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Four Metro employees on board Metrolink Train 100

Employees tell what it was like:

[Donna Blanchard](#)
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- [On the scene](#): During the first 8 hours following the accident, more than 175 Sheriff's personnel were involved in the emergency response effort.

By GAYLE ANDERSON

In the aftermath of the Metrolink tragedy that occurred at 6:05 a.m. early Tuesday morning, Metro employees are counting their blessings.

Some 80 employees typically ride the Ventura County line of the commuter train, said Irma Rivera, who coordinates transit checks distributed through the Metro Employee Rideshare Program. More specifically, 34 report to work between 6 a.m. and 7:45 a.m., a timetable that could have placed a number of employees at the scene of the accident.

At least four employees are reported to have been aboard the southbound Metrolink train 100 when it hit a Jeep Cherokee SUV parked on the tracks shortly after 6 a.m. just north of the Glendale Metrolink Station. Train 100 then bounced into a Union Pacific freight train before crashing into the northbound Metrolink train 901.

Fortunately, except for some very sore and stiff muscles and more than a few bruises, none of the Metro employees were seriously injured. Significantly, all were in the second car of the derailed train. The first car had twisted on its side and caught fire by the time passengers were able to exit. All but one were facing the direction of travel when the train careened, then jolted to a stop. That detail, we will learn, made a significant difference in the force of the impact.



"I immediately went underneath the table between the seats. I thought we were going to roll over." – Donna Blanchard, Metro Commute Services account supervisor.

Metro Blood Drive Tuesday

The American Red Cross will conduct a Blood Drive to benefit Metrolink passengers on Tuesday, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the Board Overflow Room in the cafeteria lobby on the third floor. Information: Contact Audrey Chiu at 922-4783 or schedule an appointment online at www.givelife.org Sponsor Code: MTA Participants must bring a photo I.D. to the appointment and are advised to eat a good meal and drink plenty of water before donating.

Donna Blanchard, Metro Commute Services account supervisor, boarded Metrolink train 100 at 6 a.m. Blanchard boarded at the Burbank Station the same as always, but this time she was bound for jury duty in a downtown courthouse. Five minutes later, she dived between the seats and braced for the worst. "I was reading a book and all of a sudden I heard the train hit something," she said. "I immediately went underneath the table between the seats. I thought we were going to roll over." As if in slow motion, Donna grabbed at a guy who had slammed up against the door to steady him as the train jolted and jerked to a stop. "Did the brakes give out?" Rising from her bunker-like space between the seats, she saw co-worker Charlie Fitzsimmons moving through the aisle. "You're bleeding," she said, handing him a kleenex for his ear. Now able to exit, she noticed that men were letting the women exit first, a gentlemanly gesture amidst an unfolding tragedy. She could hear someone shouting: "The train is on fire, let's get out!" And, walking down the tracks away from the accident, propelled by a fear of an impending explosion, someone else was saying, "Does anybody know where we are?" The passengers made their way to the triage area expertly set up by the Glendale Fire Department in the CostCo parking lot. "CostCo employees were wonderful. They brought out water and food – a nearby Starbucks was delivering coffee. "I was really not hurt, very tense and sore, but not hurt." At 8:02 a.m., nearly two hours after the accident, Donna checked out of triage: pulse – 100; blood pressure 128 over 100. "Of course I will continue to take Metrolink," she said, a faithful Metrolink passenger since the commuter trains began operation 12 years ago. "As many miles as I've gone without any problems, it's much safer than being in a car."



"I feel like a grenade, ready to break into a thousand pieces. I really need a good cry. I feel for those families who will never see their loved ones again." -- Brenda Aguilar, Metro Gold Line Rail Operations General Clerk.

Brenda Aguilar has total recall. She, too, boarded the southbound train at 6 a.m. in Burbank, as she has for the last two and a half years to get to her job as a general clerk at the Metro Gold Line. "I felt the stop, realized I can't get ready so I locked my body in one position. I was facing towards the back, and so the cushion of the seat took the weight," she said. Seated in the lower level of the last car of Train 100, and facing away from the direction of travel at impact, Brenda was able to help others caught in harm's way and was perhaps the last person to exit her car. "The sound of rocks underneath the train didn't stop, and grew louder. We were dragging something, going fast, I felt the side scraping, then gravel, brakes made that sound of air release like we were going to stop, now, we're going to stop FAST." I braced myself, moved to the corner, pushed back and then a loud, fast jerk. I went back, then front. Four people – the ones that were standing in the aisle – flew by me. One was a Sheriff. He was stumbling. The woman that was flying was slammed against the seats. Another guy fell on the floor, flying backwards over the woman and another man. The first set of doors opened immediately. When the air came it, it blew the flyers in our face and dust. Then it was dark, but I still could see. People were not moving on the floor. A man was coming down the stairs. His glasses cut his forehead and he was bleeding. He was screaming: 'Get outta here!' I thought all we need right now is panic! So I screamed back: 'Don't scream – you're bleeding.' " Brenda pryed the door to the train's bathroom open and grabbed handfuls of paper towels for those she could see were bleeding. The woman that had tumbled down to the floor was nearly immobile as Brenda loosened her leather jacket to help her breathe. During the long, few minutes following the jolting halt, Brenda made perhaps four calls on her cell phone. The first one was to her office. "I'm going to be late. I think my train derailed," she told a startled Rick Flores. "We have to leave the train – the car in front's on fire," she heard someone shouting. But Brenda didn't exit until she saw the injured woman escorted safely off the train. There were many more encounters with fellow passengers, even on the

way to the triage area. "One only spoke Spanish, and some are my friends I knew from taking the train every day. I thought, well nothing happened to me, so I will help. I'm glad I took all those safety classes at work. It made me ready but I hope I never go through this again." Back at work the same day by 10:30 a.m., Brenda had a smile on her face when she picked up her transit check for next month's passage. "It still feels more secure on the train. Driving scares me more than this!" Hugs from co-workers helped that day, as did phone calls from Rail GM Gerald Francis and DEO Melvin Clark. "Take all the time you need," they counseled. But, Brenda says "This is my family. I feel good over here. I'd rather be here than anywhere else."



"It was like jumping out of a second story window and landing on concrete." -- Russ Murry, Facilities Maintenance Manager at RRC.

Russ Murry's first day on the job as Facilities Maintenance Manager at RRC was January 2 of this year. Before the month was out, Russ would survive Metrolink's worst nightmare. Murry boarded at 5 a.m. sharp in Moorpark. He took a window seat in the second car, lower level, one that was facing the direction of travel. Approaching the Glendale Station an hour later, Murry saw sparks. "That's when I realized this was really serious," he said, sliding down in his seat and bracing his feet for impact. He was thrown at impact, maybe 15 feet, when the train came to a jolting halt. Years of safety training in his former employment in Arizona paid off. "I knew we should get out and get along the fence," he said, and shouted out the direction to stunned passengers. "One guy, who was physically disabled, was helped off the train," he remembered. Murry exited and circled the train. Surveying the scene from both sides of the derailed car, he could see the fire on the first car and the northbound train 901 wedged under the metal walkway that spans the tracks. Directed to triage by firefighters, he was released around 11 a.m. and reported to work at RRC. "My injuries were acceptable," he said, "I was more concerned about those that were seriously injured. Some looked like they had broken their wrists by holding their arms out to protect themselves when they were slammed to the back of the car." Murry will continue to take the commuter trains to work. "I'm a little nervous. Hearing noises like rocks hitting the underside of the train is like feeling the aftershocks of a big earthquake," he said. "But I'm okay. Lightning doesn't strike twice."



"I was flying like a rock, hitting objects, seats, from side to side. I hit three or four people like a cannon." – Charlie Fitzsimmons, Senior Contract Administrator

Charles Fitzsimmons, a senior contract administrator, boarded Train 100 in Chatsworth. He had finished reading the morning Times and was putting his paper away as the train approached the Glendale Station. Suddenly, he began to hear what sounded like gravel and rocks hitting the trains. "I felt the derailing," he said. Then the impact tossed him about the car from his seat on the lower berth. "I was flying like a rock, hitting objects, seats, from side to side. I hit three or four people like a cannon." Fitzsimmons reported his fellow passengers were stunned and silently calm as they exited. The scene outside was surreal, as a fire flickered in the car ahead and passengers were scattered, lying down on the ground. "The Fire Department were there quick," he said. "They did a helluva good job!" After making his way through the triage at the Costco parking lot, Fitzsimmons opted to get a check up from his own doctor and returned home, catching a ride with relatives of a fellow passenger and Chatsworth neighbor. "Oh, no," he said, this experience has not made

him afraid to take the train. He'll continue to ride Metrolink, he said. "It's a godsend."

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