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Profile Writing

The burning beginning to a driver's education

For a new driver, getting behind the steering wheel of a car is a heart-thumping, nerve-rattling experience. Although new drivers will scrutinize over every little step, it is inevitable that mistakes will happen. It's a part of the learning experience.

Some may turn on the windshield wipers instead of the blinker; some forget to check their blind spots or swerve into another lane of traffic while doing so.

For Lauren Curtis, 19, her mistake just led to the burning of about one-thirds of an empty development lot.

Curtis, from Sacramento, Calif., received her learner's permit in 2008 when she turned 15 years old. Three weeks after receiving that permit, she was lighting not the world on fire, but part of her neighborhood.

She was driving with her dad around their neighborhood one afternoon in 2008. Just a few driveways down from her house were two empty development lots. They stopped there and her dad told her to do a three-point turn, a difficult task for any beginning driver.

"As I was backing up, I hit a lamp post and it just tipped over," Curtis said.

Her dad told her that they would go home and call the city to clean it up and to bill their insurance for the cost. They returned home, called the city and did not think anything more of the fallen lamp post.

The city did not come clean up the lamp post right away. As the sun set, the lamp posts turned on, including the broken one Curtis had tipped over earlier that day. When that lamp post turned on, it ignited the empty lots.

“We were sitting at dinner when we saw all of these fire trucks passing our house,” Curtis said. “We were wondering what they were doing in our neighborhood and then we were like ‘Oh!’”

They went outside and saw the empty lots on fire.

“My mom got mad at my dad,” Curtis said. “She said, ‘What were you thinking? You know she doesn’t know how to drive.’ Then she said to me, ‘It’s ok, sweetheart.’”

“My dad just said calmly, ‘That’s why you always look behind you.’”

No person was hurt from the fire, but Curtis joked that the fire might have put a dent in one wildlife animals’ population.

“We have lots of jackrabbits around my neighborhood, so the fire probably killed about 1,000 jackrabbits,” Curtis said.

Because the city did not come clean up the lamp post before the fire, Curtis’ family was not charged for any of the damages.

But some damage had been done to Curtis’ pride.

“I didn’t drive again for like three months,” Curtis said. “I didn’t end up getting my license until I was almost 17.”

According to the United States Census Bureau, there were 491,000 drivers under the age of 16 in 2008. For this age group, there were 180,000 accidents; the ratio of accidents to number of drivers is not given as the rates are “substantially overstated due to the high proportion of unlicensed drivers involved,” a proportion including driving students like Curtis.

But not many in that proportion can say that they lit a fire with their accidents.