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Operators to Honor Half-Century Patron on Her 79th Birthday

By JESSICA TYERMAN

(July 14, 2004) Rita Hastings is not a typical bus passenger.

She is turning 79, July 17, and has never had a driver's license. In fact, she's never even tried to get behind the wheel. She has been an SCRTD and Metro patron since she moved from Canada to Pasadena in 1956.

"I'm just scared," she says. "That's the only regret I have in life – that I never learned to drive."

El Monte Division 9 Transportation managers and operators will gather at noon, Friday, to celebrate her 79th birthday and honor her loyalty as a Metro patron.

"She has a great personality," says Line 268 Operator Richard Lopez, one of the event coordinators. "She's 79 but says she's 39!"

Hastings has witnessed operators retire and pass away, and continues to talk to several of them regularly. Unfortunately, her arthritis has prevented her from riding the buses daily as she used to.

"All the years..." she says. "I felt like I've known them all my life."

'She was my buddy.'

"She stands out," says Operator Elsa Figueroa, who met Hastings while driving lines 268 and 79. "One day she came and surprised me at the station just to ride with me downtown on Line 70. It was really cute. She was my buddy."

Hastings worked for 21 years at a Sierra Madre Church as a kitchen and nursery supervisor and stayed on nine years as a volunteer. She took Line 268 every weekday morning during those 30 years.

PHOTOS: JESSICA TYERMAN



Rita Hastings, 79, has never had a driver's license or driven a car. She depended on Metro for 48 years to get around town.

"At my age, I've seen it all,

done it all, and heard it all... I
just can't remember it all.
-- Rita Hastings' coffee mug



Hastings has had her share of good and bad experiences while riding the buses.

One rainy night after working at the church, an operator stopped the bus to kick her off because she did not have her pass. Luckily the next bus picked her up.

"The next day I told Richard, who went right to the supervisor," she says.

Flock of wild parrots

The first time she rode on Richard Lopez's bus to the Arcadia Fashion Park Mall, a flock of wild parrots was frantically flying and screeching in front of the bus. One smashed into the windshield and fell in the middle of the street. Lopez flagged down the Arcadia police with concern that the bird would get hit or cause an accident.

"I've known Richard for so long that he's just like my son!" she says. "Anytime I see him I say, 'Any parrots today?'"

After her husband, Bill, died of cancer in December 1993, Hastings depended even more on Metro for transit. Sadly, his death came only six weeks after her eldest son, John, also died of cancer.

Hastings' arthritis worsened after a bad fall that broke her ribs in September. Her daughter, Jeanne Garrett, insisted that she move to La Puente to be with the family: her husband, Michael, and children, Wesley, 23, and Brooke, 20.

Hastings has two other sons and three daughters who mostly live in the Southern California area. She has 12 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Hastings, herself, is from a family of seven; she has three sisters and a brother who still live in Canada.

Operators became concerned

The operators close to Hastings noticed her absence on the bus and became concerned. Since then they have all exchanged telephone numbers to keep in touch.

Now, even using her walker, the closest bus stop is too far for her to walk in order to use the bus regularly.

Her daughter, Jeanne, 45, is following in her mother's footsteps. She also does not have a driver's license. They depend on others for transport.

Hastings wishes she could return to the days of riding the bus, in spite

of her arthritis. "If I wasn't like this, I'd be out dancing," she says. "I'm rarin' to go!"

"I had a good time," she says about riding the buses. "I enjoyed every minute of it."

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