

## **Trains: A Kid's Hobby Turns into Career for MTA's Jess Díaz**



By JOSÉ UBALDO

(June 20) Jess Díaz began playing with trains as a kid. Nowadays, the MTA rail transportation superintendent still plays with trains, not only because he enjoys it, but also because he gets paid to do it.

The trains Díaz runs today are the Metro Rail subway and light-rail lines that crisscross Los Angeles County from downtown Los Angeles to Long Beach, El Segundo to Norwalk, and from Union Station to North Hollywood.

Díaz' affair with trains began at an early age when his family traveled twice a year by train from Philadelphia to visit family in upstate Pennsylvania. "We were a poor family and didn't have a car during those years, so we traveled by train in summer and around the holidays," Díaz says.

### **Hooked on steam trains**

As a kid, Díaz says he was hooked on the powerful steam engines that pulled coaches traveling upstate Pennsylvania. "The dimension, the weight and power of those things fascinated me from the time I was 6 or 7."

Around 1950, Díaz received his first train set, a Lionel train, for Christmas. He spent hours playing with it. "We really had a fun

time. I didn't have a lot of money but the neighbor kids and I put our train sets together and played," he recalls.

Nowadays, Díaz spends countless hours working with the start-up team in charge of testing trains for the June 24 opening of the Metro Red Line North Hollywood extension.

Díaz was born in Philadelphia 57 years ago. His father was a Mexican immigrant from Zacatecas and his mother an Italian-American. His mother still lives in Philadelphia.

### **Became a trolley operator**

After graduating from high school, Díaz started working as a bus operator and later became a trolley operator for the South Eastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority in Philadelphia. But, his daughter suffered from an asthma condition so her doctor suggested that Díaz move the family out West. They moved to Los Angeles in 1972.

Díaz applied for a job at the SCRTD and was hired as a bus operator, a position he held for two years. Later he became a bus instructor and spent almost 14 years hiring and teaching operators until the SCRTD

began looking for light-rail operators to start the Metro Blue Line.

"Back in Philadelphia I drove trolley cars for a while so, with that experience, I applied for the position in 1989," he says. "Ten of us were picked and we were sent to Calgary, Canada, for training on their light rail system."

Those were hard times for Díaz, who practiced operating the trains seven days a week for a month on an all-night schedule with snow and temperatures of 18 degrees -- very different from those days when he exchanged toy train parts and played with his buddies.

### **Helped open Metro Blue Line**

Back in Los Angeles, Díaz helped to open the Metro Blue Line in the summer of 1990. After that he took a position as manager at Division 11 where he stayed for two years. He worked at the Metro Red Line from 1993 until he was named rail superintendent for the three Metro Rail lines in 1998.

Although he's excited about his job as rail superintendent, Díaz isn't forgetting his responsibilities in opening the Metro Rail North Hollywood extension. And, there is nothing more rewarding than to look at the faces of the people riding the trains.

"It's really hard work, but I feel good knowing the MTA offers the best service for the community," he says. "I like seeing people use the system, taking public transportation to get where they need to go - whether it be work, medical appointments, school, or shopping - and using the trains because they know they are reliable," says Díaz.

Gone are the days when Díaz played with toy trains in Philadelphia.

"I dreamed of trains but never about running trains, I mean real life trains," he says. "Dreams come true, but you have to work hard and go after them to make them happen."

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