

# Man of the Mountain

Mark Robinson's epic effort on behalf of the victims of an inevitable horror.



At 7:38 on a weekday morning—a time that lives in infamy at the foot of Avon Mountain—Mark Robinson and I stood in a parking lot and watched as the endless caravan of commuters headed east toward Hartford, climbing one of the state's most treacherous roadways. The mountain portion of Route 44 has been the scene of hundreds of accidents over the years. And it was the most horrific of these—actually, an inevitability—that turned Robinson into a man on a mission.

For a moment, however, he settled on a pleasant memory. Pointing across to the Avon Old Farms Inn, he said, "That's where Chris and I had our wedding reception." This was on a perfect summer day in 2004. A year later, on another perfect summer day, Robinson took his turn in the eastern caravan, and waited at the traffic light where Routes 44 and 10 intersect. He was thinking of the usual, his duties as a director of internal communications for ING. It did not occur to him—how could it?—that those duties quickly would become inconsequential.

For at that moment a 70,000-pound weapon was headed toward him at 80 mph. The driver of a Mack dump truck, fully loaded with 25 tons of fill—and poorly maintained by the company that owned it—was in a pan-

ic, unable to brake or to control the vehicle.

The cataclysm that resulted at the foot of the mountain was something that Robinson cannot describe because he does not remember it. He has no recollection of the demolished cars to his left or his right or behind, or the Kelley Transit commuter bus in which the driver's neck was broken. Or the plumes of smoke and explosions, and the death that lay all around him. Or that the driver of the Mack truck, mortally wounded himself, issued screams so bloodcurdling that they are still remembered today by people who were in the vicinity. Robinson was unaware as well that Kyle Caruso, a 21-year-old maintenance manager from the Avon Old Farms Hotel, had run to the burning scene, dug through the debris, and pulled him from his Mercury Cougar to safety.

He does not remember the accident. But when told about it, he knew instantly how to respond. He would write a book about the families affected and the "angels" who came to the rescue.

It was only hours later, while being treated at Hartford Hospital for six broken ribs, a punctured lung and other significant injuries, that Robinson heard the details of the crash from his wife. She was reluctant at first to tell him about the four immediate deaths. Or that 19 others had been injured. When she told him about Caruso's courageous act and the heroic efforts of many other rescue workers, he knew instantly how to respond.

Though he worked in the financial-services industry, he also retained journalistic instincts honed as a reporter and editor years

earlier on small newspapers in western Connecticut. He would write a book, he decided, about the families affected and about the "angels" who came to the rescue. Proceeds would go into a victim-relief fund.

As the hours passed, the need for such a fund became more apparent. The company that owned the out-of-control Mack truck, with the eerie name of American Crushing & Recycling, had canceled its liability insurance, though evidence later showed it tried desperately to reinstate that policy in the minutes following the accident.

There was far more, however, to the story. David Wilcox, the company's owner, had received more than 1,000 citations—safety violations of his 12-truck fleet. And yet the state of Connecticut, during that period, had also awarded him \$1.6 million in contracts. The state's involvement, actually, went further.

Though it was Wilcox who now faced felony charges, including insurance fraud, he had an enabler. In 1993, the legislature opened a stunning legal loophole: A law that required insurance companies to notify DMV if ordinary drivers dropped their liability coverage did not require commercial trucking companies to do the same. It was obviously a gift to the trucking lobby. (After the crash, the loophole was closed.)

All these circumstances collided, Robinson knew, in what would make the story of a lifetime. What he didn't know is how much of a lifetime it would take him to report, write and produce such a book.

From the very first, there was this question: From whose point of view would the story be told? The obvious choice was his own. But so many families had been affected by the crash, and so many angels had appeared from nowhere to do what they could to save lives.

By a stroke of destiny, Robinson happened to be in Washington, D.C., at the behest of ING, where the guest speaker was the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin. She took an interest in his project and agreed that he should pursue the story from several points

of view—the only way to do justice to such a complex and poignant drama.

By doing that, he could portray the victims, and particularly those who died, as real people, not merely names in a newspaper account. For on their last morning, Barbara Bongiovanni, Maureen Edlund, Chip Stotler and the Mack driver, Abdulraheem Naafi, had had every reason to believe that life would continue, with its aspirations, its joys, even its heartbreaks.

In striving for authenticity, the author knew he couldn't merely portray the victims as perfect and the perpetrator as a man who had no redeeming qualities, even if it seemed to be so. Did David Wilcox ever coach a Little League team, for example? But on the advice of his lawyer the defendant, charged with a variety of felonies, wasn't talking—not even making a serious apology.

Also, the business of publishing is complicated. The author never considered submitting the manuscript to a traditional publisher. If he did, it would take a healthy dose of any profits, and the profits, he felt, should go to the families. So the only answer was self-publishing. But how would it be funded?

More angels appeared—including his employer, ING. Even so, instead of taking the anticipated year to produce the book, nearly four years passed. But because it did, *Smoke, Fire & Angels*, as it is titled, was able to include the final disposition in the criminal case against David Wilcox. As Judge David P. Gold pronounced a six-year sentence for insurance fraud, second-degree manslaughter and first-degree assault, he said to the defendant, "You made a series of intentional and volitional choices that joined together to cause this perfect storm that led to the Route 44 disaster."

At \$20 for each paperback copy, *Smoke, Fire & Angels* has the potential of raising a substantial sum for the families of the victims, and early results are encouraging. At the Borders bookstore in Simsbury one recent week, it ranked third in sales—just behind the recent releases by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy and Dan Brown.

It may never sell much beyond the local area, but if it does, many will gain rare insight into what can happen at the crossroads of criminal neglect and heroism.

There is some very good writing here—fueled by instinct, talent and passion. Robinson describes the arriving angels this way: "They came from the north, south, east and west. They came from above. They came in fire trucks, police cars, ambulances and helicopters. They came with the latest in training and equipment. They came with nothing but their bare hands and humanity."

But thanks to Mark Robinson's effort, their deeds will live on, and inspire others.

For information about book signings, etc., visit [smokefireandangels.com](http://smokefireandangels.com).