of slide-deck transporters and cradle trucks, with underlifts.

The slide-deck units are headed by four late-model UD Condors (6x4s and 4x2s) and a variety of other makes, including three FUSO Canters.

Says Allan Hearn: "We've got another smaller one that lays flat



All pictures, clockwise from top left: A youthful Evan Watson does a parade lap on the roof of his Holden Kingswood saloon at Auckland's Waikaraka Park speedway in the early 1970s. He was a successful, well-known racer back in the '70s and '80s.....an SDT slide deck unit, part of an alliance of towtruck companies contracted to recover vehicles on Auckland's motorways, picks up a car impounded by Police.... old Mack UltraLiner was retired a few years ago, its towing gear transferred to the Inter 9800....the SDT fleet in 2019



on the ground – for low-slung cars and motorcycles. The whole deck comes off and lays flat.”

The cradle trucks – “little ones with underlifts” – are, he says, “good for little salvages and for getting vehicles out of tight spots. And for towaways. But they’re also good if you lose your keys: You can pick up the whole vehicle and nothing makes contact with the truck.”

Again, they’re a mixed bag in terms of makes and models – including Hyundais and a Hino.

The flagships of the blue and white-painted SDT fleet are its four heavy-duty units. There’s a 2012 International 9800 Eagle 8x4 towtruck with a Miller Century boom-lift (which was recycled from an old Mack UltraLiner that simply wore out), and a 2010 Mack Trident 8x4 with a Jerr-Dan boom-lift. Both of them are dedicated to heavy vehicle towing and salvage/crash recovery work.

Each has an underlift, giving a low boom height and a long reach. In addition to their over-booms they have twin winches and they’re capable of dealing with trucks and buses – even the odd boat, motor home, house truck or caravan – weighing up to 50 tonnes.

A Mack Vision tractor unit, which tows a low-loader, often works with them, as Allan explains: “If you get a cab that’s been in a rollover we can pull that up onto the trailer.”

There’s also a ’97 Scania 400 8x4 flatdeck with a Hiab crane, that’s used for salvage operations and for serious crashes. As Allan points out: “Everything in a serious crash has always got to be lifted – you’ve got to maintain the evidence. We can lift up to 12-tonne.”

Repairs and maintenance on the fleet are carried out by local business, Roger Moore Mechanical. They are “brilliant,” Allan reckons.

Although SDT’s focus is on its Counties Manukau home district, its trucks work all over Auckland...and sometimes further afield: “If we have a client or customer that wants their car delivered to Hamilton, Wellington, whatever, we’ll do it,” says Allan.

In terms of competition, the Auckland towtruck scene is busy – Pam estimating that there are about 50 companies in the Auckland Tow Roster consortium (which manages the accident roster for the Police, across Auckland).

Most of them are pretty versatile, doing salvages, accidents, Police work, panelbeating shop jobs, breakdowns and moving vehicles from workshop to workshop.

Says Pam: “I guess some companies specialise in different areas to others, depending on the size of the business and what sort of equipment they have. Not every company does towaway or heavy vehicle.” SDT does the lot.

Mostly SDT’s trucks are dealing with light vehicles (up to five tonnes). Unsurprisingly (given that there are way fewer heavy trucks and buses on the roads), the heavy-duty towtrucks and salvage units are not as busy.

About 90% of the company’s work is for the Police, insurance companies and the crash repair trade. The Police work includes the recovery of stolen vehicles, picking-up vehicle impounds, vehicles used in serious crimes and those involved in serious crashes.

Allan explains that the insurance companies’ powerful influence on the towtruck industry has driven an increasing level of professionalism – especially in these days of strict health and safety regulations. SDT, for instance, now has one staff member devoted fulltime to H&S.

Pam adds: “Our overheads are quite huge. Insurances, health and safety, equipment – it’s not a standard truck you put on the road. It’s \$160,000 to put a transport slide deck on the road....

and then some. And then you’ve got the bigger ones, the heavy haulage units – they can be anything up to half a million dollars. It’s not cheap. So don’t moan about the price when you get towed!”

Hefty though these costs of business are, Pam and Allan don’t complain too much about them – because they reinforce the much more professional approach that the towtruck industry is committed to....and which its major customers demand.

Says Allan: “No-one wants to associate themselves with cowboys. The professionalism is coming into it like you wouldn’t believe. Even if you go to the wop-wops in the South Island, you’ll get a guy with a towtruck come out in uniform. It has come a long way.

“There is still a certain amount of that stigma there – but a lot of it now is unwarranted. There are some cowboys still about, but slowly, slowly they’re disappearing.”

He says the industry is now more attractive to drivers – evidenced by SDT constantly taking phone calls from drivers wanting jobs. The only problem is, they’re looking to drive the light or medium-duty trucks – and there is still a shortage of heavy-duty towing and salvage operators.

“There just aren’t any,” he says, and adds: “You have to train them from the ground up.”

Another problem for SDT and other Auckland towtruck operators is the challenge of working around the city’s worsening traffic congestion. The time it takes for trucks to get to jobs – including vehicles crashed or broken down in potentially dangerous (or disruptive) situations – has escalated dramatically in recent years, Pam says.

“Whereas before we’ve had ETAs for the Police of about 20 minutes, that’s now stretched out to at least 30-40 minutes. And for every minute a crashed car is stuck on the motorway in a live



Top: UD slide-deck unit has an 11-tonne rating

Above, left: Usually SDT is working with the Police...but this time it's a patrol car that also needs recovering

Above, right: The fleet is versatile...and features a variety of truck makes

lane, the congestion increases by three kilometres – it can back up so quickly.”

Sometimes it’s possible for a towtruck to get to a crash or breakdown scene with a Police escort through heavy traffic – but that can be a nerve-wracking ride for the towtruck drivers: “If the gap gets too wide between the truck and the Police, people pull out in between them....and you’ve got to slam on the brakes. It can cause a few nervous moments.”

Male dominated though the towing industry is, Pam doesn’t believe that’s held her back: “I think it depends on your attitude.” She reckons that mostly people in the industry treat her as “just the head of a towing company – although sometimes I do roll my eyes and feel like people are only just saying that because I’m a female.

“Sometimes people just want to appease you to your face – and then go away and say something else. And that’s annoying because all you’re trying to do is run your business, and run it the best that you can – just like anybody else.”

Allan says he’s seen competitors treat the SDT boss differently

because she’s a woman – “whereas they wouldn’t try it if she was a guy. Some have a misguided sense of her weakness – and then find out to the contrary!”

From the time of Evan’s death until about a year ago, Pam headed up SDT virtually single-handedly. The challenges of that and the workload involved took an accumulating toll.

As she says, with spectacular understatement: “It wasn’t always easy.”

And about three years ago she was so busy, so focused on the business that it suddenly hit her: “I thought ‘I’m done now!’ And I actually I went through a phase of ‘I can’t do this anymore – I can’t do this on my own!’ ”

She did hire additional help – but it didn’t work out. She tried again...with the same result. She adds a heartfelt: “Staffing can be really hard – finding the right fit.”

And then she hired Allan – who came with prior knowledge of the company and the Watsons, as he explains: “I was with SDT before for a couple of years, then I did some other things for five years...and now I’ve come home.”



All pictures, clockwise from this page, top: Three SDT units at an accident scene. The 8x4 Isuzu slide-back deck unit has the light truck on board, the Inter has a tractor unit and the Mack is recovering the trailer...light-duty Hino underlift unit can, by fitting a dollie under the towed vehicle's rear wheels, recover vehicles without having access to them....the Inter swaps its usual highway environment for Auckland International Airport - to recover an airline catering truck....old MC Mack was SDT's first heavy-duty towtruck....the Hiab flatdeck unit is invaluable in recovering crashed vehicles while maintaining their condition for possible ongoing investigations....Hiab can also aid tricky vehicle recovery

He started off in towing as a “young fella” in Australia and has had various positions within the transport industry, including a management role with First Assistance, working for another towing company and operating as an independent insurance assessor.

“Pam and myself have a good relationship, even though she’s my boss. She’s a friend as well and has been for 20-odd years, so that has segued into something pretty cool.”

Pam agrees: “I think the timing was right.” The experience he’s gained in his years away from SDT are now proving invaluable to the business.

And, she adds: “With Allan here I can have some time out and know that things are going to be taken care of, as there’s that trust and bond there. So now I work just three days a week.

“I’m always in control financially, but the other aspects of the business I don’t need to fill my head up with. I know it’s going to get dealt with.”

Pam reckons that after all the tough years, SDT is in a good place these days. It’s evolved from being something that she had to fight

desperately for, in order to keep it alive...into a thriving business. One that’s at a stage where she’s able to guide it to where she wants it to be. From a job she “had” to do...to one she “wants” to do.

“Yeah, it’s a comfortable place now. I used to get stressed-out all the time, but I’m not now. I’ve got the business to a point where we can make choices: Now we’re looking into a better environment for the drivers and staff, health insurance and training for the drivers.... that sort of thing.”

She’s also hellbent on changing public perceptions of the towing business. She believes that towing is a service industry that doesn’t deserve any more to be frowned upon or dumped on: “The industry has changed from the one-man-band cowboy, to where we’re assisting people in their time of need. We’re not called unless we’re needed.

“Our work is such a variety of different things – from attending serious crashes and serious crimes – like picking up cars when the streets are lined with Police with guns at the ready...

“To when you’re broken down on the side of the road, it’s four

degrees outside, you’ve got two kids in the car – and your heater’s not going!

“To get people off the motorway quickly we’ll pull a truck off another job or sometimes we’ll send the ute out and load up the family and get them off. We’ll go the extra mile. It’s about looking after people. And we don’t charge extra for that – it’s a need that has to be done.”

Allan chips in to add his belief that the towing industry has come so far – “it’s not a boogeyman industry anymore.

“Especially from our perspective: We’re a business to assist. And that’s what we do, no matter where it is.”

Southern Districts Towing has achieved so much in its 42-year lifespan...but where to from here?

Pam: “There are opportunities to get a lot of work, but what we want to do is stick to what we’re doing but with more efficiency and more service, because that’s what the customers want. Good service – and quick.

“You can get too big sometimes and your service starts dropping

off and you start losing customers. We don’t want to take over the towing world – just be the best we can be, with what we’ve got in our area.”

The recent history of Southern Districts Towing is something of a triumph over adversity – against all odds, almost. Pam reckons: “It’s been a whirlwind. Evan has been gone 12 years in June and it’s like, ‘where did the time go?’ I’m pretty proud of what I’ve achieved from then till now – I think I’ve done exceptionally well.

“I don’t have any academic qualifications or anything. It’s all been hands-on, on the fly. I’ve been running on gut feel.

“Wanting to succeed and be successful – that’s always the driving force. And to prove everybody wrong. Because the comments before were ‘I wonder what she’s going to do. Sell up and move on?’ Evan built this and Evan did that....”

Mention that with all that she’s been through, with what she’s achieved in this industry with its tough-guy image, Pam’s record as an operator suggests she may be more ballsy than many guys in the business...and she smiles: “Yeah, I’ve been told that.” **TD**