

BY KARA GOLDSMITH

When you turn 17, you're finally free.

Free from waiting, free from stresses, free from relying on your parents to do everything for you. That laminated piece of plastic surely convinces us we have a special power that did not exist before. It convinced me.

I got my driver's license on May 8, 2007. I remember feeling such a sense of triumph after having passed the road test easily, and recalling that I had gotten a perfect score on the written driver exam that I took sophomore year.

It was now the end of my junior year and I had taken the SATs, AP exams, and so many other tests that would determine my future. I had gotten through the hardest high school had to offer and that simple card, with my name and photo, seemed my reward for all of the hard work I had done that year.

It also seemed a way to solve all of the logistical problems that had plagued me since my elementary school days.

Since I can remember, my parents have both been very hard workers, commuting to the city and back on a daily basis. They woke at 5:30 a.m. and came home around 7 p.m., and still had to prepare my brother and me for school the next day by making lunches or picking us up from evening activities.

Logistic planning was always a challenge in my house because I was involved in so many afterschool groups. It wasn't simple to get from point A to point B.

But now I had a car that would take me anywhere.

The first time I took that Green Mercury Sable Wagon out to the high school was possibly one of the happiest days of my life.

This was to be my very own car, available for me to use until I went to college. I turned down the windows, put on the music, hit the gas, and drove. I was finally on my own, independent and able to come and go as I pleased.

I also felt that I had lifted a heavy burden off my parents, but of course I was mistaken. There was nothing that made my parents more nervous than me being on the road alone. They made me call them every step along the way, but that barely took my pride away.

I had my license for one week and already I was driving to school and temple and my grandma's house and friends' homes.

An upcoming trip was to temple for a youth group meeting. Driving along South Orange Avenue to my synagogue, I still felt that special sense of independence that had been sparked by my birthday. I pulled into the parking lot, parked the car, and walked to the temple doors, the sacred keys dangling from my index finger. Of course I remembered to call my dad to tell him I had arrived "in one piece," but I could not wait to tell my temple friends about my license. I even offered one of my friends a ride home just because I wanted to have a few more minutes of driving.

After the meeting, we both got in the car and I realized I really didn't know where she lived. I felt comfortable, though, because it was still light out, and she was in the car to direct me. I drove her home without a hitch and, feeling like I knew the area well enough, I decided to keep on in the same direction, instead of backtracking to get home.

It began to get dark and I realized that I did not know where I was. Fearing my parents would be angry with me for driving a friend home, I did not call them for help. Instead, I kept driving and figured I could stop at a gas station.

The evening is all a bit hazy now.

All I know is that while in the middle of an intersection, time seemed to stop as a white Volkswagen Jetta hit my car on the driver's side, pushing it to the side of the road and seizing my independence from me.

There had been an accident. I made a simple call to my parents to tell them what had happened, and they rushed over. Luckily nothing had been hurt, except my pride.

It had lasted for a week, and then it was over.

I had no car anymore; my family only had one car now. I felt damaged, tired, and dumb.

I had taken the car out driving, but I had failed to take enough responsibility.

It had nothing to do with the fact that I had always been a great student and a responsible teenager who was never involved in anything "bad." I thought that having my license would make everything simpler, but indeed, the situation had just become harder than ever.

Driving required a new level of judgment and acute awareness of the road.

At that point, I thought my parents would never let me drive again but here I am, seven months after the accident, and still driving.

I still call my parents every step of the way, and tell them exactly where I am going, mapping out the directions I will take before I even set foot out the door.

My car accident was the hardest lesson I had to learn, but perhaps everything happens for a reason.

With the traffic case that followed, I was able to evade the points that threatened my clean record. Eventually, we got a new car and now I have access to one of the family cars again.

Today I am still a confident driver, but am much more cautious. I know that every car I pass could be my next accident and I want to do all that I can to prevent prospective collisions from happening.

Exercising appropriate judgment and proceeding with caution on the road can perhaps help avoid learning lessons the hard way.

**Nu**

*Kara Goldsmith, 17, attends Livingston High School and is a member of Nu's teen board.*

# Crash test

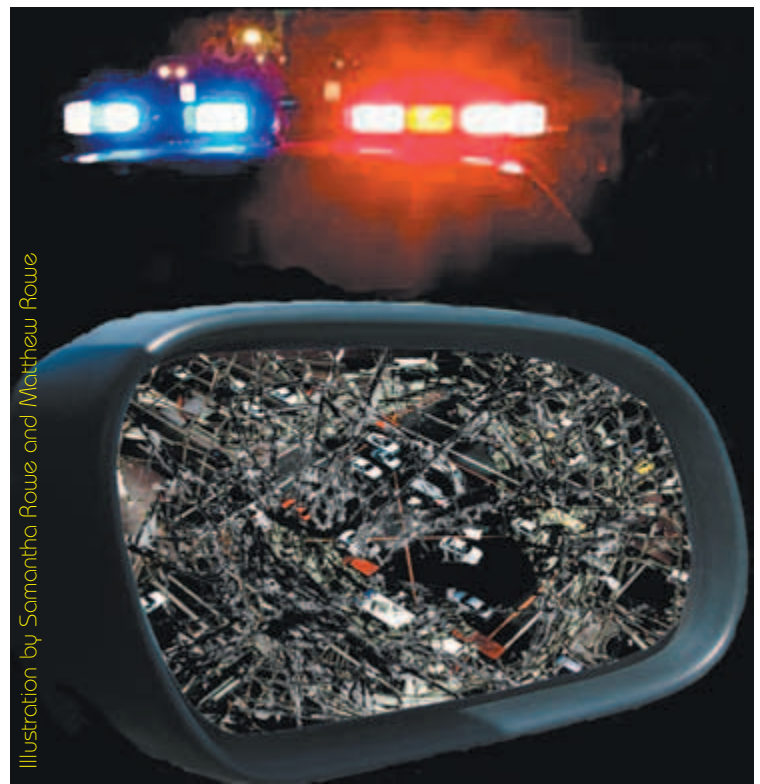


Illustration by Samantha Rowe and Matthew Rowe

A CAR  
IS FREEDOM,  
UNTIL  
THE DAY  
IT ISN'T