

First Person

She puts you in the driver's seat, not the hot seat

'One girl literally drove up a light pole'

What makes motorcyclists and over-the-road drivers shake in their socks? What equalizes the anxiety levels in teenage novice drivers and senior-citizen veterans of the wheel? It's the dread driver's license road test. "Whether they are 16 or 69, people are nervous," says Theresa McMahon Frawley, road examiner (officially, public service representative) at the Illinois Secretary of State's Drivers Services facility in Hillside.

The test is intimidating, but Frawley is not. Dozens of letters and cards from worried drivers attest to her knack for relaxing the fainthearted.

Frawley had a number of part-time jobs over the years before joining the Secretary of State's staff in 1982 as a clerk. Four years ago she trained to become a road-test examiner but still pitches in at the counters to give the written exam, take pictures or give the eye test when the road-test lines are slow. But that isn't often. On a typical day she gives 20 to 25 road tests and on a busy day as many as 30.

Frawley grew up on Chicago's West Side and has had her own driver's license for 45 years. For the last 33 years she has lived in Westchester, where she and her husband, Thomas, raised their three sons and six daughters. Frawley recently told writer Marla Smith what drives her on her job.

Nobody likes a test. Most people tell me immediately, "I'm so nervous." I try to relax them, with a smile, a cheery hello. I'm not supposed to chit-chat, but I try to say a pleasant word when I can. And I say: "Don't worry. You can always take it again." Everybody gets three chances. It seems to relax people, knowing it's not their last chance.

I think the biggest surprise to me was just how nervous people do get. One older woman came in after passing her test and just toppled over. She had to have mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I've seen drivers topple over at the wheel. We call an ambulance. It just goes to show you what nerves can do. One girl literally drove up a light pole. My glasses went flying off my face. I've been with people who drive in the wrong lane, go over the curb way into the parkway. It's almost scary. One lady ran over a big orange cone, one of the lineup markers, and she didn't even know she did it. The wall of our building has been hit more than once. I always warn people not to stand there because I've seen drivers run right into it.

I give tests for A, C, D and M licenses. Those are for automobiles, trucks, semi trucks and motorcycles. People often ask,



Theresa Frawley prepares to administer a driver's license road test.

but we don't supply any vehicles. Drivers sometimes rent or borrow an automobile or truck to take the test. A man came in a taxicab once, and I kidded him and said he couldn't put up his flag.

All the tests are based on a point system. Points aren't good. A dangerous action [like going over a curb] or a violation [such as going through a red light or a stop sign] causes a person to fail automatically. Other things—such as changing lanes, using signals, downhill parking—count as points if they aren't done correctly, and an accumulation of points can also cause a driver to fail. I mark it on a score sheet. I can't tell drivers what they're doing wrong during the test, but I try to tell them in a nice way when we get back to the facility. Even if they pass, I tell them anything they did that wasn't correct.

It isn't a good feeling to tell people they failed. Sometimes they know before I tell them. Some feel so bad they don't even want to go inside and get their receipt. A lot don't think they should fail. They'll say, "I've been driving for 50 years," but you can pick up bad habits. Sometimes people say, "Oh, please, I was just nervous." But it isn't a case of please. I have to take this seriously. You can't have someone on the road who doesn't know how to drive. I would say the biggest percentage passes. People throw their arms around me, kiss me, when they pass. They say, "I'm so glad it's over with!" That makes me feel good, even though I know they helped themselves.

The tests are different for school buses and trucks than for automobiles. For example, tractor-trailers have to dock-park, and bus drivers have to stop as they would for

children. Believe me, these drivers are nervous because their jobs depend on the test. I ride along. I remember the first time I went out to a tractor-trailer, I thought I needed a step ladder. I thought, "I can't go back and tell them I'm too old!" But now I give from one to three truck tests a day.

Summer is motorcycle season. We set up an obstacle course for motorcycles. No, I don't ride along but stand on the ground and give the driver different maneuvers like the cone-weaving maneuver, the U-turn, the quick stop. I don't know how to drive a motorcycle, but I can tell if a person can handle it or not.

The two main groups for the automobile test are the 16-year-olds getting their first license and senior citizens 69 years and older who have to take the road test each time they renew their licenses. There are also some first-time adult applicants. And I test drivers who have a citation or have let their license lapse or have come from out of state. Just as many women pass as men, but the men tend to be less nervous. I think it's because it's only been in recent years that as many women had their own cars. The women drivers are just as good. How has this job affected my own driving? I think the main thing is that now I stop at stop signs, whereas before I was apt to simply slow down. It's made me much more careful.

Senior citizens are the most nervous. They tell me they don't know why because they have driven for so many years. Some say at the end, "Would you believe this is the first road test I've ever had?" They have to be able to drive to get to the doctor's and to church. Losing their license would be like losing their life. I just tell them, "Drive the

way you always do." Older drivers tend to go a little slower, although no one is going very fast during the test.

The kids have a different kind of nervousness. A lot come in on their 16th birthdays, they're so anxious to drive. I never appreciated driver education until I started giving this test. The students who have taken it know the correct procedures. We can tell when the courses have ended because we'll have 20 kids waiting with their blue slips. In fact, they can't get a license until they're 18 without that blue slip.

The parents sometimes are as nervous as the kids. Oftentimes the mother will get in the back seat of the car thinking she's supposed to. We just tell them we do not have riders. Most of the kids know from their friends that parents don't go along. A lot of the mothers wait outside, and they can tell by their child's face, if they're bearing, that they passed. I've had teenagers cry and cry at the steering wheel when they fail. Sometimes they can take the test again right away, say if they failed for a minor thing, but some just need more practice.

I get one or two people a day who don't speak English. This is not a barrier. I prefer having no interpreter riding in the back. As long as they can understand when I ask them to go left or right, I can handle it. In general, I've found that some people just have a hard time knowing left from right, although they don't always want to tell you.

There are usually cars lined up for the test when I come in at 8 a.m., so I start with my first test at 8:10 and go until we close at 4:30. We check a car to make sure the left- and right-turn signals work. If the turn signals aren't working, they can use hand signals. I remember one funny incident when a young girl had to use hand signals. When we came to a right turn, she put her right hand out, across the seat, right in front of me!

If the car is filthy, covered with cat or dog hair, I have the right to tell them to clean it or cover the seat. This is not a biggie. What's hard is working in extreme weather conditions. For me, the heat is the worst. On a hot summer day the cars are warm no matter what. My biggest shock was that so many people don't have air conditioners, and those that do don't like to use them. Ice is probably the worst condition for the drivers. I wonder why they take the test in inclement weather, but some people have to.

What annoys me is when someone puts a \$20 bill on the seat next to me before the exam. I say, "Put that away, or we can't start." I don't get mad because I suppose some people think that's what they should do. It's only happened a few times. Often well-meaning people will say to me, after they've passed, "Let me buy you lunch." I say, "No, treat yourself to lunch." I'm paid to do what I do.

It's interesting meeting people from all walks of life. There's hardly anyone who doesn't drive. The road test is a necessary thing. A license is something you almost have to have, and I like being part of it. ■

Theresa photo by Bill Hogan