

Ticket to DRIVE

by Margaret Miller, contributing writer

As our children grow up, we celebrate the milestones. Their first step. Their first bike ride. And the day they drive a car alone for the first time, leaving us behind. It's not surprising that these markers commemorate our children's mobility, their journey out of our lives and into their own. Whether it's the family car or a hand-me-down jalopy, wheels give kids access to a world outside of a parent's radar. For many teenagers, the thrill of independence that comes with a driver's license is beyond compare.

Every day, Ben Bloom, a sophomore at Westchester Academy, drives to school and lacrosse practice and makes a 2-hour round trip to an agriculture farm to take care of a lamb he's raising. He's even taken a road trip to San Antonio. The best thing about driving? "You don't have to walk or ride your bike to get where you want to go."

"It's so much freedom!" says Ellie Stewart, a tenth-grader at Memorial High School. Ellie drives a 1987 Acura that belonged to four of her siblings before she inherited it. "It's older than I

am!" she laughs. "At Memorial, it's common to have a new car straight off the line. But the 'Legend' fits my personality," she confesses. "I'm happy to be different. I'm grateful to have something to drive."

"I lost my iPod, so my car is the only place I can listen to music," says dance student Kate Phillips, also a sophomore at Memorial. "It's so fun to drive down the highway, open the sunroof and blast the *Narnia* soundtrack. It's awesome."

Mock trial, Bible study and Outreach Club take Laura Winchell all over Houston. A Memorial resident and senior at St. Thomas' Episcopal High School, she helps her parents out by picking up her younger sister every afternoon. Like most teens, Laura considers herself a good driver. But no matter how prepared teens feel when getting their license, statistics indicate that 58 percent of them will have a wreck during the first year they drive. Laura is one of those statistics.

"We took an informal poll in English one day," she remembers. "Every person in my class had been in an accident! You think it will never happen to you. And then it does."

Ben was involved in a wreck only a few months after getting his license. "My car fishtailed," he recalls. "The other car wasn't hurt that badly, but mine was. I had to pay to get it fixed."

Although her mom says she's the best driver in the family, Ellie had a fender bender on a rainy day. "I was slowing down for a red light," she remembers, "but my car was hydroplaning! I knew I was going to hit the car in front of me. Fortunately, it wasn't damaged, so we didn't have to file a claim."

Kate came close to getting a ticket the day she got her license. "My mom hadn't replaced her left headlight, and a cop pulled me over. When he found out it was my birthday, he gave me a break." Kate had a second episode during the

Christmas holidays, while attempting to change lanes at the Galleria. The front fender of her car is still stuck together with duct tape, a daily reminder of the incident.

Laura has already been in two accidents. Recently she was hit while waiting at a stoplight by a woman who had been drinking and

failed to slow down. She's still in physical therapy to treat the whiplash caused by the impact.

"A car accident is something you're just never prepared for," she reflects. "It's the last thing you think is going to happen."

"Driving is just like playing a piano or playing tennis," says Gene Walker, owner of Safe-Way Driving Centre. "It takes doing it over and over again." Walker says parents play an important role in their child's driver's education.

"We give our students a philosophy," he says, "but we need parents to drive with their kids so they can learn to control the car. It's a team effort. I know parents are busy. But kids need to get in a little practice between the lessons."

Most importantly, he warns against setting a bad example. "Parents forget that their kids are watching everything they do. We know we'll have a hard time keeping kids off the cell phones while they drive when they go home and see their parents do exactly that."

We can't keep our children from becoming a statistic. But we can practice what we preach when it comes to good driving habits. And that's a start.



Memorial High School sophomore Kate Phillips, showing off her favorite set of wheels post-accident