

Passing on Knowledge

By Laura Neely

As a bus driver for the Western Reserve Transit Authority, Gloria Steward knows her riders, their patterns and their moods as well as she knows the routes she drives every day.



It's just after 2 p.m and Gloria Steward still has hours until her shift as counselor, mother, friend, and, of course, driver ends. Steward, a petite woman with cocoa-brown skin, long brown hair and a bright smile, has been a driver of Western Reserve Transit Authority (WRTA) for the past 10 years.

While she is only paid for navigating the red and green old fashioned trolley up and down the streets of Mahoning County and picking up and dropping off riders, she does far more than that in an average day.

"How is that new job coming along?" Steward asks a Youngstown State University student who works at St. Elizabeth Hospital.

"It's going good, thanks for asking," the student replies.

"I'm glad you got the job you wanted," Steward continues.

The ride with Steward is never a silent trip.

At first, it's the normal sounds -- the swish of the double doors opening and closing, the beep of the fare box as patrons deposit their money.

Those sounds are quickly overpowered by Steward's energetic "have a good day and morning" that she directs to her patrons.

Steward's comments draw smiles from her patrons and the entire ambiance of the bus transforms from an exhaust-filled and loud environment to a cheery and cherry air-freshener filled space.

Steward knows her riders and their patterns as well as she knows her route, and is not surprised when people wave at her to stop so they can get on board. Most of the time, her riders don't have to ring a bell to signal her when to let them off.

A 42 year-old single mother of three, she is originally from the Southside of Chicago, and has been living in Youngstown for almost 20 years.

Her current bus route keeps her in downtown Youngstown and the area of the YSU campus, and has allowed her to get to know her riders well enough that she can competently give them advice on social and personal issues.

"Mrs. Gloria, this guy has not been there, for me or his child." a patron says to her. "Girl, you should let him go and take care of your baby because she is more important than he is," Steward replies without hesitation.

The woman seems to recognize the wisdom in Steward's words. "You're right. Thanks for the advice."

Driving buses was not Steward's original plan. Instead, she wanted to be a bus aid and had no desire to drive. She says her supervisor saw that she had more potential and believed that she was the kind of person who could be responsible for others. The work, however, is not always easy.

Bus operators have to sit for long periods of time and must have strong arms and legs to maneuver the 3,000-ton bus.

Her hours are also demanding. She works a split shift job from 6:10 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. and then from 1:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

As much as she enjoys driving and being with her riders, she says she has other ambitions.

She has dreamed of opening a diversity bookstore and writing a novel.

She says her third grade teacher's daughter, a news reporter, inspired her to think about striving for more. In some ways, Steward says she is already working as a bit of a novelist and reporter by listening to people's stories.

"I'm a people person," she says.

Walter Williams, who has been riding Steward's bus for six years and who previously worked with Steward, says each day with her is a learning experience, and that the conversations are never dull.

"There is always something new going on the bus to look forward to. You gain a lot of knowledge," he says.

One of Steward's goals is to make sure that she passes on what knowledge she has to those she believes need it.

“I hope you kids are going to school and not out here smoking all day,” Steward shouts to a group of students she sees outside the Choffin Career Center. “School is important cause you can’t get nowhere without it.”