

15 MINUTES

Driving lessons

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

Florida Weekly Correspondent

A lit up, summertime Florida sky is something to see: the glittering Gulf of Mexico, reflecting that sky, as you drive over the bridge that takes you down onto Fort Myers Beach. Of course, you'll need to learn to drive before making a trip like that.

With luck you may find your driving instructor to be named Paul Brewer. Mr. Brewer, appearing tall and thin in Wrangler blue jeans with a short-sleeve, blue button-down shirt, sunglasses, a brown visor, a mustache and grown-out curly hair, possibly resembles Kurt Vonnegut (his sense of humor makes it a definite). He grew up in Buffalo and graduated from Ithaca College with a degree in Music, in 1969.

In the 1970s he played piano "just down from Madison Square Garden," he recalls, with a jazz trio that entertained at the Sheraton Hotel's bar — Sally's — in Manhattan on 53rd Street and 7th Avenue.

He spotted talk show host David Letterman and boxing promoter Don King there, to name a few. Rock groups such as WAR — a funk band from Long Beach, California best known for their hit "Low Rider" — passed through.

"They went upstairs and came back a different person," Mr. Brewer said with the warm charm of comic timing, while simultaneously teaching a student how to move into the middle of an intersection with a yellow light and execute a perfect left hand turn.

"When you drive, you create your own

safety," Mr. Brewer said. He added that this is his "general philosophy" as a driving instructor.

His student stopped abruptly, started again, then stopped again with a jerk, causing them to bump back against their seats.

"Sometimes she'll burp you a little bit," he said, not missing a beat.

Mr. Brewer said his favorite musician is Ray Charles.

A veteran of over 20,000 driving lessons and now in his 18th year of teaching it, he is expert at making students — and even the occasional, unobtrusive visitor to his vehicle — feel at ease.

"You gotta get people talkin.' You gotta get 'em to have fun," he said. "That's show-biz." Later, as his student passed the corner of Winkler Avenue and Soloman Boulevard near the Edison Mall, he began singing "On Broadway."

"They say that I won't last too long on Broadway..."

But they're dead wrong I know they are 'cause I can play this here guitar And I won't quit 'till I'm a Star..."

He seems to take a certain mildly manic pleasure in the riskiness of being alongside inexperienced drivers.

"Do you ever feel like you're just waiting for something to come out of the corner and ... bam!?" he asked rhetorically.

It's notable that in his entire career instructing new drivers he has never been in more than a fender bender, which happened to him a grand total of one time. He said he is,



Brewer

at all times, alert and aware, ready to use his emergency break or subtly adjust a student's turn to put them in the proper lane. He said his reflexes are "incredibly fast."

"If there's a fly in the room I can usually get 'im," he said, once again observing his student execute the same left hand turn, at the same intersection. "I've only got a fraction of a second for things to go wrong."

He takes an undeniable pleasure in the variety of people he meets, and especially the specific qualities that make each student unique.

Mr. Brewer says he has taught — with his own limited knowledge and the aid of instruction booklets — drivers who speak the following five languages: English, Russian, Spanish, French, and Thai.

He remembers a French eye doctor and his wife. "I taught them both."

He remembers stopping for gas with a

Thai student. She was in the driver's seat; he was outside the vehicle.

"She's backing the car into the 7-Eleven, I'm going 'Stop!'" (She didn't ultimately back all the way into the convenience store). "I learned never to step out of a car with the student in it."

Thinking, Mr. Brewer stresses gracefully, "is the secret to being a cool, calm, collected driver."

Mr. Brewer said he never takes his student's individuality for granted, as he instructs drivers of all ages, levels of experience, and backgrounds.

"It's a challenge to see how each student goes...improves...what makes them learn...or what makes them not learn."

The location of each lesson, he said, is tailored to the individual, if necessary, utilizing the lights and intersections where each student learns most effectively.

"The psychology has a lot to do with it — if they don't feel relaxed and comfortable, they're never going to learn."

People are not interchangeable, Mr. Brewer agreed.

The "test of the day" was the student finding her way back to Starbucks in downtown Fort Myers, where she had begun the lesson an hour before. It was now about 5 p.m. and dusk was still hours away. Mr. Brewer had at least another lesson or two to go before he was through.

At a red light, his hand rested coolly and comfortably on the special emergency brake installed for him to stop the car whenever necessary.

"I'm certainly not forgetting that at any time she could hit that gas on me," he said.

Mr. Brewer teaches personal driving lessons out of the A Auto American Driving School. ■

Service. Reliability. Integrity.

That's Cool for Business.



Keep your cool with Modern Service, a leader in commercial building services in Southwest Florida.

Experts in design, installation, maintenance and service in:

- Air Conditioning
- Refrigeration
- Plumbing
- Ice Machine
- Electrical
- Controls

Your best choice for exceptional service, value and excellence in customer care since 1965!

1-888-modern-1

MODERN
Service for Home & Business

www.ModernService.com