

ON THE JOB

Sending his students on the road to safe driving

By **Cindy Atoji Keene** Globe Correspondent, Updated July 20, 2018, 9:11 p.m.





Tom Murray is the owner of Teachers Driving Academy, which has 18 locations and 80 instructors in the Boston area. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

You'd be shocked at how many people tailgate a student driver. That's despite a sign on the vehicle roof, and front and rear warnings that read, "Caution: student driver." The drivers ed car is often mistaken for a Chinese restaurant delivery courier, said longtime instructor Tom Murray, owner of Teachers Driving Academy LLC, with 18 locations in the Boston area.

The company has ushered about 22,000 teens through the rite of passage over Murray's 15 years of running the Norton-based school. His drivers ed horror story is not of an out-of-control teenager at the wheel, but rather a tailgater on Route 140 who was beeping and intimidating, and finally flew past in a state of full-blown road rage. Murray, of course, used the incident as a teachable moment for his petrified student: You can't control what other drivers do, but only how you respond.

"It can be scary because you're trying to coach someone who has been a passenger for years, but never really paid attention to how to drive," says Murray, who also is a history and sociology teacher at Foxborough High School. "I love the fact that I'm setting up kids for defensive driving for the rest of their lives."

Murray bought the drivers ed school after another teacher approached him with the idea. Murray had always held a second job — whether it was running a moving company, selling flowers, or peddling Christmas trees — but with three kids, he didn't know if the school was manageable.

After mulling it over, he agreed to purchase the business and changed the name to Teachers Driving Academy to show that many of the instructors, like himself, were experienced teachers who understood teenagers.

In the beginning, he had only one car and was the sole employee, teaching classes at night, and developing the curriculum when he wasn't in a car. Today, Teachers Driving Academy has 80 instructors, with more than half of them current or retired teachers.

Murray purchases Corollas and Camrys at auction – they are the safest cars on the road because of their braking systems, he says – and equips them with a passenger-side brake. The company has 40 cars on the road, maintained by a full-time mechanic and a garage in Norton. Teachers Driving Academy has different agreements with school systems. It operates in high schools, at town recreation departments, youth centers, or rented spaces.

While Murray spends much of his time running the school, he still enjoys teaching classes, especially for the parents – the state requires that a parent attend a driver education class before students can be issued a drivers ed certificate. The Globe spoke with Murray about steering his drivers ed enterprise.

“Teachers Driving Academy students have a 92 percent passing rate over the last five years. Those eight percenters who fail do so for these top three reasons: not stopping at stop signs, not using turn signals, and speeding. Very early on, a good friend of mine who worked for UPS suggested we adhere to the Smith system of driving, which has been around since the 1960s and emphasizes reducing collisions, preventing injuries, and saving lives.

“While some people might remember using driving simulators, those are long gone. What's most important is getting in the car behind the wheel and developing muscle memory. Some of the highest achieving students are the most reluctant drivers because they're so busy with academics, sports, and after school activities. They put driving last

and I think it should be first. Per state law, parents must drive at least 40 hours with their child, but some do not reinforce best practices in driving and fail to drive with their teen.

“Texting is like the drinking and driving of the 1970s – kids are addicted to their cellphone and if it dings, it’s a massive distraction. I myself have four teenagers. Two are licensed drivers, and I tell parents that it’s a bonding experience to log those 40 hours operating a motor vehicle with their junior operator. There’s lots of tears and laughter and then before you know it, they’re off driving by themselves.

“Technology has been helpful to us to help with the logistics of running the school, since scheduling is a big jigsaw puzzle. All the cars have wireless Internet. Student drivers sign in and out with tablets that allow us to keep better track of a student’s records. I believe we are the most technologically advanced drivers ed school in the state.

“Every day is an adventure and there are definitely a lot of near misses, but the driving instructor has to be in control of the car at all times. It doesn’t matter if the student is on first or last hour, I must be on my ‘A’ game. It helps having a brake on my side to stop the car.”

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