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Victor George, center wearing the black sweater, poses with members of the Transit English class he addressed Oct. 6. The five-week language course concentrates on teaching likely job candidates enough English to safely operate a bus in LA's challenging environment.



Photos by Ned Racine

Division 6 Operator Shares Experience With Bridge Program Students

By NED RACINE

(Oct. 20, 2006) Five days a week Victor George operates buses from Metro's Venice Division 6. On Friday, Oct. 6, however, George switched roles and shared his real-world experience with students who aspire to his job.

By donating his time to address the 18 Transit English class students, George hoped to make their path easier. He most wanted to emphasize that bus operators must "treat other people with respect and dignity."

A partnership between Metro and the Los Angeles Community College (LACC) district, the five-week Transit English class contributes to Metro's effort to fill almost 300 bus operator positions.

The language course concentrates on



Victor George, a Venice Division 6 bus operator, makes a point during his talk to the Transit English class. Jim McJunkin, the class instructor, looks on. George emphasized the importance of safety in operating a bus.

teaching likely job candidates enough English to successfully complete bus operator training, to safely operate a bus in LA's challenging environment, and to communicate effectively with dispatchers, supervisors, law enforcement officers and customers.

The program also offers students a chance to change the direction of their lives. Jim McJunkin, one of LACC's Bus Operator Bridge Program instructors, told the students he cares about their success in the Bridge Program, not their past.

Addressing larger goals

McJunkin addresses larger goals than his students' immediate future. "My quest is to get you ready, not just for this job, but for your career," he told the students. "You're going to learn a lot that will help you in your life and your career."

McJunkin, who has taught this type of class for Los Angeles Valley College for 12 years, believes the bus operator positions rank high among available jobs.

The appeal of a well-paying career as a bus operator attracted Marta Garcia to the class. Garcia knew she wanted a job where she could meet people. Now she realizes how large a part attitude plays in her chance of success.

Students asked Victor George many questions about operating a bus, ranging from bus capacity and securing wheelchairs to handling disturbances and fare collection. George answered those questions, but he continually drew the students back to what he believes are the foundations of his job, particularly safety.

"This job is not about risk," he emphasized. "It's about safety. That bus can be replaced. Those passengers cannot."

George, who operates every Metro bus but the 60-foot articulated coaches, believes another foundation of his job is professionalism and courtesy. He told the students he thinks of his bus as his office. And in that office, he added, "I have to be professional and courteous and accommodating."

Greeting each passenger

George has worked for Metro for 18 months, following three years as a Greyhound bus operator. He strongly encouraged students to follow his example and greet each passenger when they enter and exit their 'office'. He said "You'd be surprised how many people smile and say 'Thank you.'"

George also stressed that whether his passengers are pleased with their experience traveling on his bus largely depends on their first impressions of him.

"Treat everyone with respect and try a smile," he counseled the students. "You have to practice courtesy." He also advised that a bus operator can be firm without being rude.

"When someone gets on my bus, I try to make that trip constantly outstanding," he told the group. "That's my job. I love my job."

When students complete the Bus Operator Bridge Program, they are interviewed by Metro. Students who pass that round take the Department of Motor Vehicles commercial license test and receive a learner's permit.

Then they begin Metro's bus operator training program, which involves four weeks of classroom study and two weeks of driving.

LACC's McJunkin describes a powerful benefit to the program's students:
"We're affecting their lives and the lives of their families . . . People who normally wouldn't have had this chance."

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