



## Dreaming About Driving

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by Jennifer Thomas

I have always imagined myself riding through Montgomery, Alabama on I-65 in my very own Alero Oldsmobile. Luther Vandross's Superstar is playing on the radio. All of the windows are down, and my hair is blowing in the wind under the summer night's sky. Fortunately, I do not have to dream any longer; I am an official licensed driver!

Just like any other 16-year-old, I wanted to drive more than anything. While in high school and before turning 16, I took Driver Education as an elective and learned the rules of the road. My teacher was the first person who had enough faith to let me drive. She accommodated me by placing a cushion behind my back since the seats didn't go up far enough. She also operated the emergency brake and cranked the car. The fact that I took and passed this class and got my permit was enough to convince a few other people to help me practice driving.

My aunt Diane was one of those people. She rode shotgun as I drove her blue Corsica on several occasions. I also practiced with my father from time-to-time. Once when he came to visit, he rented an Alero Oldsmobile and let me practice driving in it. We learned that I could operate everything in this car on my own. I was able to start the engine, change gears, and apply the emergency brake. "Alero, here I come," I thought. This was the car I wanted.

Shortly after I turned 16 and had become a better driver, my father rented an Alero and came to town to take me to get my driver license. While waiting at the DMV, I was so excited. When it was my turn, my dad drove the car around, and I went out to meet him. We waited for a while. Finally two state troopers, one male and one female, came out, and both of them got into the car with me. My excitement turned into nervousness. The female trooper, seated in the front passenger seat said, "At the end of the drive, make a left." I proceeded with caution. I did my very best to follow all of her commands. When we returned, the female trooper asked me to come inside and have a seat, and she went to another part of the building. This was odd; everyone else found out whether or not they passed while still in the car. The trooper came back with another gentleman, and they asked my father and me to come outside. I knew then that there was definitely a problem. The female trooper told me that my three-point turns and other driving skills were great. She further explained that they could not give me my license because my vehicle had to "have equipment on it and be modified." I was outraged but I managed to contain myself as I asked her what modifications I would need. She was unable to answer my question. She was also unable to tell me whom to contact about getting these modifications.

After being highly upset, wanting to sue somebody, and crying many tears, I contacted my Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Counselor. She connected me to the Adaptive Driving Program and arranged a driving evaluation. My mother, father, and I drove a little over an hour north to Birmingham for the evaluation. The results were that I needed a minivan that was no more than four years old. This is what the equipment had to be installed in. I had two problems with this. First I was not a soccer mom and did not want to drive around in a van. Secondly, there was no way I could afford a car this new. I asked if there were any other options. The other options that I was offered were that I could either get a Lincoln Towncar or a Grand Marquis. "I am four feet, 10 inches tall. Are you serious?" I thought. I was upset all over again.

Eventually I calmed down and partially accepted the news. During my 12th grade year of school, I took part in co-op; I was in school for half of the school day and at work the other half. I was having a really hard time. I had to dish out gas money to whomever I could get to take me to work. Before long I was working just to be able to afford to get there. One of the teachers heard about it. She made some contacts and asked the other teachers to donate money to United Way on my behalf.

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Even with their support, I was still unable to make payments on such a new vehicle.

I went on to college and had no choice but to rely on the para transit system and friends for four years. I was thankful, but relying on the bus was definitely not the easiest thing I have ever had to do. It was late quite often and sometimes didn't show up at all. I practically had to call everyday to schedule appointments for the next week. I had to ride the bus from home to school, from school to work, and from work to home.

About a year and a half to two years after graduating college, I had a full-time teaching job and felt stable enough to take on car payments. I called my VR Counselor and let her know that I was ready to get the process started. I also contacted the United Way to see if the money that the teachers from my high school had donated was still available. Fortunately it was, and I was able to use it as a down payment on a new car.

The process that it took to get my car modified was quite lengthy, but it was so worth it. I had to be re-evaluated and found out that the equipment that was suggested for me could now be placed on an SUV. Yes! When my counselor received approval to cover my modifications, I contacted the United Way again. The United Way cut the check for my down payment, and I went to get my car. On June 26, 2006, my uncle and my mother accompanied me to the dealership to give me advice as I asked for it. I asked questions and completed all of the paperwork. Since I did not have a license, my mother drove my Hyundai Santa Fe off the lot, but I rode shotgun.

In November of 2006, I received a call from a gentleman in Wetumpka, Alabama saying he would be the person handling the modification process of my vehicle. He explained that I would need to bring my vehicle to his shop in Wetumpka, and he was going to personally take it to Texas. He said that it would be there for about six weeks. At that point, he would pick up my vehicle and return it to his shop in Wetumpka. His company would then finish the modifications. When that was all done, he said he would call me in for a fitting, and we would take it from there. My dream was becoming more real as the weeks went by. I was finally getting there!

At the very start of January, I got a call from Wetumpka. The lady on the other line was calling to inform me that my car was back, and that it was time for me to come in for a fitting. I went for the fitting, and all of the adjustments were made. In mid January, my family and I made the 30-minute, or less, drive to Wetumpka. We were given a crash course on how everything worked and were told to call if there were any problems. I was also advised to get in it and practice with the controls as much as possible.

I did just what the people in Wetumpka told me to do. I played with the controls and eventually got brave enough to drive around the neighborhood. Time went on, and I was beginning to wonder if I was ever going to have any official training and how I need to go about getting my driver license. I contacted my VR Counselor to express my concerns, and she contacted the Adaptive Driving Program. The trainer/evaluator came to my area a few times during the month of June. I had the opportunity to get more practice in, and he gave me several driving tips. On June 21, 2007, I was awarded my driver license.

Yes! I don't have to dream about driving anymore! I can come and go when I'm ready, just as long as I have gas that is. I don't have to worry as much about being late, and I don't have to give three to four people gas money during the course of a week. So maybe it all worked out a little differently from how I dreamed. I have a Santa Fe instead of an Alero, and I am not fully comfortable driving on I-65 just yet; however I am driving, comfortably on I-85, and Luther Vandross's Superstar does play on my radio. Most important of all, I don't have to dream anymore: I just drive.