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URBAN TACTICS

Transported

By SIMI LINTON

THESE days I find myself, regularly and happily, in the midst of the clutter of New Yorkers you find on the bus. I particularly savor the times when all of us, riders and driver, seem of one purpose: A woman in a tailored suit and a man in slouchy pants stand together, commiserating about the traffic. Old and young, sitting side by side, laugh at a curbside altercation between a spandex-clad Rollerblader and a deliveryman on a rusty bicycle. A young white man jumps up to give his seat to an elderly black woman. It all seems so natural, like something that always was and always will be.

I take none of this - especially my own presence on the bus - for granted. I use a wheelchair, and only in the last few years have I been privy to the pleasures of public transportation. I "went public" around 1998, when almost the entire fleet of New York buses had been outfitted with wheelchair lifts. I'd tried taking the bus in the mid-80's when the Metropolitan Transportation Authority began installing lifts, but even when a bus that had one showed up, the driver sometimes couldn't find the key. Now the lifts are used more than 63,000 times a month. I account for about 40 of those.

A typical ride goes something like this: The driver sees me at the stop and steers the bus to the curb. The driver opens the door, and, using a key, activates the lift. It descends to the street, I back onto it, and it raises me up into the bus. It goes smoothly most of the time, and takes about two or three minutes. When the mechanism doesn't respond, it can take another couple of minutes.

Still, the people inside, and those at the bus stop, must wait. It can delay their trip and I sometimes see irritation in their faces. I understand that feeling. New Yorkers don't take inconveniences without protest.

But the irritation is rarely expressed in words. There is nothing "wrong," per se, and people know that if they were to express annoyance, they would appear selfish and illiberal. This is all new, and we are all making up the rules and social protocols as we go.

Now that I am a regular, I am particularly attuned to the drivers. They so often do their jobs with grace and good humor. One rainy day, I recall, the president was in town, sirens were wailing and Manhattan had become one big parking lot; yet the driver of the M104 shepherded us down Broadway, paused to give clear directions to a befuddled tourist, and smiled encouragement at a child trying his hand at putting a MetroCard in the slot.

I've even gotten to know some of the drivers. One driver on the crosstown route always wears on his uniform jacket an array of red and gold apple pins, awards for exemplary service to the city. I nominated him for one a couple of years ago. There is an annual ceremony for drivers who have been recognized by disabled people for excellent service. Drivers bring their families, and there are speeches and a big breakfast spread. My nominee gave me a hug when I arrived, and now when he sees me at the bus stop, he says, "Hey, girl, you riding with me today?"

On a summer night a while back, I met a driver I know only as Maria. When our bus pulled into my stop, she came to the rear door to activate the lift, but it jammed. After a few tries, she ushered the other passengers onto the next bus to arrive. Then Maria and I sat in the back of the darkened bus, with the doors open to let the warm night air in, and waited for the maintenance truck.

We talked about her children and her bus route, the M5. I told her how growing up in New York, my mother and I often took that bus to go on shopping excursions to Macy's. Once I started using a wheelchair in my mid-20's, I could no longer get on the bus and began to drive everywhere, folding my chair and pulling it into the back seat of my lumbering Oldsmobile. Now in my mid-50's, I am back on the bus, and it has been wonderful, I told her, largely because of the drivers.

It seems, and I may be projecting a wish here, that most of the drivers take pleasure in helping disabled passengers ride the bus - assuring that the full public is served. I fear, though, that these actions are sometimes perceived as benevolent gestures. One day as I was boarding the bus, a woman stopped to watch. As the lift ascended, she looked up at me and said: "Now, isn't it nice that they put these lifts on the bus so you can go places?"

"Nice? It's because of federal anti-discrimination law," I called after her, but she was already walking down the street. I wanted her to understand how big this is. While there are people at the M.T.A. who have been instrumental in bringing about accessible buses, the changes are largely in response to the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act in 1990.

In an article in The New Yorker about riding the bus, the author grouched about how a "guy in a wheelchair held things up for three minutes." He said that "law and propriety dictate" that buses pick up, as he called us, the "wheelchair-bound." While he allowed that the lift is a "civic mitzvah" - the city's good deed, I suppose he meant - he said that the municipal employee had been "reduced, or raised, to a valet."

I would be embarrassed if I felt the drivers saw their role as personal valet or good Samaritan. They are public employees acting in fulfillment of federal law. They provide a critical service, one that enhances the comfort and safety of all New Yorkers.

So I will nominate a driver this year for a Big Apple Award. It is my personal thanks to the women and men who have given new meaning to the term Public Transportation.

Yet the system will not succeed without a cooperative public. I have been impressed by the steady learning curve of my fellow riders. Increasingly familiar with the routine, they move quickly to accommodate wheelchair users.

One rainy night, a truly collective effort was necessary to get me off the bus. When the lift descended to the street, the front lip on the platform would not go down. The driver jiggled the key, but it would not budge. I offered a solution - a trick I learned from another driver. I said that if everyone sitting on the right side of the bus moved to the left side, the plate would go down. Reluctantly, he and I asked the passengers if they would move their tired bodies.

It worked, and I rolled off toward home. The driver laughed at this very human solution, and he and the passengers standing behind him waved and bid me good night.

Simi Linton, the author of "Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity," has just completed a memoir, "My Body Politic."

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