

Dale Virts, a Mechanical Department carman and safety champion at Montana Rail Link, is the recipient of the 2007 American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association Safety Person of the Year award.

“I’m very honored and overwhelmed to be singled out for this award,” said Virts, 50. “It’s the second-greatest honor I’ve ever had—the first was when my future wife agreed to marry me.”

A panel made up of representatives from railroads, labor, shippers and suppliers selected Virts from a field of entries submitted by ASLRRA member railroads.

Railroading is in his blood. Virts’ father worked for the Northern Pacific and retired in 1982. Virts followed in his footsteps when he signed on with the Burlington Northern as a carman apprentice. He joined Missoula, Mont.-based MRL in 1988 as a carman and since that time has quietly gone about making his railroad a safer place to work. He has served as a member of the MRL safety audit team for the last 12 years and has been a Safety Committee member and leader since 1991. He was elected to several two-year terms as Safety Committee vice chairman.

Virts typically works a 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. schedule (although he puts in extra hours for some safety and volunteer activities), and conducts daily and weekly employee safety briefings. Each quarter, MRL conducts system-wide SAFE Days (Safety Assessment of Fellow Employees). He is a driving force at those exercises orchestrating safety audit teams and coordinating employee barbeques that provide an opportunity for safety talks. “I’m an official barbecuer,” Virts says. During those round-the-clock feeds, it is not uncommon to see Virts work more than 16 hours to ensure that all functions are adequately planned, according to his supervisors.

MRL President Thomas J. Walsh credits Virts with playing a part in MRL’s improving long-term safety record. “He leads by example. His enthusiasm and honesty inspire others around him and demonstrates the spirit of the Montana Rail Link safety culture.”

Some of Virts’ most-rewarding work has come as a mentor to newly hired employees and apprentices on such things as track awareness and safety policy/procedures. His orientation starts with basic advice like look both ways before crossing railroad tracks and involves lining them up with appropriate safety gear.

“I tell them that MRL’s first priority is that you go home every day with all your parts and pieces,” Virts adds.

Virts noted that the safety culture of the railroad industry has changed dramatically during his tenure. “The industry used to have a just do it, get it done attitude and a punitive approach for reporting safety problems. Today, things are much more cooperative.”

The physical demands of the job have changed as well. “When I first came into the industry, you worked your back a lot harder. Today, many of those manual functions are handled with machinery and lift trucks,” he notes. In addition, MRL and other railroads have committed to programs like flex and stretch—an exercise routine designed to warm up workers’ backs and necks at the beginning of each work shift to help reduce employee injuries.

Virts is proud of the role he has played in improving air quality on the property. “Years ago, our shop was full of smoke and carbon,” he said. Since then, the company has purchased several Smoke Eaters to draw up welding smoke and taken other steps to reduce the carbon. He estimates that he has been instrumental in the railroad’s purchase of about \$80,000 worth of items to improve safety.

Virts organizes yard clean-up programs at MRL to boost facility appeal and eliminate tripping hazards; maintains yard ATV routes and crossings for carmen, and helps to run periodic hazardous materials spill drills.

Virts volunteers frequently for MRL-related activities (like the MRL Santa Train) and for charities such as United Way, Special Olympics, the American Heart Association and the American Diabetes Foundation. He also rebuilds bikes for needy children through a program called Free Bikes Missoula.

He credits fellow MRL employee Dennis Meyer for serving as a mentor. “He’s so dedicated to charities ... he inspires me.”

Virts’ passion for safety extends well beyond the MRL property to all aspects of his personal life. He admits that his commitment to safety has grown over time. “It used to be that I would just stumble through things at home. Today, I’m much more aware.”

For instance, when he is working in the garage on a project with his four grandchildren, the first order of business is putting on safety glasses. When he noted that the woman delivering his newspaper in the neighborhood was difficult to see in the dark, he gave her some spare safety equipment so that she’d be more visible.

For Virts, those things just come naturally because he lives and breathes safety. “I hope people don’t think I’m going overboard,” he adds.