

## A Tribute to Transit Workers

Written by Béatrice Noël, Special to the BT  
June 2019

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### Our North Miami bus drivers are real gems



would like to present an aspect of North Miami that is worth protecting and promoting.

I lived in three cities before moving to Miami: New York, Newark, and Orlando. The very first difference I noticed in Florida is that people would say “good morning” to strangers, just as they do in Haiti, where I’m from. It’s not a big deal, but it doesn’t cost anything either, to be courteous or kind to people.

In New York, bus drivers are not as chatty as the ones in Florida, but still they would stop in the busy streets to let pedestrians cross safely, and they used to let me ride without paying. Here in Miami, I’m acquainted with quite a few of the Miami-Dade Transit drivers.

A simple “good morning” or “thank you” makes a huge difference in one’s interaction with a bus driver. And in North Miami, whenever I ride the NoMi Express Route 4, I find that the experience, beginning with the bus driver, is almost like family.

The NoMi Express is the city’s free shuttle service, and operates in all parts of North Miami. Route 4 serves residents of the eastern part of the city, and it has come a long way. When I first moved here in 2009, we might be sexually harassed or taunted by one of the Haitian morning drivers, and we’d have to put up with the rude Jamaican afternoon driver.

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However, understand that this isn't a story about rudeness or inappropriate comments. It's about the love and kindness in North Miami.

I never hesitate to say good morning to the bus drivers when I board. And over the years, I have gotten to know the afternoon driver, Gabriel, very well. I have also gotten to know some of the regular riders. Gabriel is not only very cordial and patient with his passengers, but he always goes the extra mile to help the senior residents of Sans Souci, even carrying their groceries off the bus for them.

For example, there is one rider named Ines. I've become like her adoptive granddaughter. Ines is something else, I like to say -- she is close to 80 years old and has a bad knee, but she always insists that she can carry her own groceries and doesn't like to accept offers of help. She is like an old-fashioned Italian mama who knows how to serve you a proper lunch, and she is the sweetest person -- to a fault -- which makes me very protective of her.

But every single time, almost like a ritual, we have a little struggle as I try to help her maneuver her load of groceries while she boards the shuttle. I want to help not only because she's older but also because we're supposed to protect our elders.

There is also a woman named Melissa from Colombia who lives in the building next door. I've gotten very close to Melissa as well. She gladly welcomes the help -- but it still makes me want to give those sweet grandmothers the side-eye for the amount of heavy groceries they think they can carry.

You've got to understand that the NoMi Express stops right in front of their buildings, and that most of these senior residents live by themselves. Gabriel isn't obligated to help them. I'm not obligated to help them. But we do it because we cherish our elders. And when you ride NoMi Express Route 4, it's not like getting on the regular tiring commute to work. I see the same faces every day, so I get to know and appreciate them.

Lately, the morning shuttle driver seems to have finally a regular face. His name is Luneste, he's also Haitian, and we've started getting to know each other. Today he forgot his phone on the bus. When driver Gabriel later found the phone, he handed it over to me to try to find the owner. And it was as I was making phone calls that we found out it belonged to the morning

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driver because his niece, who was sitting right next to me, intercepted the conversation.

Later on he got on the bus to retrieve the phone, but his niece had already taken it with her when she got off. So he decided to ride the afternoon route with us to stop at her place.

When we got to Sans Souci, we helped my nana Ines to get off, and once again, Gabriel took her heavy shopping cart inside the building for her. When they got to my building, not only did Gabriel get off the bus to help out, but so did Luneste.

I asked myself, how many cities are like this one, where you can experience this kindness and camaraderie? And that is why I wanted to share it with you today.

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