



NEWS

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BUS BOOT CAMP PRODUCING BEST, NICEST DRIVERS IN THE WORLD WHILE LEARNING WHAT IT TAKES TO SURVIVE IN L.A.

The call went out some months ago...a call to buses.

The goal of the mission, for those who chose to accept it, was: help reduce overcrowding on buses, provide excellent customer service, and always drive safely. In short, be the best that you can be.

There was, however, a "Catch 22."

The part-time bus operator recruits were first required to undergo three weeks of intensive training at MTA's bus boot camp in El Monte - a.k.a. Operations Central Instruction.

Boot camp was then followed by four weeks of on-the-job training on an in-service bus. Finally, in order to graduate, recruits had to pass a 180-question written exam and driving test.

"By the time they come back to take the test, they will have amassed 25 hours in classroom time and 100 hours out in the field," said Joseph E. Drew, MTA Chief Executive Officer. "We aim higher than the law requires which is only 15 hours in the classroom and 20 hours on the road."

And though no amphibious landings are anticipated, it's strictly sink or swim at Central Instruction. For instance, if a student reports to duty late - normal hours are 6:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., or takes too long of a break or lunch - it can be immediate grounds for dismissal.

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Students also must be willing to come face-to-face with the "commander," Robert Ellison Jr., Acting Manager of Instruction, a former junior high school teacher who relishes the opportunity to shape the future of another 25 recruits and requires they be conservatively dressed with polished shoes.

Don't be fooled by his mellow exterior: "On the outside I appear to be a relaxed individual...and the students need to be in a relaxed frame of mind as well, or the stress will just eat at you. But I can really be tough."

It is Ellison, 38, who first introduces recruits to the ways of the real world, filling recruits in on certain day-to-day situations. "Up front I indicate that these things can happen. Sometimes it's not a glowing position, it's a challenging job."

From the very outset, Ellison, also a former MTA bus operator, and his staff of 20 Transit Operations Supervisors, don't waste any time. On Day One, half the class actually will drive a bus in West Covina or the dry Los Angeles River bed. "We might as well get their feet wet" said Ellison - while the other recruits attend class. Among the subjects covered in class are: customer relations; how to diffuse tense situations; defensive driving; and fares and transfers.

However, Ellison said one area that receives a lot of attention is providing service to passengers with disabilities without disrupting on-time service. Students simulate what it might feel like being disabled and waiting for a bus - from using crutches and sitting in a wheelchair, to being blindfolded.

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Even though the graduation rate is high, there are those who decide they're not cut out for the job.

"Some have the wrong impression of the job and decide this is not for them. The decision is completely up to the student, we don't try to talk them out of it."

The lean, but never mean, Ellison has played a part in the training of some 500 bus operators since joining the center 6 years ago.

"I love this job. You see so many results on a constant basis. You take an interest in someone and see it come to fruition, or you visit a operating facility and a former student walks up to you and says: 'I remember when you covered this subject during training and you were right.' That makes me feel very good."

And though Central Instruction's controlled environment will not totally prepare new operators for real-life conditions, Ellison believes that with time, all overcome the initial jitters and many rise to the very top.

"If you have great training you will have the best operators, and then you and I will have a job. People will use rapid transit if we treat them right and provide the service that can help them get to where they want to go."

"The training students receive at Operations Central Instruction is the best in the country," said Ellen Levine, Executive Officer for Transit Operations. "No doubt about it, any student who successfully completes this training, in my mind, is the best."

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