



# Portland Observer

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## A Heroine for Transit Rights

Rosa Parks' civil rights activism started early

BY DANNY PETERSON  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

An often overlooked aspect of the story of Rosa Parks, the civil rights icon whose refusal to move from her seat for a white passenger during the segregated south in the mid-1950s and subsequent arrest helped spark the modern civil rights movement, is that Parks' choice that day was part of a planned, intentional act of demonstration against the racist Jim Crow laws of Montgomery, Ala., her hometown at the time.



Rosa Parks

A pervasive narrative not entirely accurate is that the seamstress, tired from working on her feet all day and well worn to the maladies of the racist societal norms that had affected her entire life up to that point, decided spontaneously in that moment of the confrontation to take a stand by remaining seated.

The fuller truth is the late Parks, whose birthday was on Monday, Feb. 4 had been a dedicated civil rights activist her entire life.

More than 10 years before her famous refusal to move on that bus in Alabama in 1955 when the white section filled and the first row of the black section was to make way for more white passengers, Parks was thrown off another bus by the same bus driver, James Blake, for using the white entrance--at the front of the bus--while she was the secretary of a city chapter of the NAACP, in 1943. During that time she also witnessed her brother, a veteran of the Second World War, face discrimination after returning home.

Several months before the Dec 1, 1955 arrest, Parks attended a two week long



PHOTO BY DANNY PETERSON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Community leaders with Bus Riders Unite and OPAL Environmental Justice train volunteers in de-escalation techniques Saturday in southeast Portland to get them ready to become unofficial transit rider advocates on TriMet buses and trains. Pictured (from left) are first-time volunteer Arius King, de-escalation training facilitator Tristan Isaac, OPAL volunteer Keith Scholz and OPAL staff member Janaira Ramirez.

## Transit Riders Organize

Ad hoc 'rider advocates' push TriMet to act

BY DANNY PETERSON  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

A grassroots effort to bring back civilian volunteers on public transit to help de-escalate conflicts and provide information and support to riders is currently in an unofficial prototype phase, thanks to OPAL—a civil rights and environmental justice organization which stands for “Organizing People, Activating Leaders”—and a bus riders union called Bus Riders Unite.

The grassroots idea is modeled after the “Rider Advocate” program, a similar initiative that was funded by TriMet for 15 years, but ended in 2009. OPAL, which does much of its organizing by speaking with people on buses, often with clipboards, etc., said it's currently testing out the idea by dispatching some trained volunteers.

“We’re always going to be on the buses organizing, building community, and this is just one more extension of how we do that, that also happens to be sort of a proof of concept of the model of the rider advocate program,” OPAL spokesman Shawn Fleek told the Portland Observer.

The initiative, which has been incubating in the development phase for the past year, is in response to what organizers said is a recent increase in police and security presence on TriMet trains and buses. They hope the revived pilot version of rider advocates will inspire TriMet to fully fund the program again.

As many as 25 volunteers have received de-escalation training through OPAL that readies them to eventually don yellow vests, help resolve conflicts, and show riders how to safely navigate the public transportation system. Some have even ridden on transit already, in this capacity.

Though this revived program has not been officially sanctioned by TriMet, each volunteer is provided a transit pass by their sponsoring groups so they can board transit's public spaces to look out for oth-

ers and speak with them.

TriMet spokesperson Roberta Altstadt told the Portland Observer that TriMet appreciates the support of community groups that value transit and understand the desire to help others, but the agency would prefer to rely on their own employees for public safety outreach. TriMet currently has paid customer service staff performing the same type of functions as rider advocates, Altstadt said.

“We believe that that role would be better with trained employees and security personnel. We believe that would then increase the safety of our riders and for our employees,” she said.

Fleek told the Portland Observer their volunteer program is meant to bolster the accessibility and safety of riders from some of the most marginalized groups, like low income people and people of color.

“[Public transportation is] one of the last places in society that are multicultural, multiclass, multigenerational. All on the same bus you’ll have youth, seniors, peo-