

## Shifting gears: As wheels of life turn, older drivers' eyesight and other faculties may fade, but giving up keys can be difficult

By Michael Lollar

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Leonard McCullough knew his eyesight was growing worse. He was on a two-lane road in Mississippi when he saw the blue light flashing.

"The highway patrolman asked me if I had been drinking. I said, 'No.' He asked me if I was on medication. 'No.' Then he said another driver had reported me. I was weaving on the highway."

By then, the officer was more courteous.

"He didn't give me a ticket, but he said, 'You don't need to be out on the road in a car.'"

It was the kind of reminder dreaded by senior citizens whose numbers are growing on highways as baby boomers arrive at an age when eyesight dims, response times slow and hearing fades. AARP estimates that by 2020, one in five drivers will be 65 or older. By 2030, the elderly will be one in four drivers.

McCullough, 84, a former assistant football coach at Mississippi State University, was 68 when he gave up the van that he and his wife had used to tour the country. That was three months after he was stopped for weaving across lanes. Six months later, he gave up the GMC Sierra pickup that he had called his "companion."

"People don't realize when you give up driving you give up an important part of your life," says McCullough, now living in the Village at Germantown retirement complex.

Another resident, Earl Crowton, 88, has put off giving up his car. Like McCullough, his eyesight is growing worse because of macular degeneration, but Crowton has resisted hanging up the keys to the Mazda in the parking lot. It has only 4,000 miles on it.

His children live in Collierville.

"Right now, I could walk out the door and drive over to see my kids. That would be impossible if I gave up my car. I'd have to get on the phone and pester them. You hate to be a burden on anybody," says Crowton.

While he has no citations, he is in an age group statistically at high risk for accidents and fatal injuries.

U.S. statistics indicate that as drivers age, accident rates begin to approach those of the 16-19 age group, the nation's most notoriously accident-prone drivers.

The American Medical Association says that per mile driven, the fatality rate for older drivers is much higher than for younger drivers. For drivers 85 and older, it is nine times higher than for drivers 25 to 69.

It is part of the reason for a growing number of classes to help seniors brush up on their driving. And it will be the subject of a Nov. 9 seminar at the University of Memphis to help gently ease some seniors off the road.

That seminar, "Difficult Decisions: Driving and Your Aging Parents," will include advice by a psychologist to help people approach aging parents about when they need to stop driving, says driving programs coordinator Tommy Roberson in the UofM continuing education department.

"You should not confront a parent by saying something like, 'My God, you almost hit that car,'" says Roberson. Instead, he suggests an open-ended question, such as "Dad, I saw you drive the other day and you looked a little unsteady. What do you think?"

The reason for the seminar is that seniors seldom choose to quit driving on their own, and a Tennessee driver's license is almost guaranteed for life.

"Once you get them, you've got them," Roberson says of a license. "The thing that's such a horror about it is you don't need to go back and get your eyes checked. You don't need to take another driver's test."

Lt. Zane Smith of the Tennessee Highway Patrol says a family member, eye doctor or other physician can report a driver with serious problems, and the state will investigate, but such complaints are rare.

"I've only seen it once in my career (since 1977)," he says.

When a driver is ticketed for a violation it is usually for speeding, but, for seniors, violations often include improper left turns and right-of-way violations.

Smith often teaches accident-prevention courses through AARP. The group had 13 classes with 250 students in its April session. Students were anxious to learn, but with little joy about the experience.

"I could look out and see eyes misting," says area AARP driver safety coordinator George Coleman. "People would look at the booklet we provide and not want to look up. They seem to sense, 'He's talking about me.'"

For six years, Coleman has been teaching driver education courses for seniors. Some come because Tennessee law requires that insurance companies offer discounts to the owners of private cars if the drivers complete an approved accident-prevention course. Others come because they have had a close call on the highways or want to guard against losing their freedom to drive.

For Mary Davis, 97, good health and good eyesight have meant no end to driving.

"But at this age you live one day at a time. I really prefer not to drive other people unless they're willing to take the risk."

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### **Classes for aging drivers**

AARP and the University of Memphis are among those offering driver education and accident- prevention classes locally.

AARP holds classes in area churches and community centers with a long list of available locations listed at [aarpdriving.org](http://aarpdriving.org). Under "schedule of classes" click "southwesttnzone2," then click the "schedule" tab. Classes cost \$10.

The University of Memphis offers courses through its continuing education program. For details or to register, go to [umce.memphis.edu](http://umce.memphis.edu), then click on "National Safety Council Defensive Driving Courses." Classes cost \$30 for 4-hour sessions, \$60 for 8-hour sessions. Rates are to increase in the fall. (Printed continuing education schedules are available at public library branches and at Davis-Kidd and Borders book stores, or they will be mailed upon request by calling 678-6000.)

