

Woman shines in male-dominated limo business

WHAT I DO: Meryl Kelso, Chauffeur

By **Edward Guthmann** Published 4:00 am, Monday, August 2, 2010



Photo: Chad Ziemendorf, The Chronicle

Meryl Kelso is chauffeur and owner/operator of Dash Limousine & Sedan Service and is pictured in San Francisco, Calif., on Friday, July 23, 2010

*Meryl Kelso wears many hats as the owner of **Dash Limousine and Sedan Service** in San Mateo. Reservations, dispatch and billing. Marketing, hiring and training. Even cleaning and maintenance on her small fleet of Lincoln Town Car sedans and one Lincoln Navigator SUV.*

But it's the driving that she loves. Kelso, 55, lives in San Mateo and has a son, 20, and a daughter, 18. She estimates that less than 5 percent of the owners and drivers in the limo business are women.

I think I was born with a steering wheel in my hands. As a young kid I could identify every car on the road, and couldn't wait to drive.

I've always done male-dominated jobs. When I left home I was a bicycle messenger in Washington, D.C. In my early 20s I got my first driving job in San Francisco operating a 20-foot step van for Munchie Merchant.

Then I met a couple of guys who were cab drivers so I thought I would try it. I knew I couldn't be confined behind a desk. I drove for Yellow Cab for a year and a half. I met my ex-husband in the cab and got off the road to raise my kids.

I started Dash in January 2006. Being a chauffeur is largely a mix of common sense and a lot of charm. A simple thing like driving smoothly and not jerking the car around can make a big difference for the passenger.

The work is really about connecting with people - if they want to be connected with. Some want to work when they get in the car or they want to sleep - so I disappear, become invisible. I'm constantly refining the skill of knowing when to speak up and when to shut up.

When I connect with people, it's so gratifying. And it can be the smallest thing - just some appreciation or interest.

I've been advised to get out of the car and spend more time in the office in order to grow the business, which I will, but I don't think I will ever give up driving entirely. The variety of people is just tremendous: CEOs, academics, biotech, venture capitalists, investment bankers and the occasional celebrity.

I have two part-time drivers who work for me. I try to match the driver to the job. Other limo services from out of town, out of state and Europe send me their high-maintenance clients. They know I can handle them. On one job I was told: "Do not initiate a conversation with this guy. You cannot make any mistakes. You have to be more than perfect."

This just made me really nervous. So I pick him up, he gives me a big warm handshake and he says, "I've heard all about you." I drove him down to Monterey and we talked all the way. He was totally cool.

Sometimes I get an all-day job. It's called an "As Directed." They give you a list of stops, but it could change completely. Before the GPS it was a real misery to do that kind of job. You'd have to stop and look at a map, or call somebody and ask for directions.

For long rides I keep a pillow and a blanket in the trunk. I do some organ-transplant team transportation - the team of people who are called out when there's a brain death. I take them to places like Fresno, Modesto, San Luis Obispo. They might've worked a 24-hour shift, so I try to keep them comfortable.

No one has ever smoked pot or even drunk anything in the car. That's more for stretches. I have Lincoln Town Car sedans and an SUV. Stretches are fun for weddings or proms, but now they're really frowned upon (by businesspeople), because they look too ostentatious in this economy.

I always look professional. I wear an elegant suit - black, gray or taupe. I buy high-quality clothing because cheaper fabrics wear out fast and I cannot abide a shabbily dressed chauffeur. I used to wear black high heels, but running through airports is killing me. So the longer I do this, the lower the heels get.

It's a hard living and it's inconsistent. The hours are terrible and business is cyclical, especially in this economic environment. And yet, with all its aggravation - hellish traffic, delayed flights, waking at 3 a.m. - it's the best job I've ever had.

<http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Woman-shines-in-male-dominated-limo-business-3179765.php#ixzz0vYwAg68A>