

## Switch to riding enhances freedom

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In fall 2005, after noticing ever-increasing gasoline prices and what it meant to me (driving to work each day, spending roughly \$50 a week to fill the tank), and a surprising offer from Belmont University to have its employees and students ride the bus free, I came to what I initially thought would be an easy decision.

However, the certainty of driving my car and being able to determine my own time line for arrival had caused me to feel reluctant. I also felt some social discomfort, an uneasiness associated with my perceived status of being a car owner who could ride or not ride the bus at will. I didn't think I would be welcome or, at least, be easily recognized as a foreigner on the public transit system. The only way to test my resolve was to board the bus.

What I discovered was immense and mind-altering. Within a few weeks of daily riding (I live in Nolensville, drive to Old Hickory Plaza, catch the 5:03 a.m. No. 12 to Deaderick Street, then the 5:40 No. 7 to 21st and Wedgewood avenues), I began to recognize faces and share a smile of welcome with others aboard.

### Bus driver's dependability

The most important person on whom I would come to depend was Cheryl Allen, our driver. She was always on time and greeted me with a "good morning" every time I climbed aboard. With that connection, another misconception faded — that riding the bus would be much less safe than being alone in my car. I realized that everyone had put their trust in the system to work, and that no one boarded the bus to cause trouble. It is simply a means to get somewhere. In fact, during one journey, the driver actually stopped the bus and walked to the back to calm a group of noisy riders who were disturbing those around them.

Other amazing things began to take place as I made this a part of my daily routine. Those who ride the bus look out for one another. On one occasion, the bus began to pull away from a stop; the riders knew that one passenger was not aboard. Several looked back and saw him coming out of the Mapco, running for the bus. In unison, the riders shouted for Cheryl to stop. He came aboard and all was back to normal.

I have learned to appreciate the passing of time more infinitely, unencumbered by the responsibility of driving. I bought an iPod and have learned to enjoy listening to music again.

Another positive feature is that I get to walk several blocks from my morning stop in Hillsboro Village to my office at Belmont University. It makes more sense to avoid parking issues by taking the No. 7 to Green Hills or downtown to lunch. My sense of exploration has grown with the freedom I feel as a rider.

I have new acquaintances that I look forward to seeing each morning. We greet one another, share a comment or story, and know that we will see one another again in the safety of this well-organized, efficient and thoughtful system of public transportation.

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