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A longtime bus driver sets the Pace

Through 20 years and countless miles, Harley Fleming gets riders where they're going

By Dawn Reiss

Special to the Tribune
Published July 5, 2007

It's a typical day on Pace Route 322, a route Harley Fleming, 57, knows well. He wears a patch signifying a million miles behind the wheel with Pace, and he doesn't plan on stopping any time soon.

This is Fleming's third loop of the day, but he doesn't mind. Even though he has a chance to pick a new route four times every year, he's chosen this one for a decade.

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There are the regulars and newcomers and those he sees now and then. There are business people, low-income workers, retirees and school-age children.

There are people who like mass transportation and those who can't afford to buy a car.

No matter their background or reason, they all agree that riding the bus saves money, even if it means giving up a little freedom.

Some ride to work. Others take the bus for school or shopping.

There are those who have suspended licenses and those who want to use less gas for environmental or political reasons.

Here are a few of their stories:

It's just before 2:08 p.m., and Fleming has been driving for a few hours.

The bus has a handful of people on it, including Trinette Rogers, 34, who started taking the bus after too many unpaid parking tickets led to an impounded car and a suspended driver's license.

"One day I came out and they had booted my car," said Rogers, a single mother of two who lives in Maywood. "I couldn't afford to pay the tickets at that time. It was either rent or pay the tickets. That was it, I lost my car."

That was a year ago. Although Rogers knows she is saving money, she said there's "no way" she'd ride the bus if she had a car.

Fleming pulls the bus into Yorktown's parking lot. It's a chance to stretch

It's more than a festival.



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his legs and take a 20-minute lunch break. Today it's a bottle of water, a banana and two granola bars.

Sometimes Fleming window-shops in the mall or reads scripture, preparing for the Sunday school class he teaches. Today, he stands outside and enjoys the summer sunshine.

It's a big change from the okra-and-corn, horse-and-chicken farm Fleming grew up on in rural Tennessee. After graduating from high school, he wanted to see the world, so he came to Chicago.

After working as a busboy, he went into the Navy, becoming a sales and service office clerk on the USS Newport News in the early 1970s. Fleming then worked as a machine operator for 10 years.

Driving a bus gave him an avenue out of his factory job, a chance to make more money and meet new people. For the last 20 years, it's been his way of life.

"I like driving," Fleming said. "And I like being with people. I get a chance to help people. Just getting people from one point to another, on time, means a lot to people."

On the weekends, Fleming doesn't ride the bus. Instead he drives his 2002 Toyota Highlander to church and a few other places.

Fleming likes taking road trips to New Jersey, where the oldest of his two daughters lives, and visiting relatives in Tennessee, Texas and Louisiana.

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