

VROOM! VROOM!  
Guess What, Mom?

About age 31

Because I have cerebral palsy (CP) and have always had trouble controlling many of my body movements, it was assumed by the adults around me that I would never be able to drive a car. My parents never discussed the possibility, but in high school I did convince my daredevil grandfather to take me out for a driving lesson. During the first 10 minutes of that lesson, I almost ran into a church in the parking lot where I was attempting to navigate. Further evidence of my inability to control moving objects of which I had charge came when I tried to ride a horse. The horse passed under a low tree branch as I slowly slid off his back and landed on my behind.

After that, through college and graduate school, I made no further attempts to drive a car. I did ride a tricycle and a power golf cart. I lived in Wisconsin and during winter, the cart's accelerator would freeze up while driving, making it impossible to stop without heading for the nearest snow bank. One cold Saturday night I was on the way home from a movie with my date riding on the back of the cart when the accelerator froze. That lady never would go out with me again!

Soon after completing my degree and getting my first real job (post docs don't count), I again had the urge to drive a car. At the time, I had already been driving an electric car designed for people who are older which as a top speed of 20 m.p.h. I wrote the local driving school (as my CP speech impedes telephone calls) and they dispatched a frightened young man in a car with no hand controls. Fortunately, he was able to refer me to a driving school that owned a car with hand controls. After many months of intermittent lessons, as I found every excuse to delay each lesson, I was finally ready to take the test. My teacher had prepared me well, but the Department of Motor Vehicles examiner was so nervous that he made me nervous. My driving teacher spent 10 minutes instructing the examiner in "Cerebral Palsy 101," we were both relaxed and I passed the test with ease.

Buying a car wasn't easy. I took a friend with me; several people took him aside to try to convince him not to let me drive – as if anyone could stop me! I never thought I would meet a used car dealer who would try to avoid a sale. After I bought the car, I discovered that one insurance company even had special low rates for drivers with disabilities and good records.

Now came the hard part – telling my parents. Would you expect that a 30-year-old man with a Ph.D. and a full-time job as a social worker would be afraid to tell Mom and Dad that he was driving? I sure was! I piled my poor, chain-smoking, driving teacher into my “new” four-year-old American Motors Ambassador and drove the 50 miles to my parent's house. It's a good thing they both still had their original teeth, as anything else would have fallen out. They were both good sports about it although, to this day, I prefer to have them drive if we go places together. Their nervousness about their son driving makes me nervous.

Driving did help me accomplish my original goal. It gave me mobility to make it easier to date. Five years later I met a wonderful lady. We are now married and she does the driving! The thrill of driving is gone; I guess that's a milestone too.

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