

Giving up the keys can be a good decision

By **BRUCE POSTEN**
Reading Eagle

READING, Pa. (AP) — Almost a year and half ago, Ernest Ritter, 95, of Exeter Township decided to stop driving for good.

He had been driving since he was 16 years old, and for the past 14 years he operated a tan Oldsmobile similar to a car owned by another resident at Elmcroft, the personal care community where he resides.

"Well, my car just set out in the parking lot and I really didn't need it here," said Ritter, who moved to Elmcroft about two years ago.

Anytime he needs to go somewhere now, friends or relatives take him. He is all right with that, though he still carries his driver's license in his wallet, issued in 2010 and good until November 2014.

But operating a motor vehicle can drive anyone to distraction, injury or the grave.

And that's especially true for senior citizens who may face problems with vision, hearing and movement as well as challenges to mental acuity caused by medications. Seniors may even be endangered if they engage in what others may view as overly cautious driving practices.

Some younger drivers, with their own habits of multitasking behind the wheel and traveling above the speed limit, may have quicker reflexes, but they may react with impatience to the typically methodical driving habits of seniors.

Watch for trouble spots

No one is invincible or a perfect driver in every situation.

Few know that better than Bernard J. Kaplan, 78, a driving instructor for nearly 30 years in the Reading School

District and a driving improvement instructor for seven years at Reading Area Community College.

Kaplan has advised police departments, ambulance services, freight and utility companies and the Berks County coroner's office.

He's a senior citizen driver, too, and knows firsthand why many of them want to keep their car keys, even though some may be in deep denial about the need to give them up. They fear a loss of independence and self-worth.

"Older drivers aren't just driving slower they are driving smarter," Kaplan said as he drove along local roads, pointing out hazards for older drivers.

Kaplan zeroed in on four areas that may give seniors trouble: entering and exiting major highways; handling traffic at intersections; making left turns across traffic; and taking in a broad peripheral view while driving, especially being alert for pedestrians and parked drivers opening car doors.

"Decreased overall vision and slower reaction times are the two biggest issues for senior drivers," Kaplan said.

Many seniors avoid the problems of ramps by never traveling on major highways or limiting their driving to daylight and off-peak traffic hours.

They can avoid dangerous left turns by planning their route and turning right until able to enter intersections at traffic lights.

Traffic signals with left-turn arrows reduce the need to estimate speeds of other drivers from a distance.

But the dangers of making full stops on yield ramps are obvious, sometimes prompting impatient drivers to pass (an illegal move) or even leading to the rear-ending of the stopped cars.

"And there also is the prob-

lem of trying to pick up speed to get into the flow of traffic," Kaplan said. "Timing is so important when getting on a limited access highway, because to start into the flow of traffic from a stop position is very dangerous.

"Generally, many elderly tend to be tentative, cautiously slowing down on the ramp when they should be accelerating to get into the flow."

Kaplan demonstrated on the West Shore Bypass Penn Street interchange, where traffic was particularly fast and heavy and the window to get into the flow seemed very tight.

Kaplan got a lucky break in traffic flow, but he did accelerate, used his mirrors, turned his head and kept a good distance between himself and the car in front of him.

All of that can be a challenge for the less-than-confident or not-totally-aware older driver.

Slowing reaction time

The elderly can be at a disadvantage when it comes to reacting quickly.

"If you are traveling 50 miles an hour, your car will move 75 feet in a second," Kaplan said.

"What often happens with seniors when something suddenly happens is that they become startled," Kaplan said. "They freeze and don't move their foot."

He said seniors may find handling traffic at intersections intimidating.

"You don't have the right of way unless the other guy gives it to you," he said. "The law is that you may not enter an intersection until it is safe and clear to do so. The other guy has to clear it first."

Often older drivers may wave other drivers ahead just to get them out of way even if

the seniors show up at an intersection first. Also, those seniors may not be aware of drivers coming from other directions.

"It's not legal to direct traffic from your car, because that can get you into trouble," Kaplan said. "The first vehicle that comes to an intersection has the right of way, but again, it's only if the other guy yields it to him."

Limited vision at intersections where there are parked vehicles or motorists accelerating at yellow lights also can pose dangers.

A wise decision

Ritter, who owned four cars in his lifetime, said he never had an accident or even a parking ticket.

The retired machinist said he limited his driving recently, particularly after his

wife of 33 years, Martha, died in 2003.

"I was all alone, so I didn't go many places," he said.

Ritter's youngest daughter, Karen Anderson, 58, of Hamburg, said her dad was a good driver and drove cautiously. But his impaired hearing worried her.

"If it had been up to me, I would have had him give up his license 10 years ago just because of safety issues," she said.

But it wasn't up to Anderson.

It was up to Ritter.

"Let's just put it this way: My daughter did me a favor (in urging him to give up driving)," Ritter said. "I also was getting dizzy spells sometimes."

"I feel fortunate with dad because he ultimately made it easy," said Anderson. "I

know a lot of families struggle with having older parents give up their keys."

If they must

For those seniors who continue to drive, Kaplan said: "I can't stress enough how important it is for seniors to keep their foot close to the brake and to use their horns — and it doesn't have to be a loud, long blast. Rather, one quick tap to alert someone, two quick taps for a thank you.

"And always triple-check at intersections. I don't know how many times I've heard, 'Well, I did stop and I did look.' I can only say that it apparently didn't do any good because you were in a crash."

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