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## Life at the end of the road

**For seniors reluctant to give it up, driving is independence. But for others, safety has become more important.**

By RODNEY THRASH

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Even though the body was right there, lodged in the windshield of his Chevrolet Malibu, Ralph Parker didn't know what he had done.

At 93, he had shown signs of dementia. Yet his driver's license, renewed two years before, wasn't set to expire until 2010.

Parker was uninjured in the Oct. 19 accident, which killed Rade "Rudy" Vec. Authorities did not charge Parker, who has since died, but the case has forced experts to assess the risk some elderly drivers pose.

To be sure, it isn't as great as the risk posed by teenagers. According to a 2004 report by the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, 15- to 19-year-old Floridians were involved in more accidents and fatal crashes than any other group. Drivers in their 20s came in at No. 2.

Statistics aside, the question remains: Why did a man in Parker's condition have driving privileges?

"The problem, in an empirical sense, is we don't have a really efficient or predictive way of determining whether a person is safe to drive, unless we take them out on the road," said Dennis McCarthy, co-director of the National Older Driver Research and Training Center at the University of Florida in Gainesville. And financially, he said, that method is not practical or possible.

The center has joined the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to develop more conclusive assessment tools beyond the written and online tests available through AAA, AARP and other groups. The preliminary findings will be released Dec. 29.

Last year, Florida began requiring vision tests for drivers 80 and older. Before Jan. 1, 2004, they could renew their licenses by mail.

Although that test won't detect problems like dementia, other parts of the system might catch other cases.

When Dewey Meador, 82, of Dunedin began showing signs of Alzheimer's disease, his doctor reported him to the state's Medical Review Board, which is part of the Florida Division of Driver Licenses.

"Anyone in Florida - you, me, physicians - has the authority to report someone who they feel is not a safe driver to the state, and that begins a process that may or may not end up in the person's license being revoked," McCarthy said. "I don't know that many people know about this."

Meador hasn't driven since September and doesn't plan to again if the board rules him incapable.

But not all seniors are as accepting as Meador. Some are downright stubborn when their children or caregivers broach the topic.

Relinquishing their keys is an admission that they're old, that they're not as sharp, mentally and physically, that someone else will have to do for them. It forces them to give up something they have prized since they were first licensed to drive: their independence.

Other seniors recognize their shortcomings and voluntarily turn over their keys. They miss the ability to go when they want and where they want, but they cope.

There is life after the road, they say.

Here are stories from both points of view.

### **A clear signal to stop**

SEMINOLE - It was always somebody else's fault.

"I'll catch that son of a b----," Armand Borelli said after one of three near-accidents in 2003.

"Look at that old bastard," he said after another. "They shouldn't be out on the road. They should stay at home."

It wasn't until May 2004, at age 86, that Borelli realized he was the one who shouldn't be on the road.

Borelli, who was driving with his 15-year-old grandson, was trying to turn left onto 113th Street N. He waited for a lull in traffic before he pulled out into the road. He saw his chance, or so he thought.

Before he knew it, cars were on top of him.

"It was the first time that I realized that my mind wasn't functioning fast enough," said Borelli, who was not injured in the accident. "This time, I was at fault."

Borelli recalled what happened to one of his friends more than three decades ago. The friend's daughter took away her 92-year-old father's keys, but he managed to get another set, crashed into a tree and killed himself.

Borelli didn't want that to happen to him.

"Before I cause a bad accident and maybe kill somebody, I better stop," he said.

Borelli gave his car to a maid who works at his senior community.

"She still has it," he said, pointing to a gray 1998 Mercury Marquis. "I feel like going over there, opening the door, getting in there and driving. Oh, I miss it terribly."

He misses dining out. He misses stage plays at Ruth Eckerd Hall. And he misses shopping at a real mall.

His wife never got a license, so when she and Borelli need to go somewhere, they call relatives or a taxi.

But that's rare. These days, neither gets out much, though Borelli said he is busier than ever.

He organizes his 2,000 recipes in shoe boxes and three-ring binders. He cooks chicken pot pie from scratch. He works on jigsaw puzzles. He records tapes of 1940s and '50s swing music to remind him of his dancing days in New York. He sends e-mails to relatives and friends. He watches movies on cable and DVD.

"I'm busy morning till night," Borelli said. "Sometimes, I don't get out of my house for maybe a week."

He said he knows he made the right decision.

Since May 2004, Borelli has had gallstones removed and a heart attack, his second.

"Thank God I had the foresight to give up driving," he said. "It could have happened while I was driving."

### **Holding tight to independence**

HUDSON - Martha Pace hopes she dies before she has to do it.

"It will just about kill me," she said. "It really will."

Even though she doesn't want to admit it, Pace, 80, knows the time could come.

By her count, she has had three, maybe four, fender benders. "None of them serious, just little things."

Little to Pace, but major to her daughter, also named Martha.

"You're a lousy driver," she told her mother during a phone call in January. "You better give up your license."

Pace: "How do you expect me to do all the things I have to do, Martha?"

Daughter: "Take a taxi."

"I can't afford a taxi," Pace lamented. "How do you expect me to get to see my doctor, to get to do my grocery shopping and all the little things that I can't even think of right now? I'm out in the middle of nowhere down here. I'm not up in New York, where you can step out, get on the subway and go anywhere. If you don't have a car down here, you're stuck."

Mother and daughter didn't talk for eight months.

Pace knew her daughter meant well. But she says her daughter doesn't - and can't - understand what's at stake when a senior has to give up driving.

"How do you get along if you can't get to the store?" Pace asked.

"I would feel like a prisoner in my own home. My form of transportation would be gone. And I would

feel exactly like that, a bird in a gilded cage. And that's not fun."

Besides, she said, she has lost so much already. Her husband died in 1999. Driving is one of the few joys she has left.

"To have to actually give up that license, that's the last bit of independence I have," she said. "It's something that I can do that nobody can do for me."

Pace said she will know when it's time to stop driving. She has already limited her trips to day hours only, voluntarily.

"I really don't want to do it, but I will because I don't want to hurt anybody else and I don't want to hurt myself. And I don't want to leave the kids with a bad memory of their mother."

### **Making do without**

PINELLAS PARK - Every time Jeanne Cromwell turned around, something was wrong with her 1983 Chrysler E-Class.

Four hundred dollars for this, \$500 for that.

"My car had over 100,000 miles on it," said Cromwell, 80. "I knew I had to buy another car or do something else."

But her pension from the U.S. Postal Service allowed her only so much leeway. She decided to go six months without driving. If she could get along without it for that long, she would get rid of the Chrysler and use alternative transportation.

"I learned early in life," Cromwell said, "you do what has to be done."

From April to October 1999, the only driving she did was to take her dog, Frankie, to the veterinarian and back. She chucked the car and, with the money she saved on insurance, gas and repairs, fixed up an old three-wheel bike she had bought in 1990.

Cromwell outfitted the bike with a motor that allows her to travel at speeds up to 10 mph; an awning to protect her from sun and rain; two tin baskets, one in the front and one in the back; and a latch for a leash that allows her dog to walk along.

"I can get down to Park Plaza, or I can go up to the street up here to the new depot where the Pinellas Park Historical Society meets or the library or any of these places very easily," she said. "And if I have to go farther, I either take a bus, a taxi or if it's at night or something, I ride with friends."

It's not as expensive as some seniors fear, she said.

"I can take a taxi most anywhere around for anywhere from \$10 to \$15," Cromwell said.

But it can be inconvenient.

To go by bus to the nearest Publix and back home would take an hour.

"(The bus) doesn't turn around and come back," she said. "It goes down to (Tyrone Square) mall. It took me a solid hour from the mall back up to here, which wouldn't be too practical if you have very many groceries."

Cromwell compensates by doing a lot of shopping online.

"Many of these places will either deliver free of charge or they'll charge you only \$4 or \$5," she said. "It's cheaper than you could drive over to the mall and buy."

Cromwell doesn't understand why some of her peers are so hesitant to stop driving.

"As you get older, you don't need to do much," she said. "And let's face it, driving is not exactly the pleasure that it was years ago. We don't just go out and go for a ride."

More than that, "my pension goes a heck of lot further without all those expenses," Cromwell said. "Especially the insurance."

### **A healthy alternative**

TEMPLE TERRACE - No one had to confiscate Bettye Coleman's car keys.

Two accidents, on Sept. 20 and Nov. 7, were all the convincing she needed.

"I was traumatized," said Coleman, 64. "I was a little bit apprehensive about getting behind the wheel, and then after the second accident I thought, 'This is just it.' The less drivers that we have on the road, the better we'll be."

It was an easy decision. She no longer worked, having retired from the Ambulatory Surgery Center in Tampa two months ago, and she has grandchildren, five adult children and her husband to take her wherever she needs to go.

"All the things that I was doing - church, bible study, visiting the sick - I'm still doing," Coleman said. "It's just I'm not the driver anymore."

Driving was never important to Coleman. She was in her 30s before she got her license. "Driving, to me, was . . . the convenience of not having to take the bus and not having to wait on somebody to come and pick me up."

Not driving, she said, isn't as bad as it seems.

It's healthier.

"I put on my walking shoes and I walk over to the store," she said. "It's helping me stay fit and keeping my mind clear."

It also gives her the opportunity to slow down and focus on the things that are most important.

"Before I stopped working, I always had somewhere to go," she said. "Once I had the accidents, it was like, 'I was on the road for no reason.'"

She said she has more time to indulge in a pleasure of hers: reading.

Not driving also has improved her relationship with her husband.

"It gets him more involved in what I'm doing," she said. "I enjoy that."

### **No more spontaneity**

GULFPORT - Nearly seven months ago, on her 66th birthday, Cindy Forst went to renew her driver's license.

She hasn't driven since.

"I'm angry," she said. "I'm very angry at the system."

A system, she says, that made a grown woman, a grandmother, for Pete's sake, dependent, like a child.

All because of a couple of letters on an eye chart.

Forst made it to the last line on the chart, the one with the teeny-weeny letters. She couldn't tell if she was looking at a C or an O, or an H or an A.

Forst knew her vision wasn't sharp. She had lost sight in one of her eyes more than eight years before. She became unsure of herself and stopped driving from 1997 to 2000. She decided to drive again and in five years hadn't had a fender bender; not even a speeding ticket.

None of that mattered. Not to the woman in the driver's license office. She gave Forst that look, the one that said, "You didn't pass."

Since April, Forst has dropped many of her club memberships. Her volunteer days at the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg ended. And her social life is anything but. Until several weeks ago, she hadn't had lunch with "the girls," her clique of seven friends, for months.

"I had been very spontaneous," she said. "If I decided on the spur of the moment, I could just go outside to the mall. If I decided right away that I was going to go grocery shopping, I'd get in the car and go shopping. If I was going to go visit the kids, I could."

Now even basic things take planning.

"I've kind of lost the spontaneity of going somewhere," Forst said. "Unless somebody picks me up, I can't go to meetings, I can't go to choir practice."

She misses her navy blue Saab. It was a sporty car, she said, with a turbo engine.

"You could really move with that thing. Not that you can't do that in any other car, but this one was just special."

The car has since been sold.

When she can't get out of the house, Forst stitches, crochets and does needlework. Her work adorns the

walls of the waterside home she shares with her 80-year-old husband. He also has limited vision, but he works, drives and takes Forst to doctor's appointments. Forst also spends lots of time on the Internet, chatting online with people from Rio de Janeiro to Israel. If it wasn't for that, she said, her connection to the outside world would be lost.

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