

TRYING TO TOW THE LINE

Foes threaten legit auto biz

BY JAKE PEARSON

DEATH threats. Firebombs. Muggings.

It's just another day at the office for Gil Velez, owner of Gil's Collision Services, a towing and auto repair shop in East New York.

"I'm a legitimate business out here," said Velez, 48, who this month, while repairing a rooftop air conditioner at his shop, discovered three bottles full of a mysterious liquid with rags stuffed in their necks.

"They were Molotov cocktails. . . They're trying to take away my livelihood," he said.

Fire marshals collected the bottles and are investigating the incident.

But for Velez, the apparent firebombing attempt by unknown persons is just one of the many dangers associated with his work in this part of Brooklyn, where scores of illegal tow trucks rush to accident scenes, and some angry thugs look for payback after their cars are removed from crime scenes.

"People out there are cracking heads, trying to get cars," said Velez, who has been in business for 13 years and runs a fleet of eight trucks. "I'm here [in East New York] for 48 years, and I'm not going anywhere."

By Velez's estimate, there



Gil Velez, owner of Gil's Collision Services in East New York, has gotten death threats from illegal towing businesses. Photo by James Monroe Adams 4th

are at least a dozen bootleg tow-truck companies in East New York roaming the streets listening to police scanners for a Code 53, the police signal for a car accident.

The bootleggers aren't registered with the Consumer Affairs Department, and usually don't have proper insurance or certification, but rush to accidents — and intimidate licensed tow truck drivers, such as those who work for Velez,

keeping them from hooking up the damaged cars.

"They're jealous of me," said Velez, who runs one of four legitimate tow companies in the area that are members of the NYPD Direct Accident Response Program (DARP), a database of legitimate tow truck companies police call after accidents.

"It gets me targeted, because if there's an illegal tow truck company there and I show up, by law he has to leave the scene."

But rarely do they leave quietly.

Years ago, a furious illegal tow driver dropped his truck's boom and rammed into Velez's truck at an accident scene, smashing it in the side before driving to Velez's office and firing gunshots at two more trucks.

Last week, in the middle of the night, vandals spray-painted "Die" and "We're gonna kill you" on the wall of his Liberty Ave. shop.

And one day last month, at 2:30 in the morning, one of Velez's drivers was assaulted and threatened after an angry car owner erupted as his ride was removed from a crime scene.

"It's crazy out here," said Velez, who has moved to Forest Hills, Queens, but still considers himself a Brooklyn guy. "They're trying to send me a message, but I'm not scared."

Teen dancers leap over obstacles on way to Scotland festival



Dancewave Company members practice their moves. The Park Slope teen troupe won a slot to perform at a dance festival in Scotland and had to raise \$40,000 to pay for the trip. Photo by Thomas Rawe

BY BEN CHAPMAN

THEY'VE GOT rhythm — and tenacity.

A teen dance troupe from Park Slope has overcome financial trouble and theft, and now is finally on its way to perform at a prestigious dance festival in Scotland.

"We paid for this with our blood and sweat," said Diane Jacobowitz, director of Dancewave Company, which has a studio on Fourth Ave. "We never gave up."

The 15-member modern dance company won a slot last October to perform at the prestigious Aberdeen International Youth Festival — the only American group invited to perform.

The only hitch was that the troupe had to pay its own way to the event, which runs from July 28 through Aug. 7 and is expected to attract 30,000 people.

Dancewave needed to raise \$40,000 to pay for the trip — no mean feat, especially since about half of the company's dancers come from low-income families.

"Some of our dancers have never left the country," said Jacobowitz. "These are kids who would not normally have a chance to see Scotland."

The plucky dancers asked family and friends for

help, held benefit performances and even pooled their baby-sitting earnings to fund the trip.

Then disaster hit: In January, a phony travel agent ripped them off for almost \$9,000.

"That was the most hardheaded thing imaginable," said Jacobowitz. "Things got very dark for a while."

But the dancers kept rehearsing and kept trying to raise money. In March, Nick Kotsonis, owner of Slope Health & Fitness, read about the troupe's difficulties in the Daily News and donated \$10,000 to help them pay for the trip.

A month later, Dancewave's fortunes improved yet again after the group recovered the stolen money with the help of Brooklyn attorney Jay Itkowitz, who took their case pro bono.

"That's when we knew we'd make it to Scotland," said Kelly Rodriguez, 16, of East New York. "We hung in there and made it through."

The troupe leaves a week from today, and its members are making final preparations, packing their bags and double-checking their passports.

With the dancers' goal so near, the struggles they faced getting to this point no longer seem so bad.

"All in all, it's been a positive lesson," said Nola Smith, 18, of Park Slope. "If you're trying to do something good in the world, people are going to help you out."