

Driving: Proud of my Accomplishments

By Bryan Fischer



I am a 17-year old rising high school senior from Charlotte, North Carolina. I earned my driver's license at the age of 16 along with many of my peers thanks to significant advancements made in devices for the visually impaired. I refer more specifically to bioptic glasses, which essentially involve carrier lenses and telescopes. The carrier lens is exactly what you use daily, such as prescription contacts or glasses. These are used during the vast majority of driving time. The telescopes are solely used whenever the driver must see something at a greater distance.

I had my first experience with bioptics at the age of 9 or 10 thanks to the recommendation of a local eye specialist. Whether watching live sports or concerts, reading music, or observing the intricacies of Catholic mass, I was learning how bioptics functioned without the urgency of operating an automobile. As the time drew nearer to my eligibility to drive, my family and I settled on a different pair of bioptics that would offer me more precision at the cost of a vastly more limited field of view. I prefer these bioptics, though, because once I found my groove with them, they allowed me to read street signs and see obstacles at a much greater distance than before. We initially ordered bioptics with darkened carrier lenses, and once we found that that frame worked well, we decided to obtain another pair with regular lenses for night driving. The process of finding which bioptic is best for you is one that can only be pursued through trial and error, as everyone has completely different preferences.

Once I turned 14-and-a-half, I began to look into my state's 30 hours of required classroom drivers ed. My family and I found a small

driving school and signed up. I spent two entire weekends completing the instructional portion and continued to the six hours of behind the wheel learning. I opted to perform these hours with the same driving school, but this is where some problems began to arise. My teacher was knowledgeable, but I got the sense that he did not understand my condition. He would often play a game entitled, "Who sees the sign first?" Gee, I wonder who's going to win that? Thankfully, I got through my six hours, but I did not feel as ready as I thought I should. Now, the only thing that stood between me and my learner's permit was a DMV appointment and a written exam. The employee who gave me the eye exam allowed me to use my bioptics, so I passed with relative ease. Thanks to the dozens of hours that I had spent combing over the NCDMV handbook, I scored a 100% on the written exam. I was handed a printed copy of my permit and a sheet of paper that was to be returned with 60 documented hours of driving accompanied by a parent or guardian, and told, "See you in a year."

I started practicing and logging hours with my father, who was my primary driving instructor. This being said, I still knew that the state of North Carolina mandated that I spend a specified amount of time with a certified



bioptic driving instructor. We searched far and wide for someone that suited our needs, and we finally found Mr. Ian McClure in Myrtle Beach, SC. Prior to my lessons with him, I had probably accumulated around half of my required driving hours, so I had a decent idea of how bioptics worked. But in retrospect, I can certainly say that I'd recommend spending time with a bioptic instructor closer to the beginning of your driving experience to prevent the formation of any bad habits. I say this because of how truly eye-opening Mr. McClure's instruction was. Because he was bioptic certified, he had a better grip on what I could and couldn't see. Those were the most informative ten hours for me throughout this entire process.

Mr. McClure worked with me on "narrative driving," during which the instructor is at the wheel, but the student is constantly updating the instructor verbally as to what they see happening in front of, behind, and in the periphery of the car. Examples include tracking and noting the color of a stoplight or stating a speed limit change. It was never a contest as it had been with my previous teacher, but rather an examination of what we'd need to improve upon in the coming hours.

I advise that new drivers begin learning with a route that they know by heart. Maybe a set of neighborhood streets or the trip to school. This way they can concentrate on control of the vehicle and put navigation aside. Also, it is important to consider stamina and fatigue. I drive for around forty-five minutes, three or four times a week, with little to no drain on the eyes, but when I was first learning, this same amount of time would render me spent for the day. Finally, it is crucial to remember that you can and should pull over if you don't feel comfortable driving. If the sun is indeed too bright or your eyes are too tired, you should hand over the wheel, if possible, and take a break. I find no shame in admitting that I have taken detours to give my eyes some rest when the sun was overpowering.

It was finally time to take the exam and earn my Driver's License. By the time of my driving test, I had exceeded the required 60 hours by around 10-15, giving me something of an edge. All roads had been leading to this moment (pun intended). I still vividly remember being picked up from school and taken to the DMV on Monday, May 13th. I couldn't have asked for a more beautiful day, and though the sun was out, the area throughout which I would travel during my exam was shaded by trees and buildings. I recall feeling nervous, but also somewhat confident. I knew the route, and I was overjoyed that I had made it to this point. I took the exam and passed with flying colors. I was assigned a somewhat stern and unhappy examiner, and she actually did not tell me that I had passed until asking for my credit card to pay the \$40 license fee. That was the least reluctant payment I've ever made. Against all odds, my family and I had prevailed, but there was still work to be done.

I completed the final twelve hours and waited the six months until I could earn my full unrestricted license, eliminating the restrictions of only being able to drive alone or with one friend and not driving past 9:00 PM. This being said, I was still committed to improving my driving. I enrolled in a day-long course known as BRAKES, which teaches basic defensive and corrective driving techniques. We learned skills ranging from controlled swerving to skid recovery, and I cannot overstate the value of these lessons. I am certain that some of the material taught during this course will someday save my life if it hasn't already.

I drove to work, school, social events, and most other places that I could. I still enjoy driving with my parents, as I know that there is still much for me to learn. I returned for the final time to NCDMV on New Year's Eve, waited for a few hours, filled out a handful of papers, and I was at long last granted a full NC Driver's License. As I left the building that morning, I felt as though the cover had been

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closed on a significant chapter in my life, but also that this newfound privilege served as the beginning of something new.

The true finale of this story is quite anticlimactic. In early April, I received a letter from NCDMV. I was instantly gripped by shock and fear, but those feelings were quickly alleviated as I read that I had been removed from the Board of Medical Review, meaning that I would no longer have to undergo frequent eye checks to maintain my license. I am, of course, still required to wear bioptic lenses while driving, but other than that, my license is completely free of limitations.

As a child, I was often told that I'd never drive. I think even my parents, who are my biggest supporters, began to question. Now, with almost 400 hours behind the wheel already, I can safely say that driving is something I derive much enjoyment from, and I cannot express how grateful I am that I have the opportunity to do it. As cliché as

this may sound, I view driving as an art, not solely a means of travel from points A to B.

I thank everyone who played a role not only in my journey, but those who have lobbied to change bioptic driving laws in their states and those who continue to improve bioptic technology. These people are the reason that I can drive.

There may always be a stigma surrounding bioptic drivers, but I let it motivate me to be the safest, most cautious driver possible. Those friends of mine who used to wince or poke fun at the idea of me driving with sizable extensions on my glasses have since given me praise for my attentive and defensive driving style. The little things such as pulling into a garage for the first time alone or learning to drive a manual transmission may seem somewhat mundane at first, but I must admit that these events brought me some of the greatest pride and widest grins of my adolescent life. I am thrilled that I can sit here today in front of my computer and document my driving experience. I can only hope that my story will support some of you as similar stories that came before have impacted me.