Ms. Plow

Driving a snowplow, according to Kathy Daniels, isn't as hard as you'd think.







by Samantha Tisdel Wright photos courtesy CDOT

"It's like driving a car; it's just bigger," she says. And the weird thing is, to hear her say it, you'd almost believe her.

Seated comfortably at the wooden picnic table inside Ouray's CDOT (Colorado Department of Transportation) maintenance barn at the base of the Million Dollar Highway, the quiet-spoken Daniels is as unassuming as the equipment around her is impressive.

Two massive 4x4 Mack plows with 12-foot blades hibernate like bears in the open bay. It is late October and they've only been called into service once so far this fall. "But it could start dumping any time," Daniels sighs.

Off in the corner lurks "The 105," a howitzer used to hurl explosive projectiles at avalanche paths.

"It's my big gun," Daniels grins. It's a rare moment — this casual little nod to the sheer coolness of what she has done for a living for the past 22 years.

Daniels, who for the past four years has been CDOT's "M2" in charge of the stretch of Highway 550 from the top of Red Mountain Pass to Ouray Hot Springs pool, started her snowplowing career as a temp in Silverton in 1985.

She had moved to Silverton in 1977, doing "...what everyone did in Silverton to survive back then — " a mish-mash of waiting tables, running the mill in Howardsville, driving an ore truck, and working underground at the Buffalo Boy. "Any time you work at a mine or a mill, you've got some equipment you've got to run," she explains.

This experience laid the groundwork for her to become the first woman plower on Red Mountain Pass and Molas Pass. She learned her craft from hard-core veteran Silverton plow drivers, Gary King, Brad Perkins and Paul Wilson.

"From the top of Red to the top of Molas, that's where I got broke in," she says. That stretch of Highway 550, incidentally, just happens to be the most avalanche-prone of any highway, anywhere, in the continental United States.

During her tenure in Silverton, Daniels pretty much single-handedly raised daughters Skylar and Emily while caretaking the Buffalo Boy lower tramhouse, located deep within Cunningham Gulch to the north of Silverton.

"It was a cool place to be, but it was a lot of work," she recalls. "Between the slides, and the shoveling, and the nights I had to spend in town because I couldn't get home because of the slides. I remember one time it snowed so hard, the snow was almost up to your head and it was blowing straight at you. All the slides, along the north face and south face of Cunningham Gulch, came in."

Once, Daniels' husband and daughters were snowed in for a week. "I had to rent cross-country skis in town and ski home," she laughs.

Living in this extreme location, avalanches became a familiar thing. "Open your window and whzz — you might get powdered by airborn debris!" Daniels recalls. "You hear them all the time. It's almost like entertainment out there in the spring. We'd go skiing in the early morning and then sit out there in the lawn chairs and watch them. They sound like waterfalls."

Still, even having lived and worked amongst avalanches for much of her life, Daniels admits to "the pucker factor" — a term coined by her friend and Silverton avalanche forecaster Jerry Roberts — that she gets from time to time up there on the pass.

"There's occasionally that day, when you're out there by yourself, and you just know... if it keeps snowing, it's just a matter of time..."

Avalanches aren't the only pucker-inducing factor, either. "Probably one of my least favorite spots is Ruby Walls,"

Daniels says. “It’s the narrow road, the drop-off, and the big rock fall. That and the people driving right up the middle of the road, straddling center line. Plus, there are some drainage problems in there that you just can’t fix. That and the icicles; I knew a plow driver who had an icicle come right through the roof of his truck.”

These dangers simply go with the territory. But since the Riverside Slide tragically took the life of snowplow driver Eddy Imel in 1992, CDOT has revised key policies, placing the lives of plow drivers squarely in the forefront.

Highway closures are much more common now than they used to be. “It’s for all of our own safety,” Daniels explains. “550 isn’t going to be kept open at all costs.” Avalanche mitigation is practiced exhaustively with the aid of the Avalauncher and the 105, especially at the Mother Cline, the Riverside, and the Blue Point slides. Communication among plow drivers has improved with the installation of a new solar and propane-powered radio repeater on the top of Red Mountain 3. Winters, too, have become noticably milder in recent years.

“Those big changes make it easier on your heart, at a gut level,” Daniels says. “The dangers are not gone, but they’re way minimized.”



Making it there

Winters in Colorado, and especially in high country such as Ouray County, offer outdoor enthusiasts unparalleled opportunities. Unfortunately, they also bring driving challenges unlike anything most experience in other areas — and, if you’re not careful, it’s about the worst way to get a gulch named after you.

The best way to prevent treacherous winter travel is to avoid it, staying informed about the current weather and road conditions as well as the latest weather forecasts.

If you should become stranded during a winter storm, stay with your vehicle and do not panic. Run the motor every hour for about ten minutes to maintain warmth, but keep windows open a little to prevent the buildup of carbon monoxide.

U.S. Highway 550 south of Ouray is the most avalanche-prone road in the lower 48, with 56 slide paths. Though conditions on Red Mountain Pass are closely monitored by Silverton avalanche forecasters, who don’t hesitate to close the highway if conditions warrant, motorists should nonetheless utilize extreme caution.

Remember that 4-wheel *drive* does not mean 4-wheel *stop*. A 4-wheel drive vehicle will not stop any better in icy conditions.

Don’t go exploring without some local knowledge, especially during a storm or when one is bearing down.

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