

What Drives a Driver?

In early March, CTAA faxed a survey to all our members. We asked them to photocopy the survey and pass it along to drivers to fill out, then send it back to us. And you responded in huge numbers! We raced to log in nearly 2,000 responses by press time.

by Chris Winters

As you can see from the facts peppered through this article, we received responses from all regions of the country and from many different types of people.

We've tried to quote as many anecdotes as possible, but printing them all would fill this entire magazine! We appreciate the effort of all those who took the time to fill out and return the survey.

The Stories They Can Tell

While each driver has unique experiences, nearly everyone who put pen to paper wanted to let us know that the most rewarding aspect of their job was, as Belva Sessions from South Central Arkansas Transit said, "Helping people have dependable transportation for whatever purpose or reason."

Many drivers also echoed Patricia Lambert from Frederick County (Md.) Transit, who said, "The passengers have become my extended family over the past ten years, I've made many wonderful friends." The number of drivers who talked about the personal relationships they've built with their passengers could defrost even the coldest heart. One driver from South Carolina found out how much her passengers cared when her grandmother died. Her passengers, she said, "Took up \$5 and gave me a card with so much love."

The stories many drivers told were remarkable. They ranged from humdrum (a driver with 30+ years under his belt who said that his most memorable experience was, "Same ole, same ole") to heartbreaking (the drivers who saw the results of child abuse) to hilarious (a driver from a resort town who said one of the most rewarding parts of his job was, "Bikinis on the bus").

Many, many drivers described driving in winter weather as the worst thing about their jobs, a number of them specifically mentioning the brutal winter most recently endured by the Midwest and Northeast.

We were surprised to find that transit vehicles are great places to meet your spouse. Eight people, including Ginette diBruno from Metro RTA in Wadsworth,

Ohio, met their future wife/husband while driving a bus, although we assume they all waited for the stop sign to propose.

Many drivers operate Head Start vehicles or other school transportation, and their experiences with children are priceless. Countless numbers of them put as their most memorable experience, "Playing Santa for the kids."

And Georgetta Robinson, working for RCAP Head Start in Richmond, Va., heard what must be the ultimate compliment from a child: "Ms. Robinson, I am going to be a bus driver some day." Jan Turman, from Hill County Community Action in Kingsland, Texas, noted that her favorite part of the job was, "Driving our Head Start kids and being a part of their growing up. They don't forget you."

As with many outdoor jobs, particularly in rural areas, there were inevitable encounters with animals. One driver from Florida remembered from many years before, "When the hog was running and a bear chasing it." Another driver from rural California was chased by a donkey. And without explaining how it got there, one driver described the difficulty of getting a live skunk off his bus without it spraying. Charles Miller, from JAUNT in Virginia, was bitten by a dog of a passenger he was assisting into a van while Dana Lytle, from CTSA of Placer County (Calif.) told us about a goose that honks and hisses at her whenever she drives by.

Several passengers talked about famous passengers they carried. Charlotte King, a driver from Big Bend Transit in Florida, said her most memorable experience was, "Talking with (country music star) Waylon Jennings just like I would the other clients. He told me to be proud of what I do and do it to my best." And Allen Everett, from Southbridge, Mass., cited transporting President Nixon.

Oddly, two drivers had much the same experience with a passenger losing her hair. Danny Terry, a driver at Central Virginia Transit Management in Lynchburg, Va., wrote for his most memorable experience: "Seeing a lady's wig blow off as I pulled up to let her on my bus. It just flew off her head like an airplane, steadily gaining altitude up into the air as she chased after it."

As could be expected, many drivers have had run-ins with angry people who are not shy about expressing their emotions. The bus Jesse Caines was driving, from the Lake Havasu City (AZ) Transit Service, was attacked by an elderly man with a cane after he became angry over the standard fare. One driver, who didn't specify a location, said that a disturbed man once held a razor blade to his own throat in front of the bus while police officers tried to talk him out of it. Other drivers have had passengers on the wrong side of the law: one driver saw an irate passenger punch a police officer in the face as they tried to take her to the station. Still others were held up or even mugged.

College towns seem to provide drivers with an abundance of funny stories. One driver from Advance Transit, serving the New Hampshire/Vermont area, wrote that the most memorable part of his job was the, "Different colors of hair." Several drivers wrote from Blacksburg Transit in Virginia (home of Virginia Tech University) about intoxicated passengers. One, the last person exiting a charter bus, had the misfortune of getting sick on the steps as he left, thus flushing away the deposit his organization had paid for the trip.

Every once in a while, a driver would tease us with the possibilities of a great story. One driver from Florida put down her most memorable experience as a cryptic: "I realized the total destruction a bus could do to person or property," but didn't follow up. We were left to wonder.

Other drivers relayed to us their misfortunes driving a bus. One driver from Louisiana had the drive-shaft fall completely off the van; several had their vehicles catch fire. And one poor soul from Tennessee backed her bus into a ravine.

And finally, it's tough to top the capacity of Arlene Clow's vehicle, from the Regional Transportation Program in Portland, Maine. She carried five generations of a family on one trip--from 3 months old to 86 years old!

In the end, it seems that many drivers who responded to the survey would agree with the following: driving a bus can be a challenging job, but when that sweet old lady or happy young child pats you on the shoulder and thanks you for doing such a wonderful job, the drudgery lifts away and you're left with the rare and substantial opportunity to help people on a daily basis.