

People

Family is driving force behind Gwen Kirby's recovery

KATE GILDERDALE
Correspondent

When 74-year-old Gwen Kirby passed her driving test this month, she had a special reason to celebrate.

In April, 1978, Kirby was driving home on Ninth Line when her car was struck by a train, and she suffered severe head injuries. "I have no memory of the accident," she said.

"From what they tell me there was a storm, and it was icy, and I was coming home from work and just slid into the train somehow." She was admitted to the stroke unit at Riverdale, "because although I didn't have a stroke, I had a lot of problems in that line," she explained.

"I don't even remember going there, I just woke up one morning and there I was. The nurse brought me a basin and a towel and I thought, 'What do I do with this?'"

In addition to her loss of memory, she had been blinded in her right eye, and later underwent two operations to restore her sight. "They really didn't know whether I would come out of it. I had to re-learn everything that I ever knew."

She was in hospital for about three months and, because she was in the stroke unit, her driver's licence was automatically suspended.

"No one thought about it at that point, but the next year things were coming back to me and I wondered what had happened with my licence." She applied for a temporary licence,

but at that stage she still couldn't see very well and gave up her attempt at driving.

Later, she contacted Jack Barkey at Stouffville Driving School, who helped her re-gain her skills and gave her the confidence to take the test. "He and his wife were wonderful, I don't know where he gets all his patience from."

The first time she took her

test, Kirby recalled, was in 1954, on the day Hurricane Hazel struck. She was living in Unionville at the time.

"That's why I took my test - I wanted to be able to drive to the city. Now I'm content just to go shopping or to see somebody."

Her family has been immensely supportive throughout her recovery, noted Kirby.

"They're just terrific." And the feeling is mutual, said her granddaughter, Ruthann Murphy.

"We're really proud of her. She's gone through a lot and it took a lot of spunk to get her licence back."

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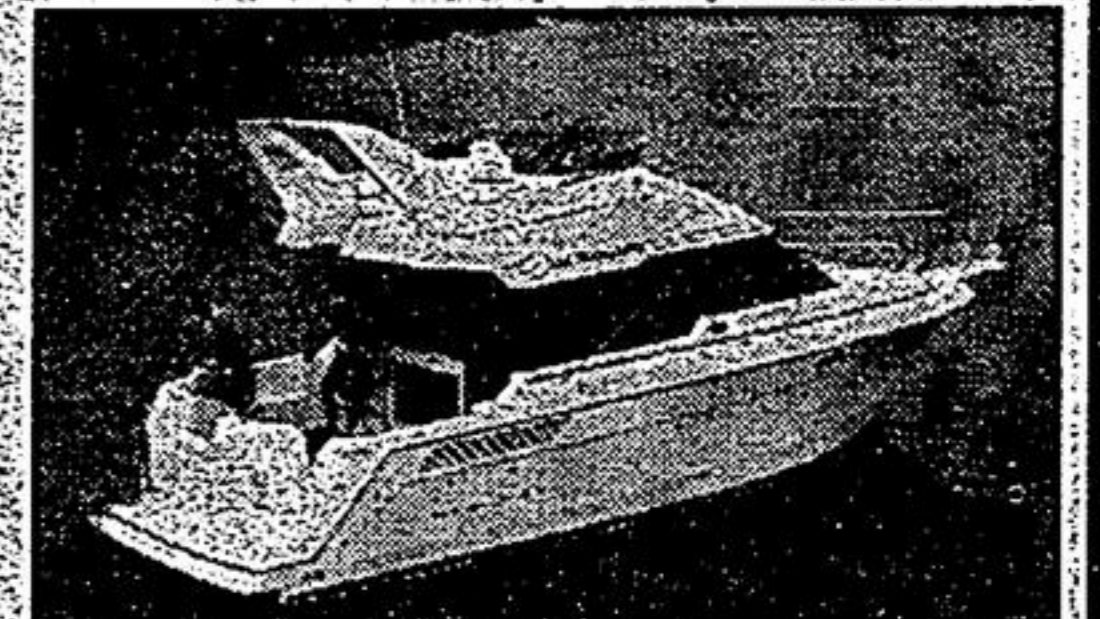
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