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PHOTO BY KIM SIM



## The 'Ultimate Operator'

**Metro Red Line's  
Tu Phan is a Winner**

- Tu Phan and teammate Jesus Valdez will represent Metro at APTA International rail competition.

By KIM SIM

(May 20, 2004) After finishing a recent run from Union Station to North Hollywood, Metro Red Line Operator Tu Phan was greeted by a "thumbs up" sign and shouts of thanks from a passenger who had just gotten off the train.

Phan, who will be in Miami to represent Metro at the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) International competition, June 2-9, is an eight-year veteran of Metro Rail. Before that, he worked for 10 years as a Metro Bus operator.

Phan is Metro Rail's shining star. He has won four of the five Metro Raildeo contests he has entered, dating back to 2000. He turned the only time he didn't win, a second-place finish in 2002, into a distant memory after winning the International competition.

Not that the winning is effortless for Phan.

"I always try to do my best in everything," he explains. "When I'm here, I put 100 percent into it."

### 'The ultimate operator'

Rail Transit Operations Supervisor Esther Pippins says she often sees Phan studying his course and training materials during downtime at the

PHOTO BY GAYLE ANDERSON



Tu Phan and teammate Jesus Valdez, at right, will represent Metro at APTA International rail competition.

yard.

"You didn't see too many of the other operators doing that," she says. "I think he took the (Raildeo) competition very seriously, like a real athlete competing for something."

Metro Red Line manager Eugene Adams calls him "the ultimate operator." Fellow Red Line operator Nick Rai jokes that the only way he would enter the next Raildeo was if Phan didn't.

In all aspects of the job — main-line operation, yard operation and yard duties — Pippins says, "He's a complete package. If I had to work with anybody, it'd be with him."

Phan's plaques denoting his Raildeo successes hang on the wall of his family study. He proudly wears the specially designed Metro Raildeo jackets he has been awarded.

### **More than a job**

For Phan, train operation isn't just a job. It's a skill. He takes great pride in getting his passengers — as many as 1,300 of them during rush hour — to where they need to be, "in a safe and comfortable manner."

Says Adams, "He takes his job seriously. MTA has a lot to take its hat off to because I know he's going to represent us well in Miami." Phan's teammate at the international competition will be Metro Red Line Operator Jesus Valdez.

Phan works five days a week, from 1:30 p.m. to midnight. He alternates between roundtrips to Wilshire/Western and North Hollywood — three of the first and two of the latter — before wrapping up his operating duties at 8 p.m. After that, it's back to the yard to clean and store the trains and move any into the shop for repairs.

"It's a different kind of work," Phan says of operating a train. "It's less demanding, less stress. You don't have to deal with passengers, traffic. The best day on the bus does not compare to the worst day on the rail."

### **Strong mechanical skills**

That said, train operation does require careful monitoring of the equipment. But Phan, a former machine technician who describes himself as "mechanically inclined," enjoys the challenge of keeping the trains running.

"(For the trains) you have to be more knowledgeable about rules and regulations," he says. "You have to personally monitor the train's performance, the radio. You can't daydream. You really do have to pay attention."

Except for the single white lights spaced throughout the tunnel, which create passing rings of light, it is dark underground. It is also noisy; the sound of whizzing trains clanging against the tracks echoes off the tunnel walls.

But Phan is used to it all. Operating a train now has become almost second nature for the decorated train operator. "I don't have to think about it."

