

Garbage truck driver does more than simply pick up the trash

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SANDY — Ricky Burr's true nature isn't apparent in his rhetoric — the industrious man speaks dispassionately, answering questions in short but direct sentences, all the while maintaining an easy-going smile.

It isn't in his attire, either. Donning heavy blue coveralls, a bright yellow safety vest and a red baseball hat, Burr goes through the daily grind of collecting garbage accompanied by only the blaring of a two-way radio and the crooning of country music on the radio.

Rather, Burr's compassion and conscientious attitude are manifest when he jumps out of his Waste Management truck into dirty snow drifts, all to right a garbage can or to listen to neighborhood gossip and check on the elderly residents along his route.

Burr says he's just doing the job: hauling trash as safely and quickly as possible. But the six-and-a-half-year garbage man puts up with regular discomfort that comes from the constant shaking of his truck.

"My back feels the jolting about Wednesday," he said. "It's part of the job."

Burr has also become accustomed to the monotony of his job, even turning down opportunities for advancement so he can continue to drive through the neighborhoods.

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"It's not bad at all," he said during a recent drive near 110000 South and 100 East. "I've had lots of chances to move up, but I wanted to stay. ... It's more gratifying to be able to see the people."

Burr is one of the employees Waste Management calls its "wastewatch heroes." Garbage men (or women) have a unique opportunity to know what neighborhoods normally look like, so they can easily see when something's amiss, said Susan Hayward, Waste Management community programs manager. It's like neighborhood watch, but a step beyond. One that doesn't take any extra resources.

Garbage truck drivers also keep watch on the landfill, keeping it free of harmful toxins or threats such as the diseased bodies of dead animals.

Burr's cab is equipped with a series of mirrors that allow him to see all the way to the back of his massive truck. He's also aided by two video cameras, mounted to show side and rear views.

Burr is proud to be accident-free for six years, but says he can be even safer if customers don't overfill their cans and put them far from cars and trees.

One of 10 trash and recycling truck drivers in Sandy, Burr is responsible for 1,426 homes, he said. That equals seven to 10 tons daily, with each receptacle containing about 50 pounds of trash.

Overall, Waste Management hauls 2,350 tons of trash per day from the 25 Utah cities it serves. It also collects about 239 tons of recycling and is always trying to do more.

Working with municipalities, businesses and homeowners, "Our goal is to provide trouble-free, convenient recycling for everybody," Hayward said.