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This proved a no-go. "I just didn't feel that I was making much progress toward the goal of raising the taxi standard," Spurling explains. After three years plus change struggling in a management role, he decided to take the leap. "I severed ties to begin what I hoped would be a better taxi company for the independent contract driver and the customer," he says.

At the time, the perception of taxis as a shit industry in Eugene was well deserved, Spurling says. "It was my belief that the ride experience was more often than not poor for the customer because the majority of taxi drivers were miserable in their profession," he says. High leases for drivers and too many cabs on the road contributed to a self-perpetuating sump of bad feelings and perceived sleaziness.

Spurling and Korinek at once tackled the root cause of taxi discontent — the drivers. "My theory for a solution was simple," Spurling says. "If the drivers had a better environment in which to do their work, they would have better attitudes," which, in turn, would lead to a more congenial public image and repeat business.

Even for a person as wary as Korinek, this newfangled business model has proven successful. "Because the company is fair, because we set it up that way," Korinek explains, "we don't have to cheat anyone."

CALL ME

Like priests and proctologists, taxi drivers tend to inherit the sort of private info most folks keep from even their best friends. They are privy to the deepest drunken desires and conked-out confessions of absolute strangers and, because of this, cabbies tend to be either sullen, pessimistic loners or gregarious philosophers of the street.

Go Taxi driver DJ Penselin is of the latter persuasion. He is the polar opposite of Robert Deniro's Travis Bickle, the alienated cabbie anti-hero who cruises Manhattan picking up all the "whores, skunk pussies, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal" fares in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. Sharp, flirty, smart and always ready to talk, Penselin is the anti-Bickle — a man of the people, especially if the people are women.

"I have noticed that the more entertaining and outgoing the driver is," Penselin says, "the more, and better, their fares and tips become." To generate a steady and loyal clientele, Penselin networks during his down time through social media like Facebook as well as by texting friends and generally trying to spark excitement about getting in his cab.

It's a canny move: Not only is Penselin drumming up business and advertising himself as a kind of local celebrity, but he's maintaining a regular Rolodex of familiar faces — a faithful posse that sometimes fills an entire night's worth of driving. He has more than 600 contacts in his cell phone — names, addresses, sometimes notes to himself about who's a good tipper, who's prone to ditching rides. He knows most of his fares by name, and he's one of those avuncular dudes who can call women "honey" and "sweetie" and not take a shot to the chops. The guy has game.

He's also a virgin. "I'm an open book," says Penselin, a Eugene native who graduated from Willamette High School. Just a few years back, he was studying to be a minister at Northwest Christian College, and he is not oblivious of the irony of the synaptic gap that yawns between serving Jesus and working a job where he can wind up with a stripper's ass in his face. Penselin is strictly straightedge, though he's not necessarily against drug use — he draws a distinction between natural intoxicants and "dirty" drugs like meth — and he certainly has a thing for strippers.

TAKIN' A RIDE

Korinek is a tough nut — wry, slowly, taciturn. He can seem reluctant to offer strangers the benefit of the doubt, opting instead to wait, watch, listen and basically withhold judgment until he gets a good read on your character. For people guilty of overabundant faith in the goodness of homo sapiens, Korinek's cautious demeanor might come across as downright cynical or snobby, though really he's just being shrewd. Caution is a smart way to go — for taxi drivers at least, if not for people in general.

"This is one of the darkest, shadiest industries on Earth," Korinek says not long after picking me up for a late-night ride-along. "Sometimes I'm in here with the scariest people in town." He says he's seen a lot of people go into the taxi business thinking they'd make great cab drivers, then burn out quickly.

"Most people could be a great cab driver," Korinek says. "It's usually other factors that keep people out. First, many people hate doing it. Seems easy, then after their first day, they are done." Another obstacle to being a taxi driver is "all the things that can happen in a decent person's life," such as DUIs, traffic infractions, accidents or poor health.

In the end, however, whether someone takes to driving seems to depend on intangibles like attitude, tolerance and flexibility. "You just have to like it," he says.

TAXICAB CONFESSIONS

"This is a great job," Penselin tells me, and I believe him. He usually drives Wednesdays through Saturdays, from 5 pm till 5 am, and whenever he's driving, he's also dispatching Go Taxi's weekend fleet of between five and seven cabs. He keeps track of everything in his head, juggling times and locations — which cab's where, how long before arrival, who's doing the airport run. He rarely uses his GPS. An evening's take can range anywhere between \$100 and \$250, Penselin says.

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Despite all this, Penselin seems to find something more than just financial remuneration in his role of tooling Eugene peeps about town for money — a means of plugging into the scene in a meaningful and rewarding way.

Much of this job satisfaction Penselin attributes directly to Go Taxi itself, which he sets apart from other local cab companies. "I wanted to work for a company that looked out for both drivers and customers," he says, "not be greedy like other taxi companies ... I get upset when customers think I am ripping them off. Not all taxi drivers are out to screw the customer over."

I TOUCH MYSELF

Saturday, approx. 11 pm, Go Taxi ride-along notes: Prim and pretty, our grade-school teacher was on fire, having located that perfect fulcrum of drunken equilibrium where we shoot our best pool and charm even ourselves. She was burning bright inside the cab. There was nothing sloppy about her. Our teacher was the quintessence of elegance.

"You put me in the karaoke bar, and I'm gonna turn everybody's shit on!" she told us. Her friends took turns egging her on and cautioning her that the enemy of privacy was riding in the passenger seat.

But she was immune to warning. This teacher would have her moment. "The truth of the matter is, the general public is going to say, 'A teacher drinking? Fuck yeah!'" she shouted. "I'm really stressed out! Me touching myself tonight is the best thing that's happened to me in six months! I'm a great teacher! I am jackpot, pretty much, any way you slice it!"

"There's a reporter in the car," somebody warned from the backseat.

"I'm not giving him any permanent information that could get me fired!" she shot back, pertinently. It was glorious to behold. This was the beauty and terror of driving cab — unpredictable, explosive, fragile, heartfelt and totally human. **EW**



ADAM KORINEK



DJ PENSELIN