

WALKING THE TALK

Young driver Chris Rose models what it's like to find a fulfilling career in trucking



By Lacey Thacker
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It's a warm, sunny morning at the Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce, one of the locations where the Be Pro, Be Proud unit can be found when not at high schools around the state.

The trailer makes an impressive sight, its stage folded out, custom-painted exterior shining, and its sign mounted from the top edge. Recently, the Be Pro, Be Proud trailer was parked at the Clinton Library for an economic educator's meeting. People from all around the country toured the trailer, and as a result, groundwork is now being laid for the program to become multistate, and hopefully, nationwide.

One of the gentlemen waiting for visitors is Christopher Rose, the twenty-five-year-old operator of the travelling display designed to educate high school

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CHRIS ROSE, BE PRO BE PROUD DRIVER

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students about the many skilled trade careers available in Arkansas.

Rose is a quiet man who uses an economy of movement, speaking only with words and not with his hands, though he occasionally tips his head down slightly when making a point. That trait doesn't stop him from smiling when he talks about how he got into trucking. Rose grew up in Heth,

Ark., where he spent a lot of time with his grandfather, whom he credits with teaching him to both drive and love driving.

"He taught me what I know. I probably drive better backward than I do forward because of him. He'd tell me, 'Those mirrors are on the vehicle for a





Chris Rose (left) demonstrates welding skills at one of the trailer's interactive stations

reason.' Anytime I'd go to turn to look over my shoulder, he'd slap me on the back of the head and tell me to use my mirrors. He's probably the reason I'm as good a driver as I am today." His grandfather, who was an experienced farm hand, made it his goal to ensure Rose could drive all equipment from tractors to grain trucks from an early age. His grandfather's motivation and his concern for Rose's future fueled Rose's passion for professional driving.

But it took a little time for Rose to turn that passion into a career. After graduating high school, Chris worked a few minimum wage jobs with no firm plan for the future. That all changed when he met his wife, Crystal. She was living in Mountain View at the time, where he frequently went on weekends to enjoy the outdoors and the various festivals the area offers. They ran into each other, started talking, and things went from there. They've been in the Jonesboro area since they married. While Chris is often away from home during the week, he counts himself lucky he's never more than five hours from home. That's particularly important since the couple has a five-year-old son. Their son, Axel, thinks he's a cowboy—he's even a member of the Arkansas Junior Rodeo Association.

Rose spends most weekends with his wife supporting their son at rodeos around the state, but in the summer, you'll find the whole family fishing as often as possible. In the fall, hunting is their hobby of choice. As Rose put it, "We're very outdoorsy."

DREAMS OF DRIVING

Rose credits his wife and growing family with lighting a fire under him to pursue bigger dreams. "I decided one day, I'm just going to get a CDL. I love to drive, I'm good at what I do, so why not make money doing it?" After getting his CDL, he quickly upgraded to a Class A with every endorsement available. He went to work in construction sites, working for Razorback Concrete driving a concrete mixer. Though the truck is shorter than a typical rig, it carries about the same amount of weight, making maneuvering particularly complex.

But Rose loves a good challenge, so the daily task of getting in and out of tight, muddy construction sites was right up his alley. That experience prepared him well for a situation he considers one of the most harrowing of his career. "We were coming back from Mississippi, crossing the bridge at Helena, where the speed limit is some-

where between 60 and 70. We were running the pace of traffic and all of a sudden traffic just locked up on the bridge. I had a short distance to get the unit stopped. I got it stopped, but it was..." he paused, "well, it'd put you on the edge of your seat."

Early last year, Rose received a call from Robert Summers, the dean of applied science at ASU Newport, where Rose's wife is also employed. Summers had heard about the Be Pro, Be Proud opportunity and immediately thought of Rose.

Initially, the position was temporary, a three-day run to Mississippi, where the Delta Regional Authority was having a private showing. At the time, Chris was preparing for an over the road trucking job. His plan was to come down, take the three-day job, then continue with his original plans. Things didn't go quite how he intended though—they went better.

Scott Callaway, who works the display with Rose, knew from the moment he first spoke with Rose that this was the person he wanted for the permanent Be Pro, Be Proud job. Callaway notes that Rose is the consummate professional, wise beyond his years. "He's not just a guy with a CDL. Chris knows how to drive. And, he's a pleasure to be with every day. When I talked to him on the phone when we were first trying to figure out who was going to do this, he answered some questions I knew would either stump him or he'd get right. I called the Chamber and said, that's the guy. You need to hire him." The rest is history. Now, Chris spends most of his days talking with high school students about the dozen jobs that Be Pro, Be Proud provides information on including truck driver and diesel mechanic.

WALKING THE TALK

The Be Pro, Be Proud initiative began just last spring, and in its first year, it welcomed about 10,000 students, a number that will likely increase



this year. The trailer travels all around the state, usually to high schools, but it can sometimes be found at other locations for workforce events like community career fairs. Rose usually parks the trailer at its destination the evening before an event, and then he'll show up the next morning, along with Callaway, at 7:30 a.m. It takes about an hour and a half to set the stage for the tours. An actual stage unfolds from the side of the trailer, while technology in the truck must be removed from its secure storage and set for use.

Students come through in groups of about twenty, with roughly 125 to 150 students coming through the trailer per day. After the students' contact information is captured on tablets, so a single follow-up email can be sent, they are led through the stations in the trailer. First, there's a demonstration of the Be Pro, Be Proud website, an extremely usable platform offering information on job descriptions, employers hiring in the area, income potential, and, arguably most important, where to find training, how long that training will last, and how much the investment will be. Finally, the students are led through various simulations, such as a plumbing game, a hand-eye coordination exercise, and a welding simulator—which Rose always runs.

Rose notes that the students get quite competitive while playing with the simulations in the trailer, but it's competition that helps them get excited about the career possibilities. Of course, as one would expect with high school students, they're not always totally focused on the serious aspects of career selection. One group of students recently requested a loan from Rose—a loan of the trailer for a party. He, of course, denied their request. His easy-going nature combined with the fact he's "walking the talk" makes him seem accessible to students, who usually have many questions about the career possibilities presented.

Rose is an ideal representative; his passion is obvious for skilled trade and what employment in any one of the industries featured on the trailer can

offer someone. While many kids have been raised thinking a college degree was the only option, once they get on the trailer, they realize how many other choices they have. "Kids just wanna know how long and how much. A lot of kids these days are doing work after school for minimum wage. You start throwing numbers out there about how much they can make in these professions, and their eyes just light up." And it's not just male students visiting the trailer, though that's certainly been a majority. Rose is quick to point out that none of these careers are gender specific; they're for any willing party. After



all, "Nothing says a woman can't be a truck driver, and nothing says a woman can't be a welder."

Parent response, too, has been positive. While they may have been encouraging their kids to attend college, often it's because they themselves weren't aware of the viability of other options. Once parents experience the tour, they realize these jobs don't have the negative connotation they may have originally thought. "It used to be, trade jobs were thought to be for people who weren't smart enough for school. That is a statement that just should never have been said. Everybody's got their own thing they're good at. If you're the best welder in the state, it sure doesn't mean you're not smart."

And the program has already proven beneficial for student retention. In the roughly hour-long program, Rose hears many of the same questions and comments from different groups of stu-

dents, but he recently heard something truly exciting: the tour had convinced one student to stay in school. A repeat senior toured the unit and shared that he was considering dropping out of school. "He came on the truck and he was very good at the welding simulation. He ended up telling the principal that he was going to stay in school, get his diploma, and then he was going to go become a welder."

Students are interested in Rose's story. He's young enough that high school students can imagine being his age, and they're often curious to know how he got into his role, as it gives them

a sense of where they could be in just a few short years. "I'm in a stable situation at a fairly young age. Ultimately my CDL is the main reason I got this job, which students like to know." From there, Chris makes sure to let them know his CDL—and strong skills—were ultimately the reasons he was selected. He goes as far as to suggest the students consider getting a CDL even if it's not necessary in their primary career. "Companies close, places lay off, and if you have a CDL you're guaranteed employment the next day."

Rose hopes to continue with the program and advance as it expands, with intentions to be there as long as they'll keep him.

But as Rose reminded the students, with his set of skills and a CDL, there will always be positions driving a truck in Arkansas or around the country and this is a career where you won't soon run out of road. **TR**