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The Department of Motor Vehicles

Lancaster Avenue is like any other road around Reading, Pennsylvania--lined with car dealerships, grocery stores, gas stations, and shopping plazas. It sounds innocent enough. But along the road, hidden behind a Wachovia Bank, is the black hole of despair known as the Department of Motor Vehicles--the DMV. This building is the only place in Berks County to get a driver's permit or license. I shudder when I drive past the DMV, as I recall the memories of being in that terrible establishment. Everything about it-- from the stressful atmosphere, to the sickeningly blank white walls, to the uncaring employees--makes me cringe. From the moment I stepped inside for the first time, I hated the DMV. The Berks County Department of Motor Vehicles is a thoroughly miserable place, where clients are not shown the respect they deserve.

One look at the inside of the DMV should be enough to warn the victim of the coming stress and misery; the interior is incredibly disheartening. Usually, the experience begins on the sidewalk outside, at the end of a long line of people. Sandwiched between Pet Supplies Plus and the New China Restaurant in a shopping plaza, the exterior is plain and white. Large, dark windows attempt to hide the interior. Inside, the layout is drab at best. Upon entering the one huge room, clients are greeted by the cheerless face of the employee at the front desk. Often, the only smile is that of Governor Ed Rendell, whose small portrait is the only decoration on the long, otherwise-blank white walls. The carpet is the same sad, bluish-gray color as the cubicles and desks that divide the back of the enormous room into departments. Several rows of black

plastic chairs, all facing toward the section of desks, seat the clients who anxiously await their turn. This drab, uncomfortable layout does nothing to ease the tensions of the people who come to the DMV.

The very set-up of the DMV adds to the constant atmosphere of stress. It was designed for practicality, not for comfort. I was shocked by this approach when I first came to the DMV. It was my sixteenth birthday, and I was there for the very first time, waiting to take the written portion of the driving test in order to obtain a permit. I was very well prepared for the test, and I had not been nervous at all that day until I entered through the door. While standing in line for at least half an hour, I hardly spoke to my mom at all--a sign that I was starting to worry. As the line slowly progressed, I watched as the people in front of me were directed to other departments, given forms to fill out, or told to leave. The serious, uncaring face of the man at the front desk never changed for any of the clients. I was scared to approach such an unfriendly person. When he finally directed us to the black plastic chairs, there was nothing to do but sit and watch the people at the desks in front of us. Unlike most waiting areas, this one has no television, no music, no paintings on the wall, and no magazines to read. The waiting area, like the rest of the DMV, was set up for practicality, and practicality alone. This clear lack of concern for the client's comfort makes the atmosphere inside of the DMV even more tense and stressful.

The set-up of the DMV is not only uncomfortable, but also disrespectful. Here, not even the parents of the young drivers are treated as valued clients. A parent must stand in the parking lot behind the building while his or her teenager is being evaluated for the road test. Three years ago, on a cold February morning, my mom took my brother to get his driver's license. She was told to come out of the car to wait until the test was done; she could stand in the little security booth if she wanted to. In the freezing weather, my mom left the car and walked to the security

booth. This tiny enclosure has no door to keep out the cold, no heat, and no chair. One adult can barely fit inside. The security booth is hardly an ideal place for stressed-out parents to wait, but the DMV apparently does not care. They are concerned with nothing but getting the job done, whatever it may be. Respect for the client is sacrificed for efficiency, both inside and outside the DMV.

Similarly, employees of the DMV have only one thing in mind: efficiency. They show no concern at all for the client on a personal basis. For example, the woman who assessed my first road test--which, most unfortunately, I did not pass--was disrespectful and lacked sympathy for the elderly man taking the test before me. I was at the front of the line of cars in the parking lot, anxiously waiting to start the road test. As I sat in my car, I watched the man struggle to perform even the most basic driving tasks, like turning the headlights on and using turn signals. His daughter stood in the parking lot, watching him. After an unsuccessful attempt to parallel park, the DMV employee stopped the test, got out of the car, and walked over to the driver's daughter to tell her that her father had failed. The daughter was obviously upset, and wanted to know why her father hadn't passed. Angry and frustrated, the employee began to list all of the reasons for the failure; she clearly thought this explanation was a waste of her time. Was she aware that this man had just lost a major part of his independence? Probably. Did she seem to care at all? No. Even though the elderly man would no longer be able to drive safely, he still deserved respect at the very least. No kind words were offered by the employee--she didn't speak to him after she got out of the car. In her eyes, he was a second-class citizen, and a waste of her time.

All of the employees that I have encountered at the DMV have been unsympathetic toward their clients. However, no employee has been less sympathetic or less emotional than the one who sat in the passenger seat of my car during my second road test. His eyes were hidden

behind his dark sunglasses, which he wore throughout the entire test, despite the cloudy weather. He walked over to my car, asked me to sign a paper, and sat down in the passenger seat, all without any sort of greeting. During the test, he gave me directions in a flat, emotionless voice, directing me through the quiet neighborhood behind the DMV. After driving safely back to the lot, I parked the car and turned to the passenger, expecting him to indicate the quality of my performance. But to my surprise, he was already exiting the vehicle, without a word. I turned off the car and jumped out to follow him. "Did I pass?" I asked frantically. He turned to stare at me with a blank expression, and wordlessly beckoned me to follow him. I was terrified. I remember thinking he was going to arrest me, or fine me, or make sure that I never drove a vehicle ever again. His total lack of friendliness completely ruined what should have been the happiest moment of my teenage existence.

The man's blank expression and complete silence had convinced me to expect the worst. I was shaking as I followed him into the dreaded building, where he led me to a desk. He started to type something on a computer, all without uttering a word, without changing his facial expression, and without removing the sunglasses. I asked him again if I had passed the driving test. He responded by asking me the last four digits of my social security number. Amidst the shock and fear, I couldn't even focus enough to remember such a critical number. I told him I had no idea what it was, and finally, his expression changed. He was angry. I listened to a short rant about how I was incredibly irresponsible for failing to learn my social security number. The employee took a piece of paper, wrote down four digits, and handed it to me. I recognized the numbers at once, and realized that he had all of my information on the computer in front of him. He had asked the question only to embarrass me. After directing me to get my picture taken at the front of the room, he stood up and walked away. This man was the very worst representative

of the DMV that I have ever encountered. Not only did he have no friendly gestures to offer, but he also went out of his way to make me more nervous by refusing to speak to me, and finally lecturing me about my lack of responsibility. He is the most outstanding example of the disrespectful, miserable atmosphere of the DMV.

With no respect or concern for clients at all, the DMV is a miserable, stressful experience. When I wove through the crowd to exit through the front door, license in hand, I was ecstatic--mostly because I knew I was free from coming back to the DMV for a long time. Though I am now a comfortable six hundred miles away from that horrible building, I still remember vividly the experiences I had there. I would like to stay far away from the uncaring employee with the sunglasses, the cheerless rows of plastic chairs, and the mocking, smiling portrait of Governor Ed Rendell. But I know that someday, I will inevitably return to that horrible building on Lancaster Avenue--a reunion that I would much rather avoid.