

Soccer Mom

A 2001 Chrysler Town and Country minivan in Patriot Blue Pearl (which ironically described the dull navy color) sat in the driveway. Bestowed upon me after finally getting my license at age 16, the old family van had a check engine light that perpetually shone, a driver's side window that refused to roll down, and an AC that came and went (but mostly went). Mysterious stains camouflaged the carpet's original color and a peculiar odor engulfed the interior of the car: a delicate mix of wet dog and gym shoes. Less than excited to be driving this beast of a vehicle, I begged my parents to reconsider their decision. I came up with every excuse I could think of to persuade them to get me a new car: better gas mileage would save money, a more reliable car would be safer during the frigid Wisconsin winters, everyone else drives a new, little car! My parents' answer was unwavering and a resounding "no" rang in my ears.

My parents believed that driving the family van would build character. More so, my frugal parents also refused to invest in a new car while the van still ran. Sentenced to driving a minivan for the rest of my high school career, I grudgingly accepted the burden because even driving a minivan trumped riding the school bus. The occasional, mildly irritating comments from friends fueled my bitterness towards the old clunker. I became known as "soccer mom." This unofficial title declared me the automatic chauffeur for my friends and family; from school dances to play rehearsals, I carted the masses around. Not all bad, a drive with my friends generally consisted of laughter, good music, and new memories. Driving to our school's homecoming dance with six other girls crammed into my minivan while we simultaneously belted out the lyrics "if you like piña coladas" was nothing short of a priceless experience. Locking the keys in the van, forcing my friends to lie on the frozen parking lot ground with

flashlights in search of the spare key underneath the rear bumper, also proved to be a “priceless” experience. While I couldn’t seem to get rid of the minivan, the memories didn’t leave either.

I would never admit to my parents that they were right, but the van did build character. After a year or so, I cared less what anyone thought about my van; at least I possessed a vehicle that could get me to my intended destination with only minor difficulty. Being in the repair shop so often that I was on a first-name basis with the mechanic may not have been the greatest, but he always got the “old girl” up and running again. Similarly, I started to care less what anyone thought about *me*. Learning that my high school reputation wasn’t ruined after driving into the school parking lot with a failing muffler, creating an ungodly sound, was not only surprising, but also freeing. Finding that most people didn’t care about my slightly embarrassing moments allowed me to do activities I was previously afraid to do because of potential ridicule from my peers. The initial shame of driving a minivan started to melt away and exposed a different side of me.

Slowly, like a turtle running through peanut butter, the old minivan started to grow on me. A shining moment came after I successfully attempted to parallel park the minivan. I inched forward and backward, into a space meant more for a compact car than the family van, but upon completing the grueling task, I knew I was one with the minivan. Finding out that two kayaks fit snugly in the back of my van was also a truly monumental day. Or after discovering that my van was the perfect storage locker for my ski equipment, I could be ready to go at a moment’s notice. Kayaking on Silver Lake until rain started pouring down or skiing with my dad in northern Michigan brought up memories from my high school days that I will never forget. In an ironic twist, my van got nominated as the “coolest car” of my senior class. Despite losing to a

2015 Mini Cooper, I felt pride in my van's even being nominated. My minivan made all these little adventures possible; my minivan helped make these memories.

The minivan finally stopped running and was officially laid to rest at the local junk yard one month before I graduated. If I could tell my 16-year-old self that she would eventually miss that beast, she would've laughed in my face. Once I started to worry less about my peers' thoughts, my initial bitterness towards the minivan vanished. I believe that at the most basic level, my minivan was in the background of some of my best memories of high school. If I never stopped caring about others' perception of me and my van, I would have never appreciated any of the memories. Without my minivan, without the embarrassing moments and the moments I wish I could relive, I would have never become the person I am today.