



When Bennett Motor Express driver Charles "Big C" Pressley said "I do," little did he know he'd be afforded so many first-time opportunities. But what else could be expected after agreeing to drive a mobile hotel room on a nationwide tour?

Even Pressley was impressed when he first saw the rig.

"Aw, man, this is going to be something," Pressley said, after seeing the trailer and being told he was going to drive the rolling room. "This is the most unique and fun haul I've ever had, and the people at La Quinta are the easiest and nicest people I've ever had the pleasure to work for."

The room, part of La Quinta Inns & Suites' national tour to tout its room refurbishments, is identical to what would be found at any La Quinta Inn around the country – with a few exceptions, of course.

Like any other room, the road room has a standard king-size bed, fully functional lights and television, a recliner, table, desk, dresser, sink, bathroom and even a coffee-maker. However, the sink and bathroom aren't functional (let's be reasonable here).

To keep things from sliding around inside during transport, most of the lighter

objects are fastened down. The table, chairs and desk are all fastened, via motorcycle straps, to the bed, which, Pressley adamantly expressed, he didn't sleep in. The bed is bolted to the floor of the trailer. The television is wrapped in padding and strapped into the closet, and smaller objects – like lamps and the coffee-maker – are padded and stored in the drawers of the dresser. These precautions aren't needed at normal La Quinta Inns, but this is not exactly normal.

A built-in generator between the tractor and trailer powers everything, including the hydraulic leveling system and retractable bell tower which, when extended, reaches a height of 18 feet. The entire apparatus takes Pressley and his wife, Carolyn, about 30 minutes to set up or break down.

The entire rig tops out at 26 tons, "minus 300 pounds for the driver," Pressley quipped. He is referring to his stature, which is how he got the nickname "Big C," with his first name being Charles and he being "bigger than most folks."

It was Big C's spotless, 2.5 million-mile, accident-free record that qualified him to drive this massive mobile room. Usually, Pressley hauls general freight for

Big C's Big Haul

Bennett, McDonough Ga., having just been taken off a dedicated run hauling baked goods from Columbus, Ga., to Kansas City, Mo., a run that he'd had for 12 years.

While, more than likely, it was Pressley's record that afforded him the La Quinta opportunity, he maintains it was being at the right place at the right time.

"(Bennett) only has about five company drivers and probably a thousand owner operators," Pressley said. "I was just in the office one day and they asked me if I wanted to drive this thing."

But Pressley got more than he bargained for.

To coincide with the tour, La Quinta launched a series of commercials centered

around its 30,001st room. And guess who appears in six of the eight commercials? Yep, Big C.

"(The TV crew) actually started putting all these lights up in the cab of the truck, and I was starting to get afraid that they were going to blind me while I was driving," Pressley said. "But, amazingly, I couldn't really tell that the lights were on.

"It was actually quite funny, and there were times when I had to keep myself from busting out laughing, because the cameraman was in the passenger seat and the director, sound guy and lights guy were all back in the sleeper," Pressley said.

He never gave much thought to the whole thing until, while at one of the tour



stops, a girl came up to him and asked for his autograph. "I was embarrassed a little bit at first, but after that first one, I started getting used to it. The whole TV thing is funny. Every time I see myself I say, 'Dang, look at that big fella,'" Pressley joked.

Aside from the glitz and glamour of TV, Big C said he has enjoyed getting to different parts of the country that he and his wife haven't been to before and, basically, getting back to the roots of trucking.

"Probably one of the best things about this tour is where it takes you," Pressley admitted. "Carolyn and I finally got to go to Las Vegas and see the Strip at night; that was a beautiful thing. And, finally, after 37 years of trucking and wanting to see San Diego, I

finally got to go there.

"But it's also the small towns that I go to, like I did back when I started driving, that you normally wouldn't go to today," he continued. "Usually, I try to stick close to the interstate, but going through these towns, I've discovered that people are as friendly as they were 37 years ago. I guess you could say it has renewed my faith in people."

Driving the La Quinta truck can have its pitfalls for the unwary, mainly low tree limbs and tight places to maneuver an oversized rig – the second of the two being the worst and a relative first for him.

Pressley got into a tight squeeze in New Orleans, where it took him almost 45 minutes to get turned around and exit a parking lot.



Big C's Big Haul

"At one point, I was right at the door to the Hard Rock Cafe. If someone had opened the door, the nose of the truck would've been inside," Pressley remembered. "When I finally did get turned around, I heard this applause go up outside. A sweaty mess by this time, I got out of the truck and saw that there had been a crowd of people gathered around watching me maneuver."

A big NASCAR and Bill Elliot fan, Pressley spends what free time he has following racing. He actually gets the chance to participate in Winston Cup and Busch Series events held at Atlanta Motor Speedway – in a truck-driving sort of way. Ben-



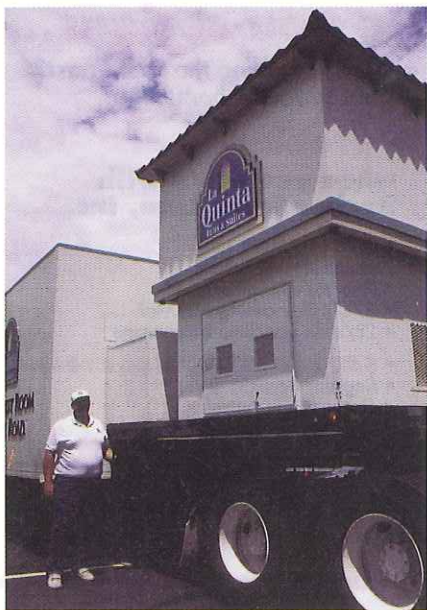
At times, Pressley doubles as a sales rep, showing what La Quinta rooms have to offer.

nett supplies the flatbed, which Pressley drives to the speedway, that serves as the drivers' platform before the race. Then, just before the start of the race, he pulls out in front of the pace car, around the track and out a side entrance. Things usually run smoothly, but Big C remembered a time when things deviated from the norm.

"Everything went as usual, but when it came time for me to pull through the side gate, it was closed," Pressley said. "So I'm told to go around again and to drop down on the bottom of the track and go as fast as I can. After the second time around, the gate was still closed, so I was told to pull into the infield, which I did, just as all the cars came flying by me. My brother-in-law, who was riding with me, looked at me and said, 'Well, I guess we led the first lap,'" Pressley said, laughing.

Despite the TV commercials, auto-graphs and hoopla surrounding the La Quinta tour, though, and not factoring in his flawless driving record, Pressley feels honored to have such a job.

"I've been driving a truck for 37 years and gotten to do a lot of neat things, but I think I'm really lucky that I've had the opportunity to do this and work with the people that I have." ●■■■■



The bell tower on the 30,001st room can be raised and lowered to reach legal height restrictions.