

FIREFIGHTER GETS A BRAKE

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SAVES 5 | Chases, stops runaway SUV after it was struck by big rig

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Chicago firefighter Mike Hill couldn't believe what he was seeing Friday morning on the South Side as an 18-wheeler broadsided an SUV with three kids inside.

Hill was driving Truck Company 24's rig, coming back from a house fire, when the big rig blew a red light at 103rd and Cottage Grove and slammed into the Chevy Tahoe — right in front of Hill and the other firefighters in the truck.

"It seemed surreal. Just like in the movies. It was almost like you see it happening, and you want to stop it but you can't stop it," said Hill, 45. "It was a very strong hit as well."

It got more surreal, however, when the smashed Tahoe, with all of the passengers inside injured, began to take off. The driver's foot was jammed against the gas pedal.

Hill got out of the fire truck and ran after the SUV. About 60 feet down the street, he caught up.

"He actually ran this car down,"



"It seemed surreal," firefighter Mike Hill (left) said Friday of his encounter with a runaway SUV. With him are (from left) Gene Taylor, Keith Griffith, Stephen Young and Deputy District Chief Anthony King. | BRIAN JACKSON-SUN-TIMES

said fire Capt. Rich Gustafson, Hill's supervisor. "He stepped on the running board, and he was actually riding along on the side. He reached in, and the gal was slumped over on the console, uttering, 'Oh my god!' It was quick thinking and actions on his part."

Hill, a 22-year veteran with six kids and some martial-arts train-

ing, said firefighter instincts kicked in.

"I jumped into the moving SUV, the door was wide open," he said. "I jumped onto the emergency brake and held on until it slowed down."

It was the emergency foot brake, near the floor of the driver's side, that Hill slammed down with his hand to stop the Tahoe.

"With an accident of that nature, you're not sure if it's going to work, but you have to try," said Hill, who then tried to calm down the "hysterical" driver with the help of a bystander.

The 18-wheeler had crushed the passenger side of the Tahoe, pinning in the woman in the front passenger seat. Firefighters rescued

the driver and the kids, and then used the Jaws of Life to remove the woman in the front.

She was listed in critical condition at Advocate Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn. The driver and the three kids were taken to the hospital in serious condition, Fire Department spokesman Larry Langford said.

The women in the front seats both had on seat belts, and the kids were properly restrained, Hill said. That "proved imperative" in saving their lives, he said.

The 10:30 a.m. crash happened just after the light at 103rd and Cottage Grove turned green. The southbound Tahoe pulled into the intersection, but the fire truck, which was next to the Tahoe at the light, lagged behind.

Then Hill saw the eastbound 18-wheeler. It was "coming through as if it had a green light," he said.

The driver of the semi, Jason Werking, 27, of Indiana, was not hurt. He was cited with failure to stop at a red light, police said.

Gustafson had nothing but praise for Hill.

"He did a very nice job. He's a man of few words. He lets his actions speak for him," he said.

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