

Chapter Eighteen: Yellow Buses Trek Through Ashtabula County





The Happy Hearts School bus, a colorful prop designed by director Mike DeMarino(left) will be used in the annual spring program at Happy Hearts on May 19th. About 190 students will present musical numbers. Pictured here from left are Nino..., Bonnie Stevenson and Todd Sloan. Theme of the show is "A Little Bit Country, Little Bit Town."



Happy Hearts School Bus Drivers Honored

Steering wheel, symbolic of her 13 years as a Happy Hearts School bus driver, is presented to Mrs. Edgar Good (left) by Mrs. Paul Berg, mistress of ceremonies, also a Happy Hearts bus driver. Mrs. Good was honored at a retirement party. 1968.



Mrs. Edgar Good

Mrs. Edgar Good of Kingsville, retiring Happy Hearts School bus driver, was honored at a retirement party recently at Hotel Ashtabula by the school staff and other bus drivers. Mrs. Good received gifts from the school staff, Ash/Craft Board, and clients, Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation, and the Council for Retarded Children. She also received a flower-decorated steering wheel, symbolizing her 13 years as a Happy Hearts school bus driver.

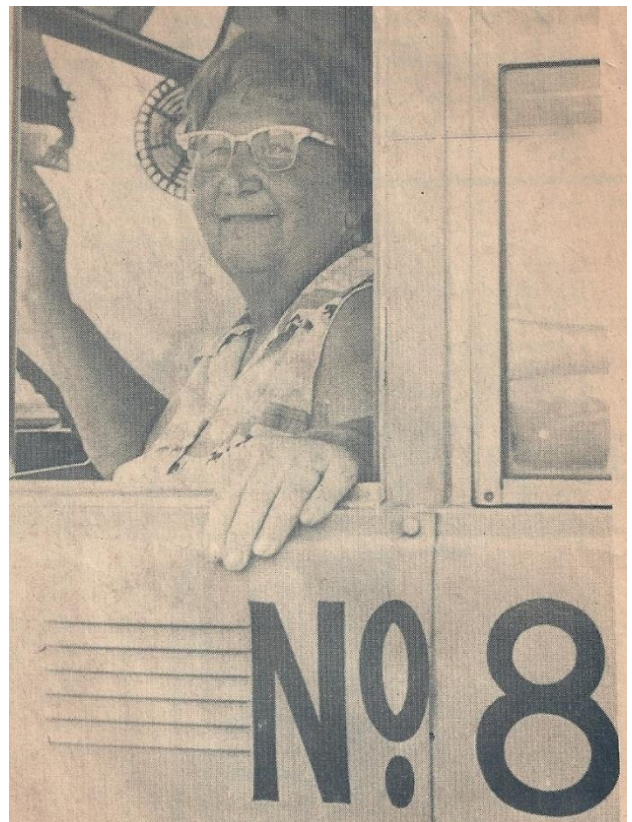
Happy Hearts school began operating in 1955, and Mrs. Good was the first from the Happy Hearts staff to retire. She was one of the school's first drivers and drove her own car to transport children before the school acquired its own buses.

Mrs. Agnes F. Berg

Mrs. Agnes F. Berg behind the wheel of Happy Hearts bus No. 8, retired recently after transporting mentally handicapped students for 25 years to and from classes in Ashtabula County. Ashtabula Star Beacon Sunday Paper Photo. 1977

Happy Hearts school may have just lost a school bus driver because of retirement, but has gained fond memories which will endure for as long as there are people who care for the mentally handicapped in Ashtabula County.

Mrs. Agnes Berg of New Lyme, retired July 15, following 25 years transporting mentally handicapped students to and from various locations throughout the Ashtabula City area before and after Happy Hearts School opened in 1968. She drove them to classes by car until she started driving bus 25 years ago.



Many people think that mentally handicapped children are more difficult to deal with than other children, but the more you know them, the more normal than abnormal they become,” said Mrs. Berg.

She became active in working with mentally handicapped children in 1954, because her daughter Paula was rejected in kindergarten. She added, “I saw an advertisement in the Star Beacon about classes for the retarded in Geneva in 1954. I then met with six other families to hold classes.

Soon after, the Ashtabula County Council for Retarded Children evolved from the program which Mrs. Berg helped establish. The council then set fund raising activities to continue classes. She said a class of seven children began in 1955 at the First United Methodist Church on Elm Avenue.”

We held classes in three or four locations and the state legislature voted operating money for classes until it was taken over by the Ashtabula County Welfare Department in 1959. The name Happy Hearts was chosen in August 1957,” said Mrs. Berg.

“We received much help and equipment from Ashtabula County service clubs including the Kiwanis and even had our own money-making projects. “In addition, the parents paid weekly tuition and transportation costs, said Mrs. Berg.

“It’s been very satisfying and gratifying to see the growth of services in Ashtabula County and to know you’ve had a small part in it,” said Mrs. Berg.

She said she drove a bus because she could take her mentally handicapped child Paula home with her and be with her constantly each day when Paula was growing up several years ago.

“I also chose to drive a bus because it’s an excellent job for a woman. I like the daily contact with the kids.” added Mrs. Berg. She said the school started out with only three or four buses. “Now Happy Hearts School has more than 11 buses for 11 routes, said Mrs. Berg. She has always driven buses on routes centered in the city of Ashtabula.

In an Ashtabula Star Beacon Sunday Paper story by Sara Smith dated April 4, 1976, Agnes said she sort of “grew into” her job as a Happy Hearts school bus driver. Her daughter was a student when the school first opened so she volunteered to drive other students to school and her car along with three other mothers. She helped in the fund raising for the new school in 1954, and a few years later when the school bought buses to transport the students, she became one of the first drivers.

“There’s no discipline problem,” she said. “It’s not nearly as bad as the public schools.” She said that some students might be afraid or hyperactive and hard to handle. Sometimes it gets noisy when any of the children are crying. “I notice on rainy days they’re more restless.” They are also excited after a party or when something has happened at school, she said.

Mrs. Berg says that one problem she has is that some of the children can’t talk and she can’t tell when something is wrong. Sometimes, she said, you can tell by the mannerisms or one of the other children will tell you. The older children are the biggest factor in helping. They will sit with unruly children and help with them.



Happy Hearts School buses are equipped with a lift to help students in wheelchairs get into the bus. Craig Gustafson, a volunteer student from Edgewood Senior High School helps Michael Meredyck board the bus to go home. Ashtabula Star Beacon Sunday Paper Photograph.



All dressed and ready to go home after a long day at school, Danny Payne boards a Happy Hearts bus. An Ashtabula Star Beacon Sunday Paper photograph.

Mrs. Berg said that she has noticed that mothers are very apprehensive of putting their children on the bus for the first time. The child may be crying when he is put on the bus, but two blocks later is so absorbed with his new surroundings that he has forgotten to cry.

Happy Hearts drivers must teach the children how to get off the bus. Although the students are always let off the bus on the same side of the street as their homes, Mrs. Berg said there is always a problem with cars passing the bus, which is against the law. She recalled one woman who passed her on Columbus Avenue. She realized she should have stopped, so she backed up after she got past.

Mrs. Berg drives the “city” route with her round-trip mileage being about 70 miles. “It’s the same route every day, but it’s different every day. The kids themselves are different and interesting.

“As far as a job, it’s a very good job for women. You’re home during the day and can do the shopping or start supper,” she said.

Mrs. Berg will retire in June to join her husband as house parents for the new residential home for retarded boys in North Kingsville.

She vividly recalls her experiences and last day with the children on the bus at Happy Hearts school before her July 15th retirement. “I never turned on the radio every morning, but the kids knew latest news, songs, and movies. Being with them is an education in itself. Anyone who works in education can tell you,” said Mrs. Berg.

The last day at work the kids on the bus started crying one by one when they found out I was leaving. They stopped though, when we pulled into a Dairy Queen.

Some people say that working with the mentally handicapped is depressing, but it is very rewarding work,” she added.

She plans on traveling to Florida in October with her husband Paul to live. Her husband retired in 1975 as a sheet metal fabricator at the Carlson Street Fabricating Company.

As part of her retirement memorabilia from the students and staff at Happy Hearts School, Mrs. Berg received a plaque, watch and furniture for her new home in Jensen Beach, Florida.

She died October 1, 2012, in Stuart, Florida.

Happy Hearts and Ash/Craft Bus Drivers Honored for Years of Safe Driving

October 1987

At the Annual Bus Driver Safety Meeting in October the Ashtabula County Schools presented awards to drivers in each of the County’s school districts. Several Happy Hearts and Ash/Craft drivers were recognized for their consecutive years of safe driving.

Jan Winchester – 17 years
Mary Lou Moody-13 years
Beulah Plats-10 years
Rowynn Bancroft-9 years
Sheila Knowlton-6 years
Dinah Pal-5 years
Sharon Yoak- 5 years

Sandy Cusano- 5 years
Terri Gill – 4 years
Cindy Jackson – 4 years
Mary Elligson – 4 years
Cindy Shearer – 3 years
Arlane Bancroft – 3 years
Jeanette Banko – 2 years

Debbie Gill – 1 year
Patti Davis – 1 year
Cheryl Lutes – 1 year

Charlie Yaharaus, Bus Mechanic

New Directions. Winter 1988

by Holly Brown

Since Charlie was reluctant to be interviewed, we've put together the comments of those who know him.

As Rick Cozza tells it, when he first came to Ashtabula, the first person to make a strong impression on him was Charles Yaharaus. Rick says he was amazed at the personal interest Charlie seemed to take in his work and remarked that Charlie seemed to feel those were his buses out on the road.

Well, in a way they are! Charlie has been THE mechanic here for over ten years, and to say that he takes pride in his work is an understatement. To say that he's done a fine job is an understatement, too! Linda Porcello, Transportation Coordinator, says that Charlie's heart and soul are in each and every one of buses. His buses. "He is dedicated and reliable and, when the chips are down, you can always count on Charlie."

For years, Charlie kept the bus fleet on the road without any help. When a second mechanic was finally hired, Charlie worked even harder. He had always managed to keep outside repairs and costs to a minimum. Now that he has help, he's been able to do almost everything here. And he worries! He worries about the buses, he worries about the drivers, about the transportation budget and about the Transportation Coordinators – four of whom he has "trained." He shows concern, offers advice and is constantly looking for areas in need of preventative action.

One of the drivers, Rowynn Bancroft, says that Charlie is affectionately known as the father of the transportation department. She says, "We are not just drivers and passengers to him, but family. When we take a bus on the road we know it is as safe as it can be."

And like family it is. Sometimes Charlie is rather crusty, sometimes he gets frustrated and lets us know it but always, always, Charlie is dependable and caring. He has been the advisor and patient listener to many – especially the superintendents over the years. While getting Charlie's respect takes some time, if you gain it you feel a strong sense of accomplishment.

Although he is basically a very reserved and private person, Charlie has a marvelous sense of humor and a lovely twinkle in his eye. As driver Dinah Pal told us, "Charlie always says that if you're going to break down, make sure it's by McDonalds."

Bus aide Sandi Kanicki says that whenever she thinks of Charlie she remembers the yearly trips to pick out and deliver the Christmas trees for the school. It was always cold, things didn't always go smoothly, but Charlie always made it fun,

Lately, Charlie's been hinting about retirement. Only hinting, mind you. Retirement is something we don't even think about, because we can't begin to imagine life without Charlie!

Hands Up for Happy Hearts Bus Safety



Happy Hearts bus driver Cis Plats (left) and bus aide Verna Osburn assist Charlie Smith into one of the Happy Hearts buses designed to accommodate wheelchairs. September 24, 1989.

Ashtabula County observed School Bus Safety Week from September 17 to September 23, 1989, with state mandated school bus rider safety sessions.

At Happy Hearts School and Ash/Craft Industries, the Bus Safety Program took on a new look this year, according to Linda Porcello, transportation coordinator. Linda said bus safety taught by the teachers in past years, was taken over this year by a volunteer committee of transportation workers.

The Committee consisted of bus drivers Cis Plats and Cheryl Lutes; bus aides Rick Walker, Sandi Kinicki,

and Carolyn Porter; parent volunteer Jean Fields; and Linda Porcello.

In January, Linda began developing the Happy Hearts Bus Safety Program by asking department personnel for the five most important passenger safety principles. The resulting top five were incorporated into a slogan which was used in a combination of sign language, rhymes, and finger plays. The following principles were taught throughout the week under the common theme of "Hands Up for Bus Safety."

- Be quiet at railroad crossings.
- Sit down when the bus is moving.
- Look three ways before crossing the street.
- Keep the aisle clear to the emergency door.
- Good behavior is best.

Using a skit outlined by Sandi Kinicki, the transportation staff made a video to demonstrate the safety principles. Bulletin board displays, a rhyme and daily “Calendar of Colors” helped to reinforce the rules.

Linda Porcello said there are a number of rider safety issues peculiar to transporting handicapped children. Students may suffer from seizures or various medical conditions. They may be blind or deaf. Some students require special seats or are in wheelchairs.

Cis Plats, a driver for the school, says she has students on her bus ranging from infancy to more than 60 years old.

On-going in-service programs are provided for dealing with these special needs on the bus, according to Linda Porcello. Additionally, all bus drivers for Happy Hearts and Ash/Craft Industries must complete a multi-media first aid course.

Mary Lou Moody, Bus Driving Diplomat



*Photo by Margie Netzel,
Ashtabula Star Beacon*

August 6, 1990

Often, the first and sometimes only contact Ashtabula county citizens have with Happy Hearts School and Ash/Craft Industries are the big yellow buses that travel to every corner of Ashtabula County on their daily routes. This fact of transportation life makes transportation staff the first line diplomats for the school and workshop. Mary Lou Moody is one of the best bus driving diplomats.

Both children and adults spend a great deal of time on Happy Hearts buses and the trip to and from school and the workshop is an extension of their day. Bus

drivers and their aides can reinforce the program goals with their interactions with passengers. Since personal diplomacy is so important, the transportation staff has to be

efficient in their jobs and highly skilled in dealing with their passengers. Mary Lou Moody treats each trip like a diplomatic mission.

Going out of her way to make the bus trip pleasant for all of her passengers, Mary Lou gives each one cheery and personal greetings and goodbyes, relating to them with the caring and professionalism of a seasoned diplomat.

Always pleasant and ready with a kind word and smile, Mary Lou says that she likes driving and credits her passengers with making her job worthwhile in many ways. "I love being around the students and clients. They truly appreciate me and make me feel important. They are a joy to be around. I wish more people could see our program and experience some of the good things we do every day," she says.

Mary Lou shows diplomatic restraint about the extra things she does daily for her passengers. Despite her tactfulness in not mentioning her act of kindness, word circulated that she had bought a Halloween costume for a four-year-old boy because his parents couldn't afford one. That's just one of her many acts of kindness.

November 1990 will mark Mary Lou's 17th anniversary as a bus driver for Happy Hearts and Ash/Craft. She became a substitute driver and substitute classroom aide in November 1973, and a full-time driver in September 1974. Over the years Mary Lou has driven bus routes in Geneva, Ashtabula, and Conneaut in many different kinds of buses and in all kinds of weather. She has worked under five Transportation Coordinators and four Superintendents.

Mary Lou resides in Ashtabula with her husband, David and son, Mark 18 and Shon, 15. Daughter Donna, 21, and sons Dan, 25, and Brian, 21, are out on their own. Mary Lou enjoys camping and cooking.

Twenty-two years later, a story by Margie Netzel in the Ashtabula Star Beacon announced Mary Lou Moody's retirement as a bus driver and diplomat after 25 years as a bus driver for the Ashtabula County Board of Developmental Disabilities and 13 years as Director of Transportation. She retired with mixed feelings and a sense of excitement for the future.

She said, "It has been so rewarding working with my students, consumers and parents and co-workers," she said. "Everyone plays a great part in the lives of the people we serve. Our students and consumers show you what compassion is all about."

Making good on a promise to a passenger, Mary Lou delayed her retirement for one day. She had told the passenger that she would ride the bus with them on her last day, but the day turned out to be so busy that she didn't have time. She came in the next day and rode the bus, keeping her promise.

Mary Lou credited co-workers like Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Superintendent Anne Zeitler and Lynda Perry, Lori Burdick, Heather Perdue, Cheryl Marshall, Pam Rose and Mike DeMarino with supporting her successful career. "I was very proud to be a member of the Board's leadership team and to be a part of our strong planning process," she said.

According to Mary Lou, her time with Happy Hearts and Ash/Craft made her a better person and the students and workers have been like a part of her family for many years. "We truly

live our motto: "Imagine, Believe, Achieve." She said she enjoyed her job so much it never felt like work.

Mother of five and grandmother of seven, Mary Lou planned to enjoy her family, volunteer locally, and travel with her husband, David. "We are going to go just everywhere," she said.

MR/DD Transportation Chief Praised for Her Work



*Linda Porcello
Transportation Chief for the
Ashtabula County MR/DD
program poses here with
some of her charges in the
bus fleet. She also services as
a mentor for an Edgewood
High School student.
Ashtabula Star Beacon photo
by Dana Lewis.*

Linda Porcello thinks Charlie Coffelt is quite a young man, but that's ok because he thinks she's pretty special too. No, this isn't a story of young love- it's about a special friendship between a forty something young woman and the world in general. Charlie in particular.

In her official position Linda is Transportation Coordinator for the Ashtabula County MR/DD Board. For ten years

she's been in charge of keeping a fleet of buses on the road and about 350 students and clients of Happy Hearts and Ash/Craft Industries safely at their posts on a daily basis. Unofficially, she's a mentor to Charlie who she comes into contact with on a regular basis.

A seventeen-year-old Edgewood Senior High School sophomore, Charlie Coffelt wrote a letter to the newspaper praising Linda for her many kindnesses to himself and others. "I'm only seventeen years old and she encouraged me to go for the gold after high school," he wrote. "She never even forgets a Christmas card. The list could go on and on."

Porcello admits she keeps Hallmark in business by sending nearly 600 cards of various types to various individuals throughout the year. Most, she said, are Christmas cards. Sitting at a

cluttered desk in a postage stamp office which overlooks the “scenic” bus garage, Porcello gives a glimpse of why she’s so well liked – a good attitude.

“I’ve never been happier in my work. I really enjoy my job. I consider myself blessed: he said.

Looking closer at the clutter the desk is filled not only with schedules and messages, but also with little plaques bearing encouraging or inspirational sayings. The walls are filled with comic strips cut out because they fit the mood of the moment; poems, photos and cards complete the happy homey décor. Besides working long hours at her main job, Porcello is also a volunteer in many organizations.

Linda Porcello Publishes a Busing Article



Linda Porcello, Transportation Coordinator

September 24, 1989

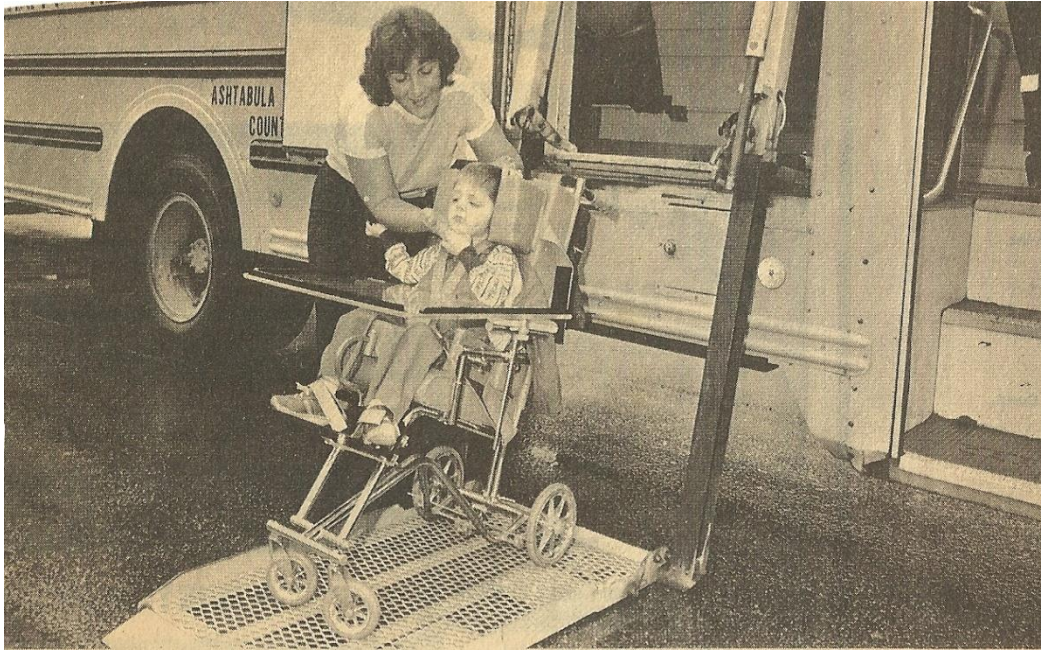
Linda Porcello, transportation coordinator for Happy Hearts School and Ash/Craft Industries has received a letter of commendation from Ohio Department of Transportation for an article which she had published the August-September 1989 issue of “School Bus Fleet,” a national transportation magazine.

In her article, Linda described the unusual busing problems that drivers of the Happy Hearts System face, including passengers ranging in age from 7 months to 67 years and all mentally retarded or developmentally disabled. “There are some special problems we are always dealing with. We have passengers with a variety of medical problems. We have passengers who are nonverbal. We have passengers with behavior problems. We have seizure problems. And we have only seven bus aides for our 27 buses,” she said.

Because of her deep concern for bus safety, Linda helped organize a school bus safety committee comprised of two bus drivers, Cheryl Lutes and Cis Plats; three buses aides Carolyn Porter; Rick Walker; and Sandi Kinicki, and a parent volunteer, Jean Fields.

The committee recently implemented a week-long program at Happy Hearts School for students and Ash/Craft workshop clients. The program included a safety segment in each class, safety skills with drivers and aides as actors; flyers and coloring books on safety; designed “colors for safety” such as blue look both ways, red, be quiet at crossing, etc.; safety bulletin boards, safety material sent home to parents and more.

Happy Hearts School Hires New Bus Aides



Three bus aides have been hired for Happy Hearts school this year. Donna Johnson helps student Dominic DeMark to get on the bus. Photo by Pat Brink.

Governor's Committee Recognizes Residents for Work in Traffic Safety



Richard Cozza, Jr. of Ashtabula, Superintendent of the MR/DD Board overseeing Happy Hearts School and Ash/Craft (right) received an award from the Governor's Traffic Safety Committee on November 28 for his involvement in securing railroad crossing gages and warning lights at the Green Road crossing in Kingsville Township. Presenting the award is Charles Shipley, highway safety director.

Two area residents were recognized by the 1991 Governor's Traffic Safety Committee November 28 in Columbus. Awards bestowed on 20 of the top traffic activists in Ohio, recognize those who work in their communities to improve traffic safety through increased public awareness, law enforcement or road engineering.

Richard J. Cozza Jr. of Ashtabula and Corporal Led Wisniewski of the Andover Police Department were presented awards.

Corporal Wisniewski, a volunteer auxiliary member since 1980, initiated Safety Town in Andover and assisted with the start up of the program in surrounding communities. He regularly volunteers his time to work with school children, retired citizens, and the disabled in traffic safety education. In addition to this award, Corporal Wisniewski was recognized as the 1990 Andover Police Officer of the Year and the 1990 Ashtabula County Crime Clinic Officer of the Year.

Richard Cozza, Jr. was recognized for his involvement to secure railroad crossing gages and warning lights at the Green Road crossing in Kingsville Township. The crossing was the site of five accidents, including one fatality, in a ten-year period. Richard Cozza's two and a half years of steady perseverance attracted the support of community, state, and local officials.

Hands Up for Bus Safety



Ash/Craft employee Rena Hudson sews a tote bag with the "Hands Up For Bus Safety" logo on it while Happy Hearts advanced class students Walter Kightlinger of Conneaut and Mary Shannon of Geneva hold the finished products. Nancy Erikson of the Ashtabula Star Beacon took the photo.

October 16, 1990

Linda Porcello, transportation coordinator for the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities produced a video called Hands Up for Bus

Safety for School Bus Safety Week. She said this is the second year the district has selected the five-minute video based on a poem that Cheryl Lutes, a bus driver and last year's safety week chairwoman, wrote as a training tool for Happy Hearts students and Ash/Craft clients.

Five bus safety points that a poll of district drivers and bus aides chose as the most important are emphasized during the video, according to coordinator Porcello. The points are:

- Be quiet at railroad crossings.
- Sit down when the bus is moving.
- Look three ways when crossing the street to get on the bus.
- Keep the aisle clear to the emergency door.
- Be polite.

The poem was adapted to video last year using transportation department employees, but according to Linda Porcello the current video features students from Happy Hearts and Ash/Craft who were chosen for knowing and following bus safety rules. One student and one client from each bus were selected to be in the video.

Teachers and workshop supervisors will use the video in their classrooms during School Bus Safety Week. During School Bus Safety Week, teachers will reinforce each of the safety points in the video by associating the rule with a color. Students are asked to wear clothing of that color on a given day, such as "sit down brown" on Tuesday. "The response to the colored clothing last year was overwhelming," Linda said.

She emphasized that the video gives teachers and workshop supervisors the advantage of reinforcing the message by repetition, unlike a skit or a live program. The video will be available in the Happy Hearts library.

Drivers and aides learned about bus safety this month and the Kingsville Volunteer Fire Department conducted evacuation drills at the School as part of a school bus safety in-service program.

Happy Hearts Ride a Bus Week



In the last week of May 27, 1993, the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities sponsored a Ride -A-Bus Week for Happy Hearts School and Ashcraft Industries. Bus driver Terri Harchalk of Ashtabula and bus assistant Betty Morrison of Monroe Township were enthusiastic about the event.

Betty Morrison who has been a bus assistant for several years said, "A lot of people learn so much from this week."

Bus assistant Morrison and bus driver Terri Harchalk think of their bus as a mobile day care center. They greet every student and Ash/Craft worker they transport and they get to know them and their stories. One little girl on their route who had been very dependent on her brothers and sisters now gets on and off the bus by herself because of the efforts of the bus driver and her assistant. Terri Harchalk and Betty Morrison witnessed a symbolic graduation the day when her

sister greeted her at the bus and the little girl refused to hold hands, walked up the porch by herself and proudly turned around and waved.

A Few Hours Of... Free Time

Winter 1995, New Directions

by Patty Davis, Transportation Department

When asked the magic question, Transportation Staff reply in different ways. Some of us reply that we “do dishes.” Some do laundry, clean our houses. Some of us do our grocery shopping. Most of us prepare our families’ dinners for that evening. We do a lot in that little amount of time.

By now, you are asking, “What is she talking about?” The question is what do school bus staff do with our time in between the morning and afternoon runs? It’s one of the greatest questions of western civilization.

Although most of us fill our days with pre-planned things to do that need to be done, we also gather once a month as a group to work on crafts. We have very talented people in our transportation unit and we also have a lot of fun.

Someone will come up with idea, usually seasonal, and that makes it interesting. For example, in the springtime we usually will work outdoors in Kingsville Park. We like to work together in the outdoors as long as we can. This past summer we worked on lawn chairs. We had many different patterns to choose from and we restrung with colorful cords and beautiful artwork on the chairs and lawn furniture.

During the fall of the year we made door decorations. During the holidays we had fun making our Santas and Christmas trees and lighted holiday pine baskets decorated with pine cones and Christmas lights.

When the weather is not working in our favor, it does not stop this group. We gather in different homes. One thing is always certain. We always have a fun time, learn how to do new things and, of course, everyone in Transportation is welcome.

I want to say thanks to Joanne Gill (Terri Harchalk and Debbie Gill’s mother), Betty Morrison and Kathe Hawn for allowing us to use your homes. I also want to thank Shirley Cramer, Lisa Morrison, Peggy Bennett and Cindy Shearer for teaching us our projects. And last but not least, thanks to all of the people in Transportation for making our work place a more interesting and fun place to be around.



Patty Davis, a Happy Hearts bus driver and summertime helper, enjoys a swim in Lake Erie with Raymond Prenzlou, 8, of Dorset Township, and David Baker, 10, of Ashtabula during a field trip



MR/DD Board Purchases Hydraulic Vehicle Lift

February 23, 2003

The Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities finalized a purchase agreement for a hydraulic vehicle lift with Safetylane Equipment Corporation at its recent meeting. Safetylane Equipment will provide and install the bus garage lift at Ash/Craft Industries at a cost of \$29,746.

The new lift will be delivered early this week and installation will begin soon. The new lift will be able to hold buses weighing up to 35,000 pounds. It will be used to lift buses, delivery trucks and community employment vehicles for repairs.

The district doesn't foresee any additional costs beyond the agreement of \$29,746, said Mike Kushma, the senior mechanic at Ash/Craft Industries.

The Wheels on the Bus Roll Through Ride-A-Bus Week



May 15, 2005

The wheels on the bus roll round and through,
Ashtabula through and through,
Ashtabula through and through,
The wheels on the bus roll round and through,
Ashtabula County to Happy Hearts School.

The wheels on the bus roll Ash/Craft way,
Ash/Craft way, Ash/Craft way,
The wheels on the bus roll Ash/Craft way,
So the workers can earn their pay!

The Transportation Department of the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities is celebrating its annual Ride-A-Bus Week. Happy Hearts School is sending invitations to parents, guardians, and staff members asking if they want to take a bus ride like the students and workers do every day. The Ride-A-Bus Week event will take place from May 16 through May 20th.

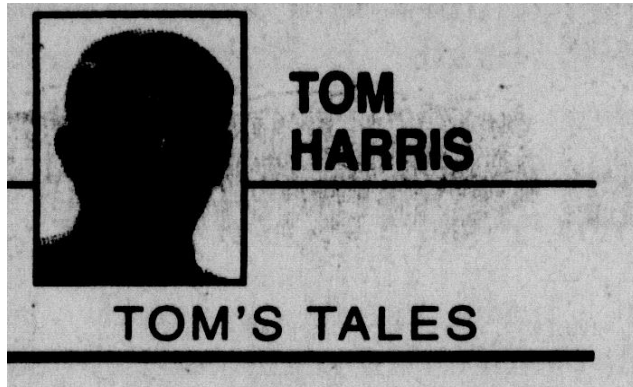
This is a special year marking the 50th Anniversary of Happy Hearts School. The idea of ride-a-bus week was first introduced in 1988 to promote public awareness within the Transportation Department. Held once a year in May, it takes a group effort to coordinate and has been highly successful since it began.

The buses travel 1,500 miles a day, and the driver must daily meet the challenge of staying within the state allotted time requirements with passengers on board. Each bus has a bus assistant on board to attend to the special needs of the passengers.

Transportation Supervisor Mary Lou Moody, is looking forward to people joining in for Ride-A-Bus Week.

Special Story

Getting to Work, Back Home an Odyssey for Ash/Craft Bus Riders



May 29, 2008

Every afternoon at 2:30 the multipurpose room at Ash/Craft Industries becomes a bus terminal. Most of the Ash/Craft workers wait in their work groups, but those who require assistance boarding the buses gather in the multipurpose room, some in wheelchairs, others with walkers. Things begin to stir when the buses pull up next to the building. A staff member looks around, spots the client she's looking for, says "Come on Joe," and helps guide his motorized wheelchair out the door and on the bus lift. Another staff person looks around and can't find the person she's looking for. "Where's Mary Anne?" she says.

"She went home early," someone replies. "I knew that," she says, as she helps the next person on her list to the bus.

It takes a fair amount of organization to pull it all off. In many cases it's not enough to just get the client to the right bus. On the buses that transport two or more clients in wheelchairs, the anxious commuters must be lifted on the bus in the proper order. That way the clients can be situated so as to minimize the disruption when the time comes for a client in a wheelchair to disembark.

On May 19, I waited for the clients in the multi-purpose room. I was taking advantage of the Ashtabula County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities annual Ride-a-Bus Week. It's been ten years or more since I've been on a ACBMR/DD bus, and the few trips I made when employed by the Board were work related. This time, I was just going along for the ride.

I boarded with the early loaders because I needed a little assistance. Rather than laugh while watching me struggle with the step, the crew of Bus 26 – driver Terri Harchalk and bus aide Jill Scott—took me and my walker up on the lift. It was fun, something I had never done before, and the day was pleasant. But those few minutes on the lift must seem like an eternity to the wheelchair-bound on a windy winter morning or during a downpour in July.

The clients and Happy Hearts students can get pretty cold and pretty wet, Terri Harchalk said.

The afternoon boarding procedure begins at Happy Hearts, and several students were in their seats when I got on at Ash/Craft. When I sat down, the young fellow in front of me looked out from around his seat and flashed the most engaging smile imaginable. Then he sat up straight, and a moment later he held his right hand out into the aisle. When I gave him five, he turned around, smiled and waited for me to extend my palm so he could slap it. While he didn't speak, he soon made it clear that he wanted my pad and pen. I gave them to him, and he wrote his name and age. He asked for the pad several more times before he got home, and he jotted down a couple numbers roughly the size of the national debt. I asked him if it was his phone number. He shook his head. So, I asked if it might be his address. He nodded, smiled a big smile and motioned for me to return to the tablet to him.

The atmosphere on the bus is pretty much what you'd expect. Some of the passengers slept, and others chatted, telling the story of their day and their plans for the evening.

Will and Ben, two Ash/Craft clients who spent the afternoon working at the Ashtabula YMCA, talked about their jobs. They perform various housekeeping chores at the Y as part of Ash/Craft's community employment program.

Sue, another Ash/Craft client, was in a more jocular mood. "You look like my old man, Tom," she said. "You've got gray hair."

It was pretty much a straight shot until we crossed the Norfolk Southern tracks at Park Avenue. That's when the business of delivering the students and clients to their doorsteps began. "We're going to get you dizzy now," Terri Harchalk said.

You can see the maze of streets that make up Ashtabula on any map, but to truly appreciate the labyrinth, riding through the city on a school bus is recommended. I went from being somewhat lost to completely lost to knowing where I was to being somewhat lost again, etc, etc. There weren't many intersections at which we didn't turn, and if there was a railroad crossing in the vicinity, we crossed it. And this was a pleasant afternoon in May.

"These streets get pretty narrow in the winter," Terri said.

There are other obstacles, too. We were headed east on Route 20, and Terri got into the inside lane to turn. But at the end of the street she intended to turn onto was a sign, "Road Closed."

"What are you going to do?" Jill Scott asked.

"I guess we're going to go down it. We don't have much choice," Terri Harchalk said.

She didn't have an option. A Happy Hearts student lived a block or two down the closed road. Normally, after dropping the student at his house, Terri would have continued in the direction we

had been heading. Today, however, she elected to turn around rather than challenge the paving crew which could be seen working in the distance. She found a long driveway, backed the bus into it, with less trouble than I have backing my little Aveo, and got us pointed toward West Prospect.

As we drove by Family Video, Jill Scott struck up a conversation with a young man, who looked to be about 11 or 12. She asked him if he was going to get any movies, and he told her a great deal about wrestling, about Shawn Michaels and Mr. Vince McMahon. Then the boy got started on his brother. "He ticks me off," he said.

There was more to do after the last passenger got off.

Jim and Brian work on the afternoon cleaning crew at Ash/Craft, and Bus 26 is their ride to work. So, the odyssey through the city streets continued for 10 more minutes before Terri Harchalk could turn east and traverse a relatively straight stretch of road.

The 16 bus routes operated by the ACBMR/DD go just about everywhere in Ashtabula County. Every time Harchalk turned down another city street, a colleague somewhere was turning on to a dusty road in a part of the county where silos dot the skyline. The fleet travels about 1,500 miles a week, with the first bus scheduled to leave each morning at 6. In the afternoon, the last bus is due back at the garage at 5.

"We have a very experienced staff," director of transportation Mary Lou Moody said. "Our 16 drivers and 16 aides have been with the program an average of 15 years. It is a great group of people, and they all do everything necessary and then some to get the job done right."

Prodded by her sister Debbie Gill, Terri Harchalk began driving bus for the ACBM/DD in 1982 as a substitute and the next year she was hired as a regular driver. Twenty-five years later, Terri and Debbie are still driving.

"I can't imagine doing anything else," Terri Harchalk said. "I enjoy it so much. Years ago, my kids Josh and Jessica, would come with me on the route, and they still talk about it."

Jill Scott has been working for the ACBM/DD since 2000.

"To me, this is really rewarding," she said. "The best part is when someone gets on in a bad mood and I can put them into a good mood."