

MTA Community Relations Spreads the Rail Safety Message

By NED RACINE

(Dec. 5, 2002) When members of MTA's Community Relations Rail Safety Outreach Program think of the Metro Gold Line, they are less concerned with its stations and rails than with the number of children who live along the new line and whether "Sly Fox" and "Birdie" still captivate the youngsters.

"Sly Fox" and "Birdie" star in one of several age-specific videos the Rail Safety Outreach group uses to reach its audience: the kindergarten to high school students who live along the Los Angeles to Pasadena alignment.

The Rail Safety Outreach group – from left, Assistant Community Relations Manager Joanne Longsdon, Communications Officer Carlos Valdez and Senior Community Relations Officer Barbara Burns – began making presentations Oct. 4.



PHOTO: BILL HEARD

The Rail Safety Outreach group – Assistant Community Relations Manager Joanne Longsdon, Senior Community Relations Officer Barbara Burns and Communications Officer Carlos Valdez – began making presentations Oct. 4.

The original plan was to address all the children affected by the Metro Gold Line before MTA begins pre-revenue operations early in 2003.

The group's work took on added urgency when Supervisor Gloria Molina required that all school children along the 13.7-mile alignment be safety trained before any testing begins.

32,000 students trained

To date, Rail Safety Outreach has completed 116 of 148 scheduled presentations to some 32,470 students at 31 of the 54 targeted schools. Having trouble visualizing 32,470 children? That number of children would fill more than two-thirds of Edison International Field in Anaheim.

Because the right of way has not been used since it was vacated by the Union Pacific in 1993, Rail Safety Outreach is concerned that many residents are unaware how to live safely with neighborhood trains.

"A whole generation has come and gone without rail traffic being on that right of way," Longsdon explains. "They're going to have to realize that neighborhood streets they take every day with Mom and Dad are going to be different beginning next summer."

Rail Safety Outreach Tips for Kids

- Two trains (not just one) may cross an intersection (you must look for both).
- Don't put anything on the rail; besides damaging the train, the train may project the object back at you at great speed.
- There are no sidewalks in a train tunnel or on a trestle.
- Don't jump the couplers between cars.
- Don't try to beat the train by driving around the gates.
- Don't stop for any reason on a rail.
- If your car stalls on the track, get out of your car immediately and run diagonally toward the oncoming train to avoid

Safety presenters attend a full day of intense training to become certified. They are required to practice what they have just learned and immediately address a group.

Each presenter's first presentation is videotaped and reviewed to pinpoint any areas requiring polish and to check that he or she hits the same key points.

Valdez recalls, "I was in denial," when he saw the video of his first presentation. "To begin with, I was very uncomfortable speaking with groups."

being hit by debris

- Don't run close to a passing train; the suction generated by the train can pull you under.
- A train extends 1.5 feet on each side of the tracks.

Speaks to large groups

Valdez specializes in presenting to groups of students from kindergarten through fifth grade ^¾ some groups as large as 125 ^¾ and presenting to English as a Second Language students of all ages.

Liz Armijo-Holbrook, a San Gabriel Valley service sector community relations officer, volunteered to be a presenter a year ago, when she worked in the Communications department.

"I'm surprised how specific the children can be," Armijo-Holbrook says. "They may challenge the facts or statistics you put out to them."

One class disputed her points by referring to things they had seen on television or movies. "The teacher stepped in at that point and reminded the students that television and movies are not real life."

"The one thing that seems to surprise them the most is how long it takes a train to stop," says Burns. "The P-2000 trains take 600 feet to stop. I've had a few gasps when I've given that number. With little kids I try to equate that with something in their lives: 'That would be running around your school six times.' "

"Kids are generally receptive to this kind of safety message," says Bill Moore, MTA's director of Quality Management and a safety volunteer. "Adults often rationalize how what you're saying doesn't relate to them."

Some kids hard to reach

"High school and middle school students are hard to reach," says Burns. "At that age they don't think of mortality. They feel somewhat invincible."

"I ask them to take the (safety) message home, to grandparents, uncles, aunts, parents who don't attend the training, to help keep their family safe," Burns adds. "I've been stressing this particularly with the English as a Second Language classes."

The Rail Safety Outreach Program reinforces its message by leaving reminders behind. One of the leave-behinds is a flyer describing a contest for each classroom.

"We ask them to either send an essay about what they learned or draw us a picture," says Longsdon, noting that the children can win small prizes for the best efforts. "When the essays and drawings come back, we can see they have retained our message."

Construction of the Pasadena Gold Line now nears its end, but MTA's effort to spread the word about safety along the tracks has no such finish line.

"It will never be done," Longsdon declares. "It's an ongoing effort. Long after I retire it will still be going on. It's something you can't stop. You have new generations coming along every day."

Note: At the November 19, 2002 Meeting of the Metro Gold Line Transition Committee, the safety team was commended by Chair, Supervisor Gloria Molina, and Committee Member and South Pasadena City Councilman David Saeta, for their efforts to reach over 30,000 students on the alignment in less than two months.

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