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Samuel Carter, transit operations supervisor, and Kirsten Bell, Passenger Relations representative, were integral in bringing Abelia Arzadon Hopewell back together with her grandson. Alberto Casillas, Central City Division 1 operator, not pictured, found the 84-year-old grandmother on his bus. *Photo by Ned Racine*

Three Employees Find a Grandmother in an Urban Haystack

- Customer Relations and Bus Operations track down an 84-year-old Metro rider

By NED RACINE, Editor

(Aug. 19, 2008) When Toby Burger woke up June 5, it seemed an ordinary morning. True, he was taking his 84-year-old grandmother to the senior center for the first time, but that wouldn't be difficult. Then he checked his grandmother's bedroom and found it empty.

In fact, his grandmother was no where in the Fullerton townhouse. Fiercely independent, but with fading memory, Abelia Arzadon Hopewell had decided to travel.

Burger began his search by calling the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) and the Fullerton Police. He considered the patterns in his grandmother's life and then called Metro.

Metro and its predecessors had been Hopewell's only means of transportation since she arrived in Los Angeles from the Philippines in 1952. For 25 of those years, she rode the 460 line between her Orange County home and her Downtown Los Angeles job. Had she decided to take the 460 line again?

Burger called Metro at approximately 9:30 a.m. and Kirsten Bell, Passenger Relations representative, answered. Bell noted Burger's detailed

description of his grandmother: loves to talk, petite, dresses in colorful clothing, always carries two purses.

Bell called Bus Operations Control and reached Samuel Carter, transit operations supervisor. She relayed Hopewell's description and asked a question: Was Hopewell on the 460? Carter broadcast an All Points Bulletin on line 460.

Alberto Casillas, bus operator, Central City Division 1, was working the second shift that day on line 460. Casillas spotted Hopewell on his coach, heading north to the Fullerton park-and-ride lot from Disneyland. In fact, she had been one of his regular riders during his six years on the 460.

When Casillas told Hopewell people were looking for her, she did not believe him. "You're kidding; you're kidding. They know where I am," he recalled her saying.

Carter remembers Casillas telling him, "I have that lady. It's her, it's her. I know it's her."

When Casillas reported Hopewell had exited his bus and was walking away, Carter responded, "Do anything short of restraining her." Casillas convinced Hopewell to come back to his bus with him.

By approximately 10:30 a.m., Bell was able to call Burger and tell him his grandmother was safe and where he could be reunited with her.

Casillas walked Hopewell to OCTA line 25 where its operator, Louis Pough, waited with Hopewell until her grandson could arrive. Carter called the Fullerton Police to notify them Hopewell was found.

Hopewell is in a care facility in Brea now, where wandering will be more difficult. Hopefully, her grandson will treat her to a ride on the 460 line now and then.

In his letter of appreciation to Metro, Burger reminisced about bus rides with his grandmother to Malibu and Santa Monica and Downtown Los Angeles, where Hopewell had the same post office box since 1952.

"She holds a special place in her heart for the drivers of the buses; she is perhaps their biggest champion," Burger wrote in his letter of appreciation. "One of her great joys in life was riding the buses through different areas . . . people watching and interacting with everyone. She never really drove a car, so for her the bus was her car, her companion, her savior."

Her savior on June 5 included Metro teamwork.

"It felt great to hear the ending and [that] she was OK," Carter said. "If this didn't come together in the way it did, she would have been lost."

"We'll have missing reports on our console, and [when you] clean your desk, you'll see the report is two weeks old, and you'll wonder what happened?" Carter said. "This is one of those situations where things work the way they're supposed to."