

Trial By Freeway

By Karen Telleen-Lawton

Karen Telleen-Lawton graduated from San Marino High School in 1971, just a few years ago before moving to Santa Barbara and Colorado with her husband David and their two children, Emily and Tim. The Tribune has asked Karen to share her thoughts about economics, education, the environment and life here in the town where she was raised.

Karen's column will appear on the third Thursday of each month. To contact Karen, please e-mail her at smtribune@earthlink.net

Hunched in the back seat of our metallic black Corolla, I watched freeway call boxes whiz by, grimly figuring I'd be walking to one. My daughter's face flashed in and out of darkness under the intermittent freeway lights. The gas gauge had read 'empty' for twenty miles, but my husband and I sat mute, recording our observations on little notepads.

At last she snapped on the right turn signal and steered smoothly off the freeway, rolling into a gas station placed strategically at the base of the ramp. She nopped out and gassed up, humming to dispel any thought we might have that she wasn't in complete control. The immediate crisis had passed.

We were Coloradoans when our daughter passed driver training two years previously. She learned to navigate the mountain roads around our home in slippery ice storms as well as thick spring snows. We trusted her driving skills in difficult situations.

But after moving to San Marino, we faced new driving dangers. The Southland has many more drivers who interpret stop signals as 'recently green.' The freeway system is a world apart from Boulder's single

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Denver-bound highway. Now seventeen, our daughter begged to drive to Corona del Mar to see a visiting Boulder friend. Thinking of the five freeways, unknown territory, and return trip in the dark, I was reticent to allow it.

After much negotiation, her father and I agreed to accompany her, monitoring her progress from the back seat. She prepared by studying the Thomas Guide and recording the directions. On a brisk March Sunday, we set out after church, a confident driver chauffeuring rear occupants braced for a long day of silent testing.

The drive down was pretty smooth. She suffered one moment of hesitation on a freeway exit decision, but managed to make a save maneuver. Later, looking for her friend's street, she read the right-side street signs, missing her left turn because the street changed names at that intersection. But she found it easily on the retrace, and spent a jubilant day on the beach with her friend.

The return trip was rocky from the start. She was the same confident and competent driver, but her nascent navigating skills conspired with the early winter dark to thwart her. First she dashed through the Pacific Coast Highway intersection looking for Highway 1 (which it is). Arriving at a 'T' after a couple of miles, she consulted the map in the waning light, and found her way back on track. We silently willed her to check the gas gauge, which had already read 'empty' when we retrieved her at the beach.

She navigated the maze of freeway interchanges onto the 605, where she finally realized

**"...come LA or
high water."**

she was running on fumes. But as she reentered the freeway after refueling, her next freeway change was upon us. We were shunted east before she could maneuver west. No problem she intoned cheerfully enough. She exited the first opportunity ready to cross over and retrace. Dave and I peered at each other across the blinking dark: the off ramp had no onramp.

Our teenager masked her anxiety with light chatter and humming, or perhaps she was oblivious to the dangers of potentially stumbling into gantry territory. Eventually, she wandered about a mile to find an onramp, and was on her way home once more. Her last snafu again put us on gantry alert, as she ended up heading south rather than north while ramping off the Pomona freeway. Circling through a dark neighborhood, she turned around and disoriented "home" where we arrived exhausted and relieved.

In the next few days, we use our notes to debrief, praising her driving skill and calm demeanor as well as eliciting her suggestions for improvements. She needed no prodding to express how much more is involved in reaching destination than just driving. Now that we're on the same side, she has driven to the beach, Magic Mountain, and even Santa Barbara alone without a mishap.

Well, a fence in the SMH senior lot did get in her way a few months ago. But despite inevitable bumps in the road together we are building a confident, independent, and safe high school senior, come LA or high water.