

Learning to drive **again**

Solicitor and SiA trustee, Raquel Siganporia t7/8, tells of the thrill of learning to drive at 16!

It was 1997. Labour were in Government and 'things could only get better'. I was inclined to agree. After four long years my clinical negligence litigation claim had finally concluded successfully. However, both the judges and my parents dashed my dreams of self indulgent shopping trips, stipulating that I was to use the money to address the extra needs that come with being negligently injured. My plea that new shoes were essential to my quality of life fell on deaf ears.

It wasn't until my annual multidisciplinary school meeting, involving educational psychologists, teachers, teaching assistants, carers etc, that my social worker let slip that I could learn to drive at 16, thus saving the Borough the taxi costs of ferrying me to school.

I could learn to drive a whole year earlier than my peers! This immediately became my mission. It fitted all the criteria imposed by the trust fund. Social services and my teachers thought it would boost my self-esteem, yet my parents were opposed. Vehemently opposed.

During the litigation process my parents had been visited by Bart Hellyer, my care expert and a former Chair of SIA. Unbeknown to me, he had shown them a car with a nifty device, which collects a wheelchair and stores it in a box on the roof. They had been impressed enough to retain the manufacturers information but still held doubts about my driving, especially at a young age.

It never occurred to me at the time that someone paralysed at T6/7 wouldn't be able to drive a car. The naivety of youth perhaps, but I

like to think it's partly due to the can-do attitude instilled in me at Stanmore SCI Centre during my recovery. So I negotiated hard and eventually a deal was brokered. In return for good GCSE results, I would be taken to the local Disabled Drivers Assessment Centre in Banstead, to see if I was able to drive.

On 16 June, the day after my last GCSE exam, me and my rather anxious father made our way to the Assessment Centre in Surrey. I completed a reflex test and was shown ways of getting in and out of vehicles, as well as the types of hand controls I would use for driving. As my reactions were not impeded by my paralysis, I was given the green light to find a driving instructor with an adapted car. My father groaned audibly.

I took to this with great gusto and located an instructor with hand



Raquel controls the hoist's descent from the top box and positions her chair for pick up. The folded wheelchair is lifted into the roof box

controls on his car. A week later I took my first lesson, funded with my DLA money, aged just 16³/₄. I loved it from the start. The hardest aspect was memorising which gear did what as, although I was driving an automatic, the theory test still asked questions about gear change as though you were driving a manual car.

Three months later, my instructor announced I was ready to take the test. My dad turned white and arranged for the driveway gates to be widened, so that I wouldn't hit his petunias or his Mercedes, when parking at the house.

However, despite his protestations, he'd started to warm to the idea a little, accompanying me to choose my first car. My dad was happy to secure an ex demo Toyota Starlet with low mileage. I was very happy it was sky blue. We employed Cowal Mobility to fit the wheelchair rack and the

week before my test, I took delivery of my sparkling Toyota complete with a 'free' CD player. I was unquestionably the very cutting edge of cool.

When the day of my test came, I was very nervous. Driving had opened my eyes to how I could actually be independent and not rely on my parents or a taxi driver every time I wanted to leave the house. Suddenly there was a great deal riding on this.

Thankfully, I needn't have worried. I passed first time. Ecstatic, I called my father, who initially expressed what can only be described as supportive incredulity. He then promptly congratulated me and took me out for some more practice runs. I'd finally gained full parental acceptance.

Obtaining my licence and a car was undoubtedly a turning point in my life. Within the space of six months, I was the envy of all my

friends and a more confident, happy girl. Without my little Toyota Starlet, I would not have been able to live away from home when at University, nor maintain a social life or been able to start my legal career. It was, in no small part, the best thing I could have done as a young woman and the foundation upon which I rebuilt my confidence and, ultimately, gained my independence.



Raquel's car showing hand controls and the controls for the roof top wheelchair storage