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Pearson family caters to teens' driving ambitions

Chris and Lisa Pearson are two of the nicest young family types you'd ever want to meet. When I called Green Light Driving School to ask for an interview with the owner, Chris Pearson said, "Can I bring Lisa, too?" Sure I said. "And Corbin?" Of course. Bring Corbin along, too.

Corbin's the three-week old bundled-up tyke in the photograph, who slept peacefully through his interview, even when a crowd gathered around to coo at him. Lisa's his mother. Her seven-year old Jacob wanted to come along also, she said, but it was a school day.



PHOTO BY PAUL SULLIVAN
Chris and Lisa Pearson own Green Light Driving School and baby Corbin will be along for the ride, for at least the next 15 years.

Green Light Driving School is truly a family business. Lisa's mother is the office manager and her father is a driving instructor for Green Light. Although Lisa is licensed to teach driving, she doesn't. "My favorite job is being the mom," she said. "I get to stay home and take the calls from students."

The Pearsons, Elburn residents, got the green light for their driving school in 1997. Chris came up with the name and the company's logo while brushing his teeth and staring at the Arm and Hammer logo on a box of baking logo.

"Green Light's easy to remember," said Chris. "We thought about Pearson's, but nobody cares about that. So from a marketing standpoint Green Light works." He held up a Starbucks coffee cup, also with a logo in a circle. "Like that."

Chris, who has a bachelor's degree in occupational safety from the University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, said he always dreamed of owning his own business. Lisa, with a degree in social work from the same university, said the business affords her the kind of flexibility she likes as a mother.

Perhaps you've seen Chris or one of the other instructors with a student driving around the Fox Valley area in a car sporting the distinctive Green

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Light logo and "student-driver" signs on the roof. The Pearsons now have seven employees and four cars for their school, including a hybrid, one of the first in the Fox Valley area to be used for driving instructions.

Both Lisa and Chris said that teenagers generally improve their driving skills more easily and quicker than mature adults or adults from another culture. "Teens are used to video driving games, riding lawnmowers, or golf carts," Lisa said. "They've already got the basics."

Current Illinois law calls for a teen driver to spend 25 hours driving with a licensed adult, and requires the adult(s) to sign off on the teen's having completed the mandatory hours. A pending change in state law may require new drivers to have 50 hours of time behind the wheel with an adult and 10 of the 50 hours must be at night.

Some public schools no longer offer driver's education. Green Light Driving School, with its main office in Batavia, offers driver's ed programs at Marmion Academy in Aurora and St. Edward High School in Elgin. Green Light's 30-day driving course consists of both classroom work and six hours behind the wheel. The cost is \$400. A one-semester course at area high schools averages about \$375, said Chris.

Many of the students at Green Light begin at age 15. "A lot of parents want their kids to have as much driving experience as possible by the time they're 16," Chris said. Summer is the busy time of the year for the Pearsons. "Kids just come out of the woodwork in the summer," said Lisa.

In eight years of teaching teenagers and adults to drive, Green Light Driving School has had only one minor accident. One of their cars was rear-ended. "Other drivers are real good about giving us space," Chris said. "We drive slowly. We've got two sets of brakes."

A bizarre incident nearly caused an accident once when a student drove over a golf ball in the road. The ball squirted out from under the wheel, hit the curb and shot straight back at the open window beside Chris, who held up his hands and ducked. Fortunately, the golf ball hit the center post, leaving the student to wonder what she had done to frighten her instructor so.

*- Know someone who would be an interesting subject for Slice of Life?
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