

First Time

FOUR WHEELS AND FREEDOM

A Toledo teenager takes her first driving lesson

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, March 6, 2005

This is the third in a year-long series offering a look at various "firsts" for people around the region.

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Sitting in an empty parking lot in West Toledo, Alexis Branum grabbed the steering wheel of the red Toyota tight. Real tight.

"She's been thinking about this for the last day or so. She's pretty nervous," said her instructor, Patrick Carlisle.

Alexis is 17 and has had her temporary license for two years now. She's spent 24 hours in the classroom and numerous others slowly cruising through quiet neighborhoods with her mom. But this, her first driving lesson, would be her first time on busy streets.

She didn't say she was scared; but her silence did, her white knuckles did, the herky-jerky way she punched the gas pedal did.

"Try to keep it at 40," Pat said as she pulled out slowly onto Jackman Road. "Stay close to the speed limit. There's a lot of road rage and speeding people out there."

Alexis knows.

"I was driving with my friend ... she was going so fast," Alexis said. "She said, 'I like going fast.' I was scared. I'm not driving with her again."

Alexis had a lot of reasons to be nervous. Her grandmother was killed in a car accident, and she said her brother recently was in a collision with a 16-year-old who had his license for only two weeks.

Those reasons were on top of the obvious stuff: the flakes of snow fluttering outside and the fact that her car was pointed toward the traffic snarls surrounding Westfield Shoppingtown Franklin Park.

Still, the car pattered on, and Pat, with his moustache and head of curly hair, showed her how to check her blind spot, encouraged her to go a little faster on her turns, and occasionally reached out for the steering wheel to make a turn a little crisper or keep the car in its proper lane.

"She can drive. I just need to watch her a lot," he said, peering into the extra rear view mirror installed for instructors. (He has his own set of brakes, too, just in case.)

Alexis, in her ponytail and blue jean jacket, is looking forward to getting her license. A car means freedom, and it would be nice to stop working around other people's schedules to get her 16-month-old daughter to doctor's appointments and other places.

Even though the Whitmer High School student waited a little longer than many teenagers to get to this lesson - "I didn't think I had enough practice yet," she said. "And I was a little scared." - she's ready now.

Well, almost - as we're reminded when Pat again reaches over for the steering wheel.

"Sometimes I get sidetracked looking at my speedometer. Or I'll look down for my turn signal," she explained.

The one thing Alexis doesn't need to worry about is being too cautious.

"Driving school taught me a lot," she said. "The kids who didn't pay attention or laughed, all those kids failed their test. The kids in my class who laughed scared me more than the accidents in the movies."

Pat can sympathize. The 58-year-old retired quality control engineer now working for Master & Sylvania Driving

School has seen it all - much of it bad. He pointed out examples during the ride, one eye on Alexis, the other on drivers who run a red light or fail to use their turn signal.

"Probably 30 percent of the people out there, if I took them over to Heatherdowns [to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles testing center], they probably wouldn't pass," he said.

And don't even get him started on some of the adults he teaches, like the 54-year-old woman who had never sat behind the wheel of a car before getting in with him.

Things were going better for Alexis. About an hour into the lesson, Pat told her to pull into a parking lot off Lewis Avenue. Time for maneuverability drills, where the dreams of many teens seeking a license come to die.

The test seems simple enough: Just pull the car through a box outlined by four cones and then to the right or left of a "point" cone out front. Then, back the car through the course the same way it came in.

Sounds like a breeze, right? Alexis wasn't so sure.

"I'm bad at reversing. I get mixed up. I think right's left and left's right," she said.

That's OK, Pat said, "There's no time like the first time."

Before they could give it a try, though, before she would bump into a cone or two and start-and-stop her way through the course, they needed to get the cones out of the trunk. You know, the easy part.

So Alexis punched a button, and ...

"Oops," she laughed as a noise came from the front of the car. "I opened the hood."

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