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MTA Employees Share Experiences as Volunteers at 2002 Winter Olympics

By AMY HOWELL

Eric Rapp contributed to this story.

(March 19, 2002) Not many of us want to say that we spent our vacations working. But that's exactly what a bus operator, a mechanic and a train operator did – three of about 73 MTA employees who participated as volunteers, last month, at the Winter Olympics.



Mechanic "A" Albert Semadeni of El Monte Division 9 enjoys the Olympic "challenge."

A bus operator's story

Venice Division 6 Metro Bus Operator Benjamin Zisner wanted to go to Salt Lake City because it was "something different, something I've never done before."

But, it turned out to be an unexpected, and last minute, occurrence. Although he applied for a position after looking at a pamphlet at his division, Zisner eventually received a letter stating that enough operators already had been recruited.

While driving his route at the end of January, however, Zisner was told via radio that more operators were needed. He left for Salt Lake City on February 3.

Like all volunteer operators, Zisner was required to go through a drug screening and an application process. He also received two days of classroom instruction about Salt Lake City and the driving conditions he might encounter. "It was a very motivating experience."



Benjamin Zisner

Unlike the procedure he must follow on his MTA route, Zisner did not have to collect fares from passengers in Salt Lake City. "It was basically a park-n'-ride. You park your car, you ride the bus, you go to your Olympic venue."

Shuttling back and forth

Zisner shuttled people back and forth between the makeshift park-n'-ride lot in Eagle Crest in northern Salt Lake City and a downtown staging area at West High School from about 1 p.m. to 1 a.m.

"We didn't have too much snow. The only snow they received was out in the mountain areas like Park City where they had skiing events," he said, of the driving conditions. "In town it was cold; we had snow flurries, but nothing that stayed on the ground."

Meeting four International Olympic Committee (IOC) members, who had mistakenly taken Zisner's bus late one night, was his most memorable experience. He was asked to take them directly to their hotel.

"We went through all kinds of security and checkpoints and they just let us go through," he said. "And these guys were so happy, they were tired and lost and just wanted to go back to their hotel."

The IOC members gave Zisner a couple of Olympic pins for his actions.

"Another thing you see in the Olympics is some very heavy pin trading going on. It can get vicious," Zisner said. "Some people will not give up pins unless you name a price or you have something of equal value to trade. It's a real serious business."

A mechanic's story

For Mechanic "A" Albert Semadeni of El Monte Division 9, the most memorable part of his Winter Olympics adventure was "the challenge."

"I really enjoyed that," he said. "And once I know I've taken care of my job, then I feel better about celebrating with everybody else, because I feel I'm a part of it."



Albert Semadeni

It worked to his advantage that Semadeni enjoyed challenge, because that's precisely what he was faced with from the moment he arrived in Salt Lake City.

Buses from transportation authorities around the United States arrived about two months before the Olympics started. The buses had been parked, but were never turned on or driven.

By the time Semadeni reached Salt Lake City, most of the buses had about a foot of snow in their engines and wouldn't start. To make matters worse, there wasn't enough room for a snowplow to get between them.

Somehow, he and the 51 other mechanics (eight of whom were also from the MTA) got the buses back in working condition. They divided into teams to cover three shifts and worked ten-hour days for the first week, without taking even one day off.

Put him on overdrive

"It was a very big, big challenge," Semadeni said. "And that really excited me a lot. It just put me on overdrive."

Without a pit or a hoist and only a small supply of tools and spare parts, Semadeni and the other mechanics improvised. They worked out of a building originally designed as a snowplow shop and made several

trips to Home Depot for tools during the first week.

After that, things went more smoothly. With vehicles equipped with tools, a compressor and diesel fuel, the mechanics traveled to locations where buses were in need of repair.

Like Zisner, Semadeni was interested in going, but did not expect things to work out. Last November, the people he knew were going had already received their plane tickets. Semadeni received his ticket three days before his departure February 3.

"I just feel very lucky to have been called at the last minute and gone through something that you're going to remember the rest of your life," he said.

Semadeni was enamored of Park City, which also served as the site of the Olympic Village, and where many of the Olympic events took place. "We were right in the middle of the Olympics. That's what was important to me."

Semadeni wanted to share his Olympic experience with his family. His wife, Dolores, and two of his daughters, Angela and Isabelle, joined him for a day and a half.

A train operator's story



Ernest Miller

In addition to bus operators and mechanics, even a train operator got in on the Winter Olympics action.

Metro Blue Line operator Ernest Miller said he "always wanted to see the Great Salt Lake."

"My teacher told me about the Great Salt Lake, how you could stick a hand in and bring up a handful of salt; I always wanted to see that," he said. "So when this opportunity came up I decided, 'Why not check it out?'"

Miller has been working on the Metro Blue Line for seven years, but said train operators need to drive a bus once a year "just to keep in shape." Like Zisner, Miller drove people to and from Eagle Crest and West High School.

He did, however, find the time to get "a handful of salt right out of the lake."

Miller counted seeing President Bush's motorcade as a memorable experience. He also gained a better appreciation for his union, after talking about working conditions, pay and benefits with operators from other transit agencies around the United States.

Semadeni also had the opportunity to meet Salt Lake City Organizing Committee President Mitt Romney and IOC President Jacques Rogge.

All the MTA employees, along with some 27,000 other Winter Olympics volunteers, were honored at a post-Closing Ceremonies party hosted by the SLOC.

ON THE JOB: Photos of Ernest Miller and Albert Semadeni by Amy Howell

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