

# THE TOWMAN Of The YEAR

## American Towman and Tow Woman of The Year Blaze Industry Trail in Texas

by Henri "Doc" Calitri

**A** definition of a leader is one who guides or is a directing head. Some people are born to lead, while others are influenced by events and thrust into that role.

Whichever way you look at it, Dan and Joann Messina have become leaders in the towing industry whether they planned on it or not. Chaotic events regarding mandatory certification of tow operators by the State of Texas has thrust this couple front and center. Not only have they accepted the responsibility, they have embraced it.

The Messina's, married for 14 years, are operators for the last five years of their own Southwest Auto Tow in Dallas, a non-consent private tow business that employs 40 people and maintains 14 tow vehicles on an 18-acre property in an industrial area of the city. They have more than 900 customers within a 50-mile radius of Dallas.

Since August of 2007, they have been trying to build a new Texas towing trade association and taking on the responsibility for making it easier for towers to secure their licenses to operate. Their motivation is quite simple: "We just wanted to do the

right thing for other towers in our state," Dan Messina says.

To date they have held certification testing for an astounding 5,500 towers around the nation's second largest state. They have seen the membership in their Southwest Tow Operators organization grow to more than 566 members, the largest by far in Texas (there are three other smaller groups), making it perhaps the largest state tow association in the country.

They have organized a grass roots program with one purpose in mind: to help Texas towers understand the new laws that have required non-consent towers to be certified and licensed in Texas (consent towers only need to be licensed) and help them be tested at an affordable cost in convenient locations.

It all started somewhat quietly two years ago when Dan attended a membership meeting of a state towing organization and walked out of the meeting, disturbed at the direction of the group and its leadership. He remembers climbing into their SUV with Joann and saying, "I think we have to organize a new group. This one's dying and going nowhere." Joann nodded in agreement, not

quite knowing what those words would ultimately mean.

In a short time, they met with some other disgruntled tow business owners who felt Dan's frustrations. After meeting one night in Dallas, they decided on a name and their mission. Southwest Tow Operators was born. "All we wanted to do was to provide information and training to towers."

Soon a logo was designed and a mailing sent to every tower in the state informing them of this new group. Dan originally thought hundreds would sign up without much fanfare. Joann was a little more cautious. "While Dan thought several hundred would sign up, I thought maybe a hundred was more realistic."

A total of 40 companies signed up at the group's exhibit booth at Tow Expo Int'l in San Antonio in spite of the brisk floor traffic in the hall. It was August 2007. Dan was a little dismayed by the low number of new members. "I was somewhat surprised since I thought we had promoted our position and the needs of towers in the state." He admits that he became a little more conservative in his predictions after that.

Dan and Joann traveled around the state holding meetings with towers over a period of six months. Another 40 or so companies joined, still hundreds short of their original goal. The costs of all the mailings, printing, postage, and travel were coming out of their pockets. "I felt very committed personally to get this organization off the ground," he adds.

While they were crisscrossing the state, something was brewing in Austin, the state capital, which would change their fortunes and catapult the new SWTOP into the state limelight.

There was a bill before the state legislature that was going to require all non-consent towers and incident management recovery operators to be certified and licensed in order to do business in the Lone Star State. The test that was to be used as the certification test was the T.R.A.A. test that had been around for years. The local state affiliate of T.R.A.A. would be the sole administrator of the test. The Messinas were concerned about the new bill.

"We went to Austin and spoke before the committee considering the bill. It resulted in allowing other tests to be included as long as they passed certain established criteria. That criteria would be approved by an advisory board made up of towers and others," explains Joann. The state's lawmakers ultimately passed the bill and the Texas Dept. of Licensing and Regulation (TDLR) was put in charge of the licensing program.

Joann made herself available to be named to the advisory group along with several other towers and she was appointed to a 6-year term. The Messinas then went to work on writing a test that they submitted to TDLR, which was approved last March. "We sent out a new mailing to all the state's towers informing them of this new law and its ramifications and effects on towing businesses throughout Texas. We announced a meeting and test dates at the Tow Expo Int'l show in San Antonio last April. We didn't know what to expect but we knew the towers were all up in



**Thousands of Texas tow operators proudly wear the above patch.**

arms and didn't know what the heck was going on."

"Many feared they would be put out of business while others were just downright angry," Joann says. Dan held a meeting for all towers to attend just prior to the show's opening and by the end of the weekend, membership in the group had jumped to over 200 companies. Testing was conducted over two days and more than 300 towers took the first mandatory test ever administered in Texas.

When the Messinas got back to their office the following week, their phones were ringing off the hook. "Towers from every corner of the state wanted to know about this bill, what it meant to them and how they could be tested. We knew we had to organize quickly," claims Dan. In a short period of time, several membership meetings were held in various locations, monitors set up as proctors to administer the test at 60 different sites around the state, and mailings were sent out again to the entire database of towers extolling the need to be tested."

With a deadline of Sept. 1 established by law that all towers had to be certified and licensed, it didn't leave much time for some 15,000 plus tow operators and their drivers to meet the state requirement. The Messinas and the SWTOP moved as quickly as a 24-hour day allowed. "Here we were swamped with calls every day, organizing tests throughout the state, reserving rooms for the testing, signing up the proctors and running our

towing business as well," Joann says.

It was exhilarating, and tiring as well. "We knew we were doing something to help our fellow towers in Texas. It was obvious that they needed help and we were there, ready and willing and able to help them," Dan says.

It almost cost him his wife. Joann, 51, came down with a bad case of pneumonia in April and finally had to be hospitalized in May. It took her some time to recuperate so Dan and the SWTOP board added three new staffers to handle the onslaught of phone calls, requests for testing, and new membership applications. A new 6-room office had to be rented to give them all more room to administer the program which was now an all-consuming full time job.

Dan, 60, knew he couldn't do it all as the head of the group and run his company so one of the board members, Jess Horton from San Antonio, agreed to leave his tow business and become full time executive director of the group this past Sept. 1.

From their business careers at EDS, the computer services giant headquartered in Dallas, Dan and Joann Messina have risen from the rubble of chaos and uncertainty in the aftermath of the new controversial Texas law to a position where they are recognized, at least in Texas, as people who have stepped up to the plate and made a difference.

They have already received calls from other parts of the country to help state organizations face the licensing problem head on. "This is going to happen all over the country eventually. I can see it coming. We as an industry have to be there to respond to the situation as it arises and do what we can to organize properly. It will make for a healthier industry eventually," Dan states.

For their contribution to the towing industry, we salute Dan and Joann Messina, the first couple to win Towmen of the Year honors, or perhaps more correctly stated, American Tow(o)man of the Year. 