

the hardest-core of transit nerds

PROFILE OF PANGILINAN, PROGRAM DIRECTOR AT TRANSITCENTER

Interview location: TransitCenter Office and Obao Restaurant in New York City

How we got there: On the A Train

In one word, he describes himself as “Relentless.”

By Laura Lee Huttenbach



Chris Pangilinan, in 2016. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

When Chris Pangilinan was a little kid, riding in the backseat of his family’s station wagon, the red stop-lights annoyed him. “I would think, *Why is this so inefficient? Why do we have to stop all the time?*” he recalls. Today we are sitting in a conference room at TransitCenter, a non-profit organization that conducts research and advocates to improve public transportation. It’s Chris’s first week on the job. The building is on the southern tip of Manhattan, a two-block walk from the Hudson River, Battery Park, and a view of the Statue of Liberty. “Even as a ten-year-old,” he continues, “I’m concerned about the gas we’re wasting in the car and the pollution this is causing. I thought, *There’s gotta be a better way.*” >

infatuated with transportation

The more he talks about it, the more Chris's career as a civil engineer and urban planner, and his focus on public transit, seem predestined. His father drove a bus for TriMet Transit Agency for 27 years in Portland, Oregon, where Chris grew up. "I'd ride his bus for fun every now and again," says Chris. "So I'm sure that bled off on me somehow." His mother worked in transportation, too, as a travel agent for Philippine Airlines (his parents moved from the Philippines to Portland in 1979, three years before he was born). "I'm not sure what part of your brain makes you do this," says Chris, "but I was just infatuated with transportation."

One video game, in particular, fed his infatuation. "Have you ever played SimCity?" he asks me. I tell him I haven't. "Well," he says, "as most urban planners in their twenties or thirties will nod their heads to, when SimCity came out, I was like, *Oh my God*. That game is a sandbox. All the stuff I complain about in real life I can make right in this game as a benevolent dictator."

Because I'm unfamiliar with SimCity—and videogames in general—Chris elaborates. Running his hands over the white table



between us, he tells me the game gives a player "a blank canvas with the tools to build a city." For a person like Chris, SimCity was revolutionary. Before its release, most popular videogames had been violent. "People were like, *Are you really going to make money selling a game where no one dies?*"

He never considered the field of public transit as more than a hobby until his freshman year at Portland State University, where he took an elective class in urban planning, and he got hooked. His professor, Robert Bertini, became a mentor. "He was just super warm and welcoming and always willing to give up his time for his students," says Chris. It was Professor Bertini who encouraged Chris to apply to grad school. "To the best," says Chris. "He said, 'Don't sell yourself short.' I was

like, *MIT? That's for other people*. But because he believed in me, I applied and got in.”

When Chris began grad school in Boston, it was the first time he had ever lived outside his parents’ home. Chris, who has cerebral palsy, has never been able to walk without crutches. Today he uses a wheelchair, though, and depending on the city, he can either drive or ride a tricycle, to which he straps crutches with a bungee cord. “Boston was a real test,” he says. “I was worried I couldn’t do it on my own.” But, with the support of cool roommates and a lot of persistence, he learned to go grocery shopping and do all the other household tasks required of life outside his family home. “It proved adulthood would be fine,” he says. “A lot of people don’t have to think about that.”

Since graduating from MIT with a master’s

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degree in civil engineering focused on public transportation, Chris has tried out four other cities—Chicago, DC, San Francisco, and now New York. “Which city’s public transit most impressed you?” I ask.

“It’s kind of cliché,” he says, “But New York: the way that they move eight million people a day on buses and subways. The way that life is oriented around public transportation for most people. It runs 24/7. It’s a miracle that the subway is able to be maintained at all.” Just a day earlier, he says, he attended an event with the Young Professionals of Transportation, where the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA)’s president, Veronique “Ronnie” Hakim, delivered the keynote address. “She said, ‘You can’t change the tire on your bicycle when you’re riding it 24/7. You have to take a break from your bike for at least ten minutes,’” he recalls. “But the problem is, you can’t take a break in New York because people have jobs 24/7.”

Though Chris always knew he wanted to work in transportation, he says that the majority of people he meets in the industry “fell into it” and have extremely diverse backgrounds. He mentions a colleague he admires from the MTA who used to be a high school teacher and play in a band that toured all over the United States. I ask what he thinks transit professionals have in common. “We all care about the city,” he replies. “We see transit as a tool to make cities better.”

“And why would a young person want to work in transit?” I ask.

“Cause it affects them every day,” he says without hesitation. “It’s very satisfying to be in a profession where you can have actual, tangible effects on

things. Instead of just complaining about, ‘Why is the bus late all the time? Those idiots need to run the bus better.’ Well, guess what? You can actually be the idiot that you’re insulting. You can be that person and make a change. You can find out how it works and make it better. I think that’s a lot better than just living through it and not doing anything.”

You can find out how it works and make it better.

Before we head to lunch, Chris pulls out his phone to check the MTA’s webpage for an updated elevator status. He has to do this before any subway trip. “So the New York City subway isn’t that wheelchair accessible,” he says. “It’s old.” The first New York subway ran in 1908, some 82 years before the first President Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act. “About 20 percent of the stations have elevators,” says Chris.

He’s dragging his finger across his iPhone when suddenly he frowns. “Oh,” he says, shaking his head. The elevator at Bowling Green Station, where we hope to catch the train, is out of service. “It must’ve just broken

down,” he says. “It was working this morning when I came to work.” Instead of Bowling Green, we have to go to Fulton Street—about a ten-minute, uphill walk. “That’s okay,” Chris reassures me. “It’s just gonna add a little time and effort.”

Leaving the office, he nods to the building next door, the MTA Headquarters. “That’s my old office,” he says, “So you can see my commute didn’t change.” There’s a crowd of tourists across Broadway taking pictures of the Charging Bull sculpture—all 7,000 pounds of bronze—one block before the New York Stock Exchange.

“Is it frustrating when you check and see the elevator’s out?” I ask.

“Oh, definitely,” he replies. “It’s not as frustrating as finding out the hard way, but yeah, absolutely. I’m trying to figure out what to do about it.” The incline is steep, and Chris is out of breath. “One second,” he says. “When I get to the top of this hill, I can talk.” A minute later, he continues. “My philosophy is that the MTA is already lacking elevators—which is fine, because it’s very expensive to build them—but that means that the elevators we do have need to be reliable, and they’re not.” He keeps a detailed log of the broken elevators that affect his journey. “This one is number 191 in the past 18 months that I’ve encountered,” he says, pushing the wheels of his chair forcefully with black-gloved hands. “That is completely unacceptable.” He tells me that Boston’s MBTA was sued in a class action lawsuit over a similar matter in 2002. “They’ve gotten their act together since,” says Chris. “They’ve done a good job.”



Chris Pangilinan in 2016. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

A massive truck is turning in front of us, and the driver motions for us to cross. I ask Chris if he worries about being in a lower line of sight. “Yeah, that’s a danger,” he says. “Drivers might not see me as well. It hasn’t caused me a problem yet, but I have to be mindful.” In his experience, curbs pose greater challenges than traffic. One time, he explains, he was returning to the office from lunch with a takeout meal sitting in his lap. “I wasn’t paying attention, and I was going over a curb that I’d gone over multiple times,” he says. “There was a crack in it, though. I nailed the crack, stopped cold, and I went out of the chair, and my food went flying everywhere.” He pauses, reliving the scene in memory. “I wasn’t hurt except for my pride, and I lost my lunch,” he continues. “But all these people stopped and helped me. And the

sandwich shop across the street gave me lunch on the house.” He is smiling. “That was nice.”

At Fulton Street Station, we take two elevators underground. In the second elevator, a woman in a mechanical wheelchair is riding with us. As we sink to the platform, a train is arriving. “Look at this timing,” says Chris. When the doors open, he picks up speed approaching the big gap between the platform and train. I wince, and want to close my eyes. But Chris leans back and clears the gap like it’s nothing. “That’s a big jump,” I say, sitting in an open seat.

“Yeah, it’s a big gap,” he says as the subway

doors close, then reopen for a moment and close again. “They have wheelchair boarding areas,” he explains. “But we’re not in a wheelchair boarding area right now, so I had to jump that gap. And that woman behind us in the mechanical chair—she cannot make the jump, so she was probably rushing to the middle area. I think they opened the doors for her, which is good, but if they weren’t to open the doors for her, we would’ve taken off, and she, and I, and you—who were in the same elevator—would be in different trains. Crazy, right?”

At his home station, he tells me, he has to clear an especially large gap if he doesn’t get on in the middle. “I have to hit it just right,” he says. “I can board it—I don’t know—60 percent of the time? That’s why I only try if I have no choice.” I ask about the other 40 percent of his attempts. “What I like is that people are very aware of other people in New York. People see me try and fail, and they’ll get up, grab my chair, and pull me in.” By the time Chris says thank you to the Good Samaritan, usually he or she is immersed in another world. “They won’t even be looking at me,” says Chris, chuckling. “They’ll be back on their phone. It’s great.”

We take the A Train uptown. Chris takes inventory of our car, first scanning the advertisements, then looking at the people. “I’m always fascinated by the idea—here we are, 40 of us on the subway car,” he says, “And ten minutes ago all of our lives are different—and they’re intersecting right here. Why?” At our stop at 42nd Street, we have to ascend

a steep ramp. “Let me know if I can help,” I say, walking behind and wondering if I should offer to push. “Are there things that people do trying to help, but actually it’s annoying?” I ask.

“People who start pushing me in the back without saying anything,” he says. “I totally get it’s out of the goodness of their heart. But I don’t go up to you and push you in the back if you’re walking slowly. Plus I do like to get the

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exercise.” At the top of the ramp is an elevator lift. “I apologize in advance,” Chris says. “We’re about to go into the smelliest elevator in New York.” I tell him I don’t have a really sensitive sense of smell.

A minute later, stepping inside, I’m wrapped in a muggy embrace that reeks of urine, excrement, and a touch of bleach. “Wow,” I say, coughing. “That goes straight to the back of your throat.”

Chris nods, and we hold our breaths for rest of the mercifully short ride. Out in the open

air, we have two blocks before getting to Obao Restaurant in Hell’s Kitchen. Chris has made a reservation, but the table the restaurant has held for us is up a couple of stairs, so we wait until an accessible table opens up. “One thing I keep saying I wanna do, but haven’t done yet,” he says, “is come up with a guide to New York for people with disabilities.” Restaurants, stores,

an old city, most places weren’t built to accommodate people with wheelchairs. “It’s already expensive to live here,” he says, “but if you narrow down the filter to new construction, you’re at a higher price point. But new construction is the only thing that’s accessible. I’m not living in a Brooklyn walk-up.”



Chris Pangilinan in 2016. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

and bars could have a five-star rating system. “Five stars, fully accessible,” imagines Chris. “Three stars, somewhat accessible but no accessible bathrooms.”

I ask what resources he has now to figure out where he can go in the city. “I use Google Street View a lot,” he says. “I’ll zoom in and see if there are stairs. Sometimes Yelp will say if it’s accessible or not, but not always.” He emphasizes again that because it’s such

He rattles off a few other challenges of the city—snow and rain, broken elevators—then is silent. “For anyone—regardless of if they have a disability—New York is a hard place to live,” he concedes. “But I don’t like to hear that I can’t do something. The best way to get me to do something is tell me I can’t do it, and I’ll prove you wrong.” (Incidentally, I learn over lunch, this is also the philosophy that led Chris to become a pilot of a Cessna 172—he has over 100 flight hours—and

go skydiving.) As he lists the difficulties of living in New York with a disability, his expression changes from disappointed to determined. “It’s sort of the Mount Everest,” he concludes, smiling. “I’m gonna climb it.”

Over appetizers, I notice Chris’s watch, which he tells me was a gift from his girlfriend. “The official watch of the Swiss Railways,” he says. “It’s a big transportation nerd thing. When they see the band, they all know what the watch is.”

As we talk, Chris gives me further insight into his favorite gatherings of fellow transportation nerds. One major convening is Transportation Camp, a growing enterprise that started in New York and DC in 2011 and is spreading to other cities. “There’s one this Saturday in Kansas City,” he says. But DC is the biggest. “We all make our pilgrimage toward the end of January,” he says. “It’s on the front end of the main Transportation Research Board Conference,” an annual academic conference that runs from Sunday to Thursday. “Camp’s on Saturday,” he says. “And if you’re really enthusiastic, the World Bank has their own conference on transportation the Thursday and Friday afterwards, which is free. So it’s a whole week of transportation.”

As much as he adores Transportation Camp, Chris acknowledges that the “biggest display of transit knowledge and nerdfest ever” happens at an annual Transit Trivia

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Contest. The contest is hosted by the New York Transit Museum, a decommissioned subway station in Brooklyn repurposed to house artifacts from the city’s long history in transit. “Next time you’re in New York, you should go,” he suggests. Last year, Chris’s team placed third out of 30.

When I ask Chris to provide some example trivia questions, he asks me how I got to his office. “I took the B and R,” I say.

“B to the R,” he says. “You transferred at 34th Street.” I nod. “See, that’s a Transit Trivia thing, too.” The bonus round in Transit Trivia, he explains, combines movie trivia with transit. For instance, from plot hints, you have to come up with two

movies—let’s say, “John Q” and “Seven.” “Then you have to think, Okay, *Q and 7—where do they intersect? Oh, Queensboro Plaza*. And that’s the answer... and only the hardest-core of the transit nerds can get that.” In this moment, I decide that I will never be competing in Transit Trivia, but I’d like to be a spectator.

When we leave the restaurant, preparing to part ways, we get onto my favorite topic of conversation, which is ice cream. Chris asks me my favorite flavor. “Probably cookie dough,” I say. “But anything with chocolate.”

“I had to give up chocolate about ten years ago,” he says. “I’m allergic.”

“You’re allergic to chocolate?” I ask. The prospect sounds devastating.

He’s nodding. He explains it’s a chemical called theobromine. “The same thing that kills dogs,” he says. “It’s the worst thing ever. I know what chocolate tastes like, and I know what I’m missing.”

“Oh my gosh,” I say, searching for words. “Honestly this is the first time in the whole afternoon I’ve felt sorry for you.”

Chris folds over in laughter. “That’s hilarious,” he says. “You saw me almost fall getting on the subway. The elevator was broken ... but no sympathy until I can’t eat

chocolate. I’m gonna remember that one.” We hug, and he points me toward the subway stop I need, at Columbus Circle. Above us, the sky is full of dark clouds. I worry about the rain, and he’s not concerned. “I think we’ll be okay,” he says.

And I totally believe him. ■



Writer Laura Lee Huttenbach’s first book is “*The Boy is Gone: Conversations with a Mau Mau General*” (Ohio University Press, 2015). Her website is www.LLHuttenbach.com.



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