

“WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?”
(or: The DMV Fast Lane)
by Brennan Kane

[June 30, 2003]

The Tape Recorder was rolling.
She asked me to sit down, and said, “Testify”
“I’m sorry?”
“Testify”

I was momentarily at a loss. All I wanted was a driver’s license. I hadn’t expected a “hearing”, complete with tape recording and being sworn in under oath. This was, after all, just the Driver Safety office of the California DMV, not Perry Mason. And here I was, alone in a room with Driver Safety Case Worker Sheila (and tape recorder), whom I had just met, asking me to “testify” with no Miranda Rights in sight.

I grew up in California and had only recently moved back after 10 years in the East and Midwest. I understood and appreciated that since I had Parkinson’s Disease (my symptoms are very mild) extra steps might be necessary to get a driver’s license. But now I was being asked to “Testify”, presumably about my PD. Should I have my lawyer present? What I *really* needed, as it would turn out, was a DMV tour guide.

April 15

This chapter in my life began on April 15 at the DMV field office in Pleasanton. I had been given the wise advice to make an appointment via the Internet, and to avoid waiting in line. I passed the written driver’s test, eye test (with corrective lenses), and they took my picture. The registration form identified Parkinson’s Disease as a condition requiring further follow up by DMV. I was issued a temporary license and was told I would receive instructions in the mail.

May 15

I received a physician’s evaluation forms in the mail. The forms were to be filled out and returned to the “Driver Safety Office” by June 7, or “your driving privilege will be suspended.” This sounded rather threatening, but I was already ahead of the game; I already had a set of the evaluation forms in my possession, having surfed the DMV website, and had sent them to my doctor.

June 6

Anxious to avoid such extreme measures, I phoned the Driver Safety Office. “I mailed and faxed the physician evaluation forms earlier this week. Did you receive them?”
“What’s your license number?”
“K500-2732-0432”
“That’s not a California Driver’s License number.”
“You’re right. I don’t have one. That’s why I’m going through this process.”
...
“Yes, we did receive your paper work, and will follow up with you shortly.”

June 19

I hadn't heard from the Driver Safety Office. My temporary license was going to expire soon, so I called again.

I spoke with Sheila. "Do I need to come in for some sort of test?"

"Oh didn't we mail that to you yet?" She replied. "You will receive a notice in the mail tomorrow."

June 20

Sure enough, I received a notice in the mail: **"You must contact the Driver Safety Office by 7-3-2003"** to arrange for an appointment...If you fail to contact the Driver Safety office by the date shown above and/or you fail to keep a scheduled appointment, your driving privilege will be suspended." These fatalistic messages were becoming more disturbing. After all, *I* was the proactive party in this tango, and these dictates would not have been sent had it not been for my prompting.

I made an appointment for June 30 at the Driver Safety Office.

[June 30]

It was at this appointment where I was compelled to "Testify". Under Sheila's directive, I swore to tell the truth. My PD symptoms were mild at the time, so I spoke with confidence. Upon the conclusion of my testimony Sheila told me, "I will send you an appointment notice for a Drive Test within a week."

Return for the actual driving test? I assumed from the very start that they would want a driving test, and that it would be on the day's agenda. Instead, I would have to miss more work and come back a second time. Oh well, at least we were making progress...

July 11

May be I should have asked Sheila to swear under oath. It was almost two weeks later and I hadn't heard from her. I called. "I haven't received an appointment notice yet." "Oh haven't you received one yet? Well, let's make an appointment now." We settled on July 24 for the Driver Safety Test.

July 24

The Driver Safety Test was memorable. Jasleen, the evaluator, first gave me a vision test. Jasleen is a straight forward person. Professionally reserved, you might say. After I read the smallest line of letters (using glasses) without error or hesitation she asked me the Question of the Day, "Why are you here?" I was beginning to wonder myself.

As best as I could tell, Jasleen conducted the driving test as she would with anyone else. "Show me your hand signals, turn on your headlights, brake lights, blinkers, etc." We drove around the neighborhood of the DMV office for about 10 minutes. Then we ended up in a neighborhood not too far from the Oakland Coliseum. This was not a neighborhood worth exploring. In fact, it was worth avoiding. It was residential, but all of a sudden the streets were empty. Not much grass. Lots of cement. We turned a

corner down a street two lanes wide. Directly in front of us, a car had stopped and the driver was talking to someone leaning on his door. There was no indication he was going to budge. Did Jasleen not know this particular neighborhood was not where the Brady Bunch lived? Was she as tense as I? She gave me no direction on where to go or how to proceed. I decided to put on my left blinker and cross to the other side of the double yellow lines in order to pass the stopped motorist. If Jasleen were going to give me demerits for crossing the double yellow line, I would certainly be justified in voicing my dissenting opinion.

After leaving the “neighborhood” I made an effort to break the tension in the car, “I’m glad you check the brake lights and all that before the test. I’d hate to break down in this neighborhood.” Jasleen remained stoic.

At the conclusion of the safety test, Jasleen briefly reviewed her evaluation with me. She gave me a couple of dings for improperly turning a couple of corners, but on the whole was satisfied with my driving.

She did not go so far as to say I passed, but neither did she say I would have to re-take the test. She said I should receive the results in the mail early next week.

July 30

I called the Driver Safety office.

“What’s your license number?”

“K500-2732-0432”

“That’s not a California Driver’s License number.”

“You’re right. I don’t have one. That’s why I’m going through this process. I was calling for Sheila to give me an update on the test results.”

[Sheila] “Oh didn’t I mail that yet? You may resume the process to renew your driver’s license.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you may resume the process to renew your driver’s license.”

July 31

I stood in line at DMV. I didn’t want to make an appointment and wait for three weeks to restart the process. I wanted to be proactive. I got in line ½ hour before the office opened, and stood in line 45 minutes after they opened before I was able to speak with Ron for three minutes.

“Did you take the Driver Safety test?”

”Yes.”

“Did you pass it?”

“Yes, they said so on the phone yesterday. Doesn’t your screen show that?”

“It looks like you did not pass the test. However it looks like the file is not complete yet. They may have a backlog. You should come back in a few weeks.”

That same day the test results were delivered by mail. “You may return to your local DMV office to complete the renewal of your driver license. Attached please find a copy of your drive test results of July 24, 2003.”

August 21

8:40 am

This time I made an appointment at the DMV. It’s a devilish feeling of pleasure to pass the Orwellian creatures hopelessly confined to a single line for hours before they’re told to go home and bring back the missing papers. I had already done that gig twice in the last four months, and felt no empathy for them.

I spoke with Ron again.

“Did you take the Safety Test? The results of the safety test are not apparent on the screen.”

“Yes I did take the test. In fact, here *is* my test.” I handed a copy of the test results to him.

“There are “No Holds” on your drivers license now,” he said.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that there are “No Holds” on your drivers license now.”

“Who do I follow up with, then?” (In no mood to care about grammar.)

“No one. You should receive your driver’s license in 4 to 8 weeks. Call this [state-wide] number in four weeks. In the mean time, here’s a temporary license.” (My third temporary license since April. Not bad, if you’re into that kind of thing. On the whole, however, I’d rather be at work than in line at the DMV.)

August 29

No one I had spoken to had left the impression that the process was trustworthy, and now that I could monitor the process without having to leave work, I decided to make sure the process was working.

1:30 pm - Statewide Office (rang for ten minutes before answering.)

A polite “technician” informed me that the screen showed no results of passing the safety test. I needed to contact the Safety Office.

2:00 pm - Safety Office. Vivian answered.

“Hi, I’d like to speak with Sheila.”

“Is she expecting your call?”

“She is if my case is not an exception.”

“Sheila does not work with people who already passed the test. [Ah, heartless Sheila! And I thought there was magic between us.] My screen indicates No Action Taken.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means no action was taken against you.”

“Well that certainly *sounds* like good news.”

Vivian went to look for my file. She couldn’t find it. “What did the statewide office tell you to do?” she asked.

“They told me to call you.”

“Well, you have my number. You need to tell them to call me.”

2:15 pm - Statewide office

Computers are down right now. Call again in an hour

2:30 pm - Statewide office (apparently down time is measured differently in State offices.)

I spoke with Rebecca. (The recording tells the callers to make a note of the name of the person they speak with.)

Rebecca: “What do you need?”

“I need an update on the status of my drivers license.”

“You need to contact the Drivers Safety office”

“The Safety Office asked me to tell you to telephone them. Then they can show you “No Action Taken”.

Rebecca chuckled. “We don’t talk to them. They should have referred you to ‘Issuances.’

Hold on, please... (five minutes later) You need to show the DMV field office the

“resume the process letter” and get a temporary license.

“I already did that, on August 21.”

“Please hold... The Pleasanton field office should have approved the renewal on the spot.

I will call the Pleasanton office personally and have them clear the process, so that you don’t have to go back in. I will call you on Tuesday (September 2nd) when I do or don’t succeed.”

September 4

Statewide office. Phillip.

“I need to speak with Rebecca, Technician #NH.”

“I can help you.”

“While I was on hold, your recording said to write down the name and number of the person you work with. That’s why I’m asking to speak with Rebecca.”

“We just use that for reference.”

“Rebecca said she would call me on Tuesday.”

“What’s the nature of your issue?”

“I want an update on my driver’s license.”

“I don’t see that you took and passed the driver’s safety test.”

“That’s why I wanted to talk with Rebecca. I took the test and passed it on July 24. I was notified on a memo issued July 30, which I received on July 31 after visiting the DMV that very day, and then on August 21 I brought the actual test results to the branch office.”

“Hold on, please... Okay, I spoke with Rebecca and she barely got the information yesterday from Driver’s Safety. She will be going down to meet directly with the person at Driver’s Safety this week and WILL CALL you regarding the outcome.”

September 16

8:00am - Statewide office, Brett

“Hi. I’d like to speak with Rebecca.”

“I can help you.”

“I’m looking for an update on my Driver’s License”

“Drivers Referral is still in effect, so that’s why you haven’t been issued a driver’s license.”

“What does that mean, “Driver’s Referral? Am I being referred to Driver’s Safety? Is someone being referred to me?”

“The ‘Drivers Referral’ means you are being referred to the Driver’s Safety office.”

“But I was already at the Drivers Safety office, and passed the test.”

“Then you need to go to the field office and tell them that.”

“After I passed the test, I went back to the field office on August 31 and showed them the test results in person. They referred me to your office. I spoke with Rebecca, in your office and she was going to meet personally with Driver’s Safety. That’s why I was hoping to speak with Rebecca.”

“You have to go to the field office and they will personally call Driver’s Safety and at that time take off the Driver Referral status. The only way you can take off the Driver’s Referral is at the field office. I can’t do that for you here. That’s why Rebecca could do nothing. That’s why Phillip could do nothing. It’s got to be done in person at the field office.”

“Brett, would you say that it’s probably true that if I hadn’t called this morning and spoken with you that I wouldn’t have known to go back to the office?”

“Yes, I would say that’s true.”

“Now if I make an appointment with the field office over the ‘net’, it will take about three weeks?”

“That’s correct”

I felt I was getting somewhere this morning. If I talked to enough people at the statewide office, maybe we could come to a consensus, or better yet, a solution! I figured I could call maybe 10 or 15 times before I got someone I had already spoken with.

8:15 am - Varen, Statewide Office

“There’s still a Driver’s Safety Referral. You need to speak to them.”

“I did speak to them, and they said I couldn’t talk to my case worker.”

“What?”

“They said, “Is she expecting your call?” and I said, ‘she probably is if everybody else gets the same treatment I’ve received.’ They said she doesn’t speak with people after she has finished with them. Instead, they asked me to have your office call them directly.

That’s why I’d like to speak to Rebecca. I spoke with Rebecca on August 29. She said she was going to meet with them personally.”

“The only Rebecca I know isn’t here at the moment. I can’t take off the “Driver’s Referral.” I suggest you call Drivers License Issuance Department at 916-657-7790 or 7791. Maybe find out through them why your license is still pending. It says,

“‘Automated app on file.’ I’m not sure why your license hasn’t been issued.”

“Automated app on file. What does that mean?”

“It means your license should have been generated already.”

8:30 am - Drivers License Issuance Department

Called 7790 twice. Busy.

Called 7791 two times. After ringing 30 times, phone line went “busy”

Called 7790 again, and got through.

Judy answered.

“Okay, your drivers license will be approved today. I just need to put your application in the basket and it will be issued tomorrow.”

“Judy, that’s good news. I had spoken to someone in the statewide office this morning and they said I would have to go to the field office and have them personally call Driver’s Safety and then they could take off the “referral” status.”

“No, I just did that, so we can issue it tomorrow.”

“Judy, if I hadn’t called you this morning and followed up on this issue, would it have been issued anyway?”

“No it just would have sat here.”

“Then it’s a good thing I called this morning?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Well, thank you for your time today.”

“Thank you.”

September 17

4:15 pm - Nancy (Rebecca’s supervisor) called!

She just sent off the file to generate my Driver’s License. It may take up to 30 days, with the mail and whatnot. All that was really needed was for me to bring in the letter showing that I passed the test (which I did), and the path would have been cleared.

October 10

4:30 pm – Statewide office, Nancy

“Your Driver’s License was put in the mail to you today. You should receive it some time next week.”

“That’s great news, Nancy! Thank you very much!”

I hope it doesn’t get lost in the mail...

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