

RIDING THE BUS WITH MARK

My name is Mark and I have been driving for Mountain Line for 30 years. It was freezing that first year, like -15° or something, with wind. I started driving solo the day after Thanksgiving and the rest is history.

I've driven all the routes. I've driven routes that don't exist anymore or ones that have changed.

Right now, the Route 12 is my favorite. It's a little more residential and it works for my schedule. I like starting early & getting off early.

If you are new to riding the bus and you want to start, I would say the number one thing is to be visible. I hear that all the time from other drivers, and it's happened to me a million times - people dressed in black head to toe, they are invisible. We just can't see them when we're coming down the road. Yeah, **I would say being visible is number one.**

And then of course, **you also have to be on time to the stop.** Today there were a lot of people running for the bus. It makes it hard for us drivers because we don't want to leave someone behind, but if we are already running late with traffic or weather and still you're 3 blocks away, we have to make that decision. I try not to do that too much, though.

And third, it can help if you know where you're going. It just gives you [the rider] some peace of mind.

Helping riders is part of our job as drivers, technically, but if you have a general idea of where you're going, that can help. Drivers should at least be able to get you pretty close to where you need to go, even if we don't know exactly where that is. We all have the radio and we can communicate with our base. We all know the drill.

I think some people think it's unsafe to ride the bus, but **per mile the bus is actually quite a bit safer to ride than your own vehicle, taking into consideration traffic and parking.** Yeah, that's a big one. I think a lot of people say they think it's unsafe, but really I think a lot of people are just afraid to try something new.

And sure, getting onto a public transit system with a lot of other people, not knowing what to expect, can make people have a little anxiety. That's why **whenever someone says, 'This is my first time' I try to make them feel comfortable and talk it up. I want people to continue to ride,** you know?

Even if someone's ridden the bus, if they want to load their bike on the front rack, it's maybe out of the ordinary, so that can make people feel nervous. But bringing your bike on the bus really can further your trip pretty efficiently. I think it's a good thing that we added bike racks.

I also think a lot of people are afraid of getting lost on the bus system or afraid of not knowing how the system works. All of us (*bus operators*) know the whole system. **We know all the different routes, where they go, and what they connect with.** I think that eases people's nerves a lot of times. And we have the Transit app now. Anyone can look up the Mountain Line website to find the app and it tells you all the schedules and routes. It tells you if the bus is on time and I think it's been really helpful for people. We also have our paper schedules, too ... which is what I learned with.

Mountain Line's basic service is just to be able to get people where they're going, on time and do it reliably. I think that's about as basic as it gets. Over the years we've done a really good job with consistency. Sure, sometimes people call with complaints, but I think overall, with the amount of people that we haul every year, we do pretty well. I'm really proud of that.

I've heard complaints from people when they see a bus that is empty. I tell people, if you drive a car, then you can't complain. The bus wouldn't be empty if you were on it. But really, what people don't understand is that they saw that bus for a short snapshot. **Maybe the bus left the mall with no one, but by the time it gets downtown it has filled up with 10 or 12 people.** Especially in the winter, people really don't want to drive. Depending on the weather, it can get pretty busy. If you aren't on the bus, you don't see that. **When people see us driving around town, they see us for just a brief second,** that's what I wish people would remember.

I've been driving a long time, and all those riders have given me a lot of great memories and stories. Missoula used to have a lot of characters. There was this guy that used to ride and his name was Tommy

the Leprechaun because he, well, dressed like a leprechaun; green little hat, the pants and shoes. He would make balloon animals and give them out to the people on the bus and it was really entertaining for all the passengers. He'd also hand out these little cards that had his name on them and on the back, it said it was good for one wish from a leprechaun. People really loved it. That was a long time ago, now.

Also, I remember, there was this mom who would get on with her daughters and ride up to the South Hills during the holidays. They didn't have a car, but she wanted to take her kids to see the lights at Christmas. I was doing a route from 12:00-7:00 pm at that time, so it would get dark in the evening. Well anyway, years went by and then recently, a young woman got on my bus with her baby. She said, "Hi. Do you remember me? I used to ride the bus when I was little. You used to take us around and show us the Christmas lights." And there she was, probably in her 30's now, getting on the bus with her baby. Stuff like that is just kind of cool. I could write a book of all the people I remember.

There really are so many different aspects of the job I like a lot. I really like going through the seasons. Even though I'm not technically outside, driving has always felt like an outside job. **I'm moving around and I've always felt like I've had a pulse on the city, watching it change over the years; the buildings and roads, watching people grow up, and finding out what's going on in their lives.** I think it's those elements wrapped up all together in one. Maybe that doesn't sound very nice to some people, but I think when I'm not driving anymore, it's something I'm really going to miss. I've been driving a long time, but 30 years came really, really fast. It's amazing how quickly. I love the job... I guess that's why.
