

# Driven to Drive



by Zach Foster

*It started when I turned 16 last summer. I was ready to do what a lot of my friends were doing: drive.*

I talked my mom into enrolling me in an online training course at drivers-ed.com. The course covered the basic car parts, traffic signs, regulations, and everything else I needed to know to satisfy the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) course requirement. I enjoyed it because I could learn the rules of the road at home, in the comfort of my bathrobe. Mom said I was lazy. I say I was playing it smart. I guess it's a matter of perspective. It was definitely more educational than playing Grand Theft Auto.

Next, it was time to actually get behind the wheel. It took several weeks to find a "behind-the-wheel" school, because many California schools aren't designed to serve students with disabilities. Mom finally found the California Driving School. For safety's sake, they have two of everything in the car (steering wheels, brakes, etc.) so the instructor can take over if necessary. I was already used to this. My Mom has an extra steering wheel and brake pedal in her car too, but only she can see them.

My instructor, Troy, was very laid back and explained everything clearly. Near the end of my first session, as I drove around, I pointed out a restaurant called Kosmos. "Would you like to get a couple

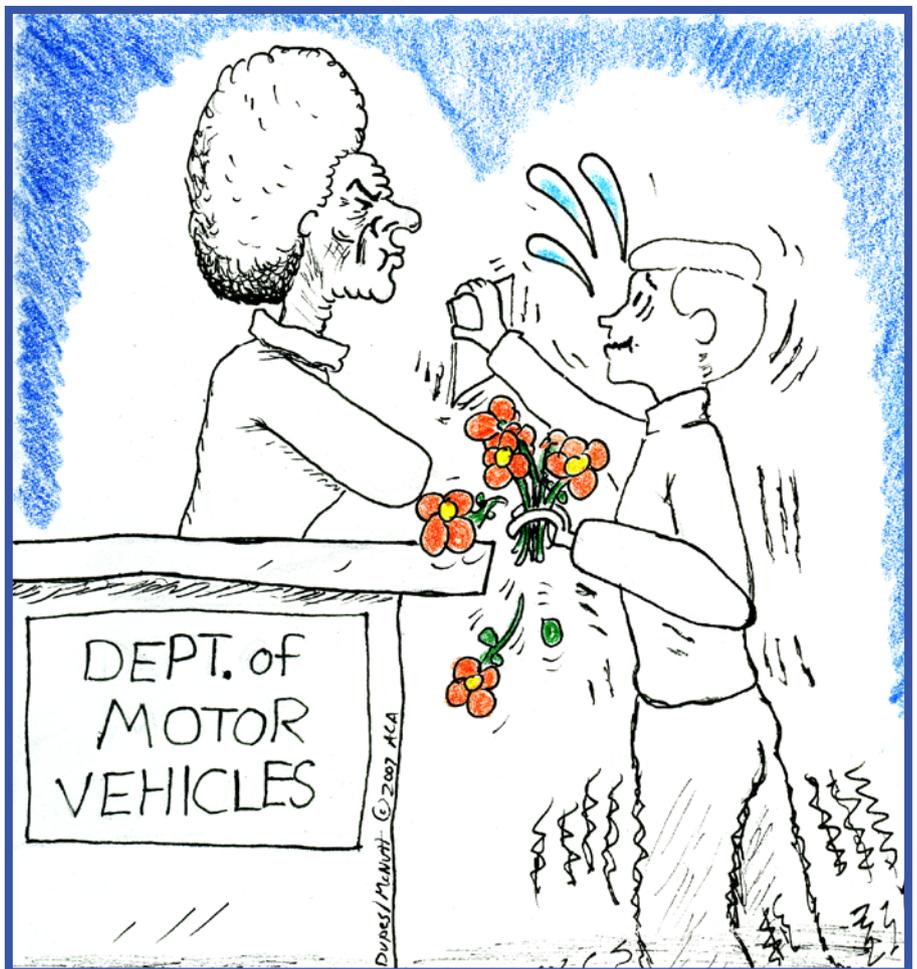
of shakes?" he suggested. "I'll treat." So went my first official drive-in experience. Something about being behind the wheel made my drink taste even better.

Things started going downhill when it was time for my third lesson. According to Troy's supervisor, my student license was invalid because I was a special case, and I didn't have my learner's permit yet. My "special" status was a liability issue for the school. I had to get my learner's permit before anything else could be done.

Troy was ready to help. We drove to the DMV at warp speed, arriving at 4 p.m., and immediately switched from panic mode to a slow-motion conga line. We got to the counter at 4:15, where we were given a number and told to wait for it to come up.

It was here that I conceived Foster's Theory of Relative Pain. Franklin had his kite. Newton had his apple. Me? I had a number. Here's how it works: The number they give you corresponds to the size and urgency of your problem. The bigger the number, the bigger the problem, and the longer you have to wait. I also discovered a fascinating inverse relationship between number size and the helpfulness of government employees.

My number came up at 4:26. I placed the paperwork before the forbidding woman behind the counter as Troy requested a permit test. Dragon Lady shook her head. No tests after 4:30.



"But it's 4:27," Troy said, pointing at her clock.

"No, it's 4:30," she said confidently, without even bothering to glance at the clock for verification. She folded her hands together and gave me the creepy, serene smile of someone who routinely gets away with changing the laws of physics, like a malevolent Mona Lisa.

The next week, my mom took me to the DMV so early that they couldn't possibly deny my permit test. But karma manages. Apparently, along with my ID and certificate of course completion, Dragon Lady needed proof of enrollment in a driving school. I began to wonder if I had seriously wronged this woman in a former life, and now it was my fate to be punished by her in some eternal vendetta.

As my mom drove me home, my shoulder angels popped up for a little pep talk. My angelic alter ego, Zach Lite, said, "Hang in there, buddy. If at first you don't succeed, try, try again!"

"Yeah, great philosophy, Captain Cliché," retorted Zach Black, my dark half. "Bet that works real well for skydivers. And brain surgeons. And bomb experts. C'mon, kid, what does he know? He sits around in drag and plays 'Kumbayah' on the harp all day! Besides, have you checked gas prices lately? Think of how much money you could save bumming rides off your friends!"

"You know," sighed Zach Lite, "I'm pretty tired of your negative waves." And with that, he chucked his harp at Zach Black like a 10-pound Frisbee. For a pacifist, his aim was pretty impressive. I decided to embrace my inner angel and keep on trying.

I went back the next Friday, armed with my paperwork and flowers. Yes, flowers. I gave a bouquet to Our Lady of Perpetual Numbers and thanked her for helping me. She was pleased with my humble offering and gave me a number that was called a minute later. So this is how it works, I thought. Cool. I gave a bouquet to She Who Must Not Be Named (although a Venus flytrap would have been more

appropriate). The paperwork was all good. I took the permit test and passed.

Over the next six months, I practiced driving our Honda Civic. I even drove to Los Angeles once without ending up on the 6:00 news.

Finally, I was ready to take my test behind the wheel. I gave my paperwork to You Know Who. She looked it over and asked, "Will you be driving the Chevy or the Honda?"

"The Honda," I said confidently.

"Well, this registration is for the Chevy."

I ran out to the car and ransacked it until I found the Honda registration. I handed it to Dragon Lady, who promptly handed back the proof of insurance, saying it had expired.

I knew I should've gone with my instincts and brought Godiva chocolate this time.

I ran back to the car. After 10 minutes of burrowing like a rabid gerbil, I came to the bitter conclusion that the new proof of insurance wasn't there. I called my Dad and begged him to find the form and fax it. It came through, 15 tortured minutes later. Then Fate played one last card: Dragon Lady asked if I'd completed Traffic Safety School.

No one had ever mentioned anything about this. Traffic school is for people who get too many violations. But I hadn't done anything! I stated my case that I shouldn't have to go just because I was missing an

arm. Dragon Lady left to discuss it with her manager. When she came back, I was approved for my driving test.

My driving proctor made sure I knew where all the important parts were, such as the pedals, turn signals, gear shift, and the windshield wipers. He asked if I knew the hand signals. I showed him all of the polite ones. I turned on my lights and demonstrated the brake and signal lights. He got in and told me to pull out of the parking lot. Following his instructions, I turned right and left, parallel parked, and changed lanes, being careful to stop at all stop signs and red lights. I had come too far to blow it now. I think it could have gone better, but it was good enough for him.

Against all odds, I now have my driver's license. I've earned the right to drive a car. Sure, there are some restrictions: I have to use automatic transmission, and I had to have a lame knob attached to my steering wheel, but that's a small price to pay for a personal, and symbolic, victory. It shows that I have the will and the way to overcome my physical limitations as well as the stereotypes and discriminatory expectations of people who don't know any better. My disability doesn't stop me from what I'm entitled to, and if I can drive a car and face life head-on, then there's no stopping other young people with disabilities from realizing their dreams. ■

