

Here's why drivers should yield to funeral processions

By Ryan Helfenbein

It seems that more people are on the roads this year than we've seen in quite a while. More traveling, vacationing and getting out of the house all together. When in our travels trying to reach point B from point A, nothing confuses drivers more than seeing the sight of the train of vehicles flashing those hazards and displaying bright lights in the middle of the day. Yes, I'm talking about the good ol' funeral procession. This honorable, respectful tribute of escorting a loved one to a final place of rest is something that often brings much confusion to not only the average driver but often to the undertaker leading the procession itself. When do I yield, should I stop and most commonly, how can all those cars go through the light ... it's red!

Before we look at legalities of a funeral procession, let's go back in time to see where this whole idea came about. The funeral cortège (a group of individuals coming together to escort a decedent to a place of rest) dates back to ancient times. The Egyptian *kher-heb* (the funeral priest) would organize the procession with the mummified remains being placed on a sledge pulled by oxen or men. Family and servants, along with professional mourners, would then follow behind. The Greeks had their own version of a funeral procession with the deceased being carried on a bier or table by family members. The Romans had a similar tradition but added an extensive parade similar to that of a New Orleans second line. Many moons later this was transformed with the use of an elaborate horse-drawn buggy, called a hearse. It was not until 1907 that the first petrol-powered hearses went into production and in the 1920s when automobiles became a dominant mode of transportation, the traditional funeral procession that we see today was born. Nonetheless, we have to imagine that regardless of the time frame and method of transport, people questioned how they are to manage an intersection when faced with this collection of slow moving individuals and now automobiles.

Right out of the gate, we must understand that there are different laws in each state and even some cities across the US. As an example, Alabama has no rules governing funeral processions at all, yet the city of Birmingham has made it illegal to cut through a procession. When it comes to Maryland however, we do have written laws specifically concerning who has the right of way at an intersection. It falls

under The Maryland Transportation Code, Article – Transportation, Section 21-207. It reads that a vehicle which is part of a funeral procession identified by headlights and warning lamps flashing (ie. Hazards) may continue through or make a turn at an intersection if the first vehicle in the procession already entered the intersection before the signal changed from green to red. Furthermore, it reads that a vehicle that is not in the procession may not enter the intersection, even if it is facing a green signal, unless it can do so without crossing the path of the procession. All in all, the Maryland code concerning funeral processions at intersections, defines that the procession has the right of way regardless of what the traffic light might display.

“Pretty simple, Ryan, but why do drivers in some small towns, such as Rock Hall, MD pull to the side of the road to allow a funeral procession to pass? Is that the law as well?” Quite frankly ... the answer is no that is not law, that is simply respect. It is still very common in some areas of our state and this nation, that cars not part of a funeral procession will pull to the side of the road and allow the procession to pass. It is simply a sign of respect to not only the decedent but to the grieving family and friends accompanying that individual to their final place of rest. In some areas, we find individuals even getting out of their vehicles after pulling to the side of the road and either placing their hand over their heart or standing at attention while the hearse and procession pass them by. You talk about getting goosebumps.... that gets me every time!

“So what is the worst that can happen if I don't yield to a funeral procession?” A few years ago, a Jimmy John's sandwich shop employee in Michigan learned the hard way when he made the decision to cut into a funeral procession. With the laws in Michigan being very similar to that of Maryland, the delivery driver not only received a ticket for failing to yield, but lost his job and probably was late getting that lunch delivered.

It is actually very simple to resolve any confusion when it comes to encountering a funeral procession. That is to simply use good manners, show respect for the grieving family and do what you would want someone to do for you if you were in that same situation. This is the Golden Rule, and when it comes to funerals it's a guideline that will never steer you wrong.

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