

Confinement in a wheelchair can be like a prison. Old age limits errands to walking distances. That's why Arlene Link, a Lane Transit District bus driver, enjoys helping people maintain some independence through...



Story and photo
By CAROLYN BEAVER
Of the Emerald

It's 6:50 a.m., a frosty, gray morning. Arlene Link pulls up at her first passenger's home.

Link drives for Lane Transit District's (LTD) Dial-a-Bus. Brian, a Lane Community College (LCC) student and her first rider, waits on the cold floor of his porch. When he sees Link's blue and green bus coming, he pulls himself up and walks to the curb to meet it.

Although he uses arm braces to walk, Brian doesn't want any assistance. Link feels good that Dial-a-Bus is helping Brian and many like him become more independent.

Dial-a-Bus, a service LTD started in December, 1976, escorts seniors and handicapped persons around the Eugene-Springfield area. Monday through Friday, Dial-a-Bus picks up its customers at home and takes them to more than 27 locations, including shopping centers, schools, government offices and medical facilities. On Saturday, the destinations are unlimited.

Link, who drives from 6:45 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, has many "regular" customers. After Brian is picked up, she heads to Springfield. Russ, also attending LCC, waits in his wheelchair in his garage for Link.

The Dial-a-Bus is equipped with a hydraulic lift for those in wheelchairs. Outside the bus, Link unlatches the doors to the lift, flips a series of switches and buttons, and lowers the lift's platform to ground level.

After she's helped Russ into the bus

and his wheelchair is secure she goes back outside the bus to bring the lift back up and latch the doors. Link goes through the in-the-bus, out-the-bus ritual 10 to 15 times daily.

Although she's a small woman, she has no trouble helping people on or off the lifts and dispatcher Johnnie McDonald says she's just about the most efficient driver they have.

He says, "A lot of times, keeping up with her is more of a problem than her keeping up with me. We have times these people are to be picked up and a lot of times, she will be there and pick these people up before time and then have them delivered and ready for another one and we still haven't got her scheduled for the last one she's already cleared."

"We have a dispatching log that is recorded. It lists all the people each driver has carried," continues McDonald.

Does Arlene usually rate high? "She always does her share," McDonald says. "In fact, there's a good part of the time that she will do more than her share. She will haul as many or more than any of the other drivers. She'll be in the top."

Link stops in for a few minutes of conversation with McDonald every morning. He gives her the list of her riders, and she's off. He'll call in more passengers over the bus's phone system throughout the day. Handicapped participants must be certified, either through an LTD approved organization, a physician or through LTD itself. Any one 62 or older, however, needs only proof of age.

The buses have four wheelchair secures and six orange and blue padded seats. Link says the buses, with oversized windows all the way around them and power steering, are easy to drive.

An LTD employee for four and one-half years, Link has driven just about every bus and route there is. She volunteered last year for Dial-a-Bus because she figured "if you're going to do something, you might as well learn about all of it and know how to do it all."

Her job's best reward says Link, is helping people become more independent. It especially makes her feel good to pick up "little old ladies who live all alone and wouldn't go anywhere if it weren't for Dial-a-Bus. They feel so good about being independent again. Before this came along, they weren't able to go anywhere. The only places they could go were as far as they could walk too," says Link.

In particular, she recalls a group of five older women, who live together.

"They especially wanted to go to Valley River. The first time they rode, I took them there. They were just like little kids on their first outing or their first time at Disneyland."

Link always likes to be on time for senior citizens; "sometimes they wait for an hour because they have nothing else to do." Dial-a-Bus is billed as a curb-to-curb service, yet Link often does more than pick and drop people off at curbs.

She arrives a few minutes early at Ya-Po-Ah Terrace, a senior citizen apartment complex. Next to the woman Link's scheduled to pick up stands a man, bent over his cane. He's missed

his "mini-bus" that weekly takes him shopping. He doesn't hear well, and Link has difficulty explaining she hasn't come to take him shopping.

Link checks her schedule and finds she has a few minutes after she drops the scheduled passenger off and agrees to take the man to the store, so he can join his companions.

When she arrives at the store, it's raining. She doesn't leave the man at the curb. Instead, she gets out her umbrella, walks the man into the store and finds a checker who will assist him in finding his friends. Then, she's off again, with a couple minutes to spare.

It's important to Link to have good relationships with her riders and she cares about all of them, yet "you can't let yourself become emotionally involved. If you do, suddenly you feel tied to the whole world."

She tries to imagine what it's like to be handicapped, or to be on a fixed income. "It's not like being in a prison, but almost."

Sometimes when she sees people making the best of what they have, it makes her angry with herself when she complains about things. She doesn't feel sorry for seniors or those with disabilities, since she says "feeling sorry for yourself or others doesn't accomplish anything."

Because the Eugene/Springfield area has so many things to offer its citizens, both "community-wise and politically," Link says, "people are alone because they want to be alone."

When she gets older, she plans to stay here and take advantage of as much as possible.

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Laster named president

Leonard Laster of the State University of New York, has been named president of the University Health Science Center in Portland.

Laster, who won a medical degree from the Harvard Medical School at age 22, will become Oregon's highest paid state employee next September.

The job pays \$64,865 per year, plus an expense allowance and use of a state-owned residence.

Roy Lieuallen, Oregon state system chancellor says Laster was selected unanimously by the State Board of Higher Education. His national leadership in

academic administration in the health sciences should bring many "significant benefits," Lieuallen says of Laster.

Laster has been Vice-President of Academic and Clinical Affairs and Dean of the College of Medicine at the Downstate Medical Center State University of New York, Brooklyn, since 1974.

Laster won the Edward Whitaker Prize for the outstanding freshman at Harvard College at the age of 16 in 1944.

The new director will succeed Lewis Bluemle, who resigned last July to become President of Thomas Jefferson University.

Audubon film scheduled at Churchill Hi

"Queen of the Cascades," the last in a series of films sponsored this season by the Lane County Audubon Society, Thursday at 7:30 p.m. at Churchill High School, 1850 Bailey Hill Rd.

Mount Rainier wildlife and its scenery will be shown along with a climb to the 14,410 summit.

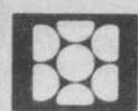
Tickets are 75 cents for students.

For more information, call 687-0430.

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