

the same brush

PROFILE OF SHARON DOYLE, MANAGER, MOBILITY PLUS AT YORK REGION TRANSIT (YRT)

Interview location: Scaddabush Restaurant and on YRT in York Region, Ontario, Canada

In one word, she describes herself as “Passionate.”

By Laura Lee Huttenbach



Sharon Doyle, in front of the York fleet, in 2016. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

Sharon Doyle is on the phone with the inspector when I arrive at the Richmond Hill bus terminal in York Region, a municipality to the north of Toronto. Next to Sharon on the platform is a man named Michael, who uses a wheelchair. Michael is confused. He can't tell Sharon exactly how he got to the station, and he can't tell her exactly where he wants to go. He'd tried to board a GO (Government of Ontario) bus going to the airport, but was told the bus wasn't wheelchair accessible. Additionally, Michael made it clear he had no flight to catch. With stubble, wearing stained grey sweatpants and a navy hoodie, Michael looks like he may not have showered for a few days. Most people watching the scene edge away from him on the platform, but Sharon, Manager of Mobility Plus for York Regional Transit (YRT), is close. >

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“I just can’t leave him here all day,” she says to the inspector, Miles, on her phone. She turns to me. “I’m sorry,” she says. “Let me just take care of this, and we can head to lunch.”

Michael is looking me up and down. “Do you work for the bus company, too?” he asks.

I shake my head. “They provide pretty good service, right?” I say. He nods vigorously.

Soon Inspector Miles pulls up in a Mobility Plus van and helps Michael board. They will go to a Jack Astor’s, a restaurant close to the airport, where Michael remembered he had to meet a friend. Before they leave, Sharon hands Michael a business card. “This is my phone number,” she says, pointing to the bottom corner of the card. “If you have problems getting home, please call me.”

“Thank you,” says Michael. “Thank you very much.”

As we walk together toward our stop for the Viva rapid transit bus, I tell Sharon, “You are an angel.”

“No, no,” she says. “I did what anyone would’ve done.”



Sharon Doyle (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

A board the 60-foot-long Viva bus, Sharon tells me what makes the vehicle rapid transit. She points out that we are driving down a designated median lane, a rapid way and explains that major intersections use traffic priority systems. “I’m not sure what priority we have,” says Sharon, noting an ambulance or fire truck rightly takes precedence. “But with our technology, a driver can extend a green light to avoid delays.”

We head to an Italian restaurant for lunch. As we eat, Sharon tells me that she never planned to have a career in transit. She was born in Australia to parents from Northern Ireland but moved with her family to Canada when she was still a baby. Two decades later, when she got married, she and her

husband wanted to have a big family. Together, they decided that her first career would be in children's development, aka motherhood. When their sixth child was old enough to go to school, Sharon wanted a second job that still allowed her to be available for the kids. "So I started driving a school bus," she says, adding that she had no idea what she was getting into. "In my interview, I remember they asked about my experience with buses, and I said, 'I can draw a mean bus.'" She smiles. "It's true," she says. "I was always into art and art history. I *can* draw a mean bus."

I ask how her children reacted to the news their mother was going to drive a school bus. "They said, 'I feel sorry for the kids on your bus,'" she recalls, "because I already knew all the tricks." On her first trip, she announced to the high school students that the school bus was an extension of

school and if they misbehaved, she would turn the bus around and take them back to school. "I couldn't drive the bus and keep my eyes on the road and keep the peace back there," she explains. Eventually her passengers were regulating each other and new students were informed not to mess with Mrs. Doyle.

Still, some kids wanted to test her. One Halloween, she was driving around a neighborhood, dropping students at their homes. "There were a lot of kids in the streets, dressed up and walking around," she recalls. "Suddenly I ran over something, and I just heard a big thud." She thought her worst nightmare was coming true. But fortunately some rambunctious teenagers were just playing a trick; they had thrown a pumpkin under her tire. Her panic quickly gave way to relief; she was too grateful at seeing the pumpkin to be angry at the pranksters. "Driving a school bus I learned to have a lot of patience," she says. "And to listen."

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In addition to patience and listening skills, driving a bus taught Sharon to pay attention to the big picture—not just what was going on inside the bus but what was happening all around her. To illustrate the lesson, she tells me about one day in the middle of a Canadian winter, when she was driving down a road surrounded by farmland and saw something strange. A toddler, wearing only a diaper, a shirt, and a pair of boots was walking through the field by himself. "I stopped the bus and got out and went through the field," recalls Sharon. When she reached him, she wrapped the shivering boy in her heavy coat and brought him on the bus to call dispatch. Finally, they reached his parents. "Sure enough, he'd gotten out," explains Sharon. "He just opened the door at home and started wandering." The boy went to

the hospital but was discharged after an hour, returning home safe, sound, and warm. “Oh, I didn’t do anything,” says Sharon, dismissing my admiring look. “I did what anybody would do driving by there.” She pauses for a moment. “But I told the [bus] company, ‘You guys taught me how to see the big picture. I saw what was to the left of me and right of me. It sticks in your mind because you think of your own children and how quickly life could change. He just woke up and decided to go for a little bit of a walk.’”

The company that managed the school buses also ran the local transit agency in Newmarket, one of York Region’s nine municipalities. One afternoon in the break room, Sharon noticed a job posting to drive the lunchtime shift for paratransit vehicles, which she calls “specialized transit.” The vehicles operate under a program called Mobility Plus, a service for people with physical, cognitive, or sensory disabilities that make them unable to use conventional public transit. Sharon applied for the position and was hired, and it wasn’t long before she was making suggestions in the office to improve routes.

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“Because I had driven, I knew the passengers and what their needs were,” she says. “So I was given more responsibility in the transit office. Next thing I knew, I was developing the routes.”

In 2001, York Region consolidated the independent transit agencies of the municipalities within the Region and called it York Region Transit (YRT).

During this consolidation, the Transit Manager for the Town of Newmarket retired, and Sharon stepped into a managerial position. In 2006, Sharon became Manager of Mobility Plus and still holds the position today. “It was a huge undertaking,” says Sharon, explaining that each town was operating at a different level of accessibility for passengers who were disabled. At that time, there was no provincial legislation regulating accessibility; Ontario’s government didn’t pass the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act—AODA, the Canadian equivalent to the Americans with Disabilities Act—until 2005, when it laid out a 30-year plan to make public services accessible to all people. Sharon, however, has always been ahead of the game. At YRT, she told staff that “the AODA should be a benchmark for the service we provide,” she says. “But we should always strive to exceed AODA standards.” To Sharon, accessibility boils down to good customer service, determined by looking at the individual needs of every passenger. Every passenger traveling on YRT, she believes, deserves independence, inclusion, integration and self-sufficiency.

Today, with Sharon at the helm, Mobility Plus provides close to 400,000 trips per year. In



Sharon Doyle, her husband, and their six children. (Photo used with permission from Sharon Doyle's family collection.)

2016, ridership has gone up 7 percent from the previous year. This jump excites Sharon, but it also presents a challenge: how can she offer more rides to more passengers without exceeding their budget? “Paratransit is a very expensive service to provide,” she says, “and we never want to deny anyone a trip.” In Canada, she remarks, unlike in the United States, all operational funding for regional transit service comes from local taxpayers. Occasionally, the federal government will offer capital to build a system, but once it’s in place the locality has to come up with the funds to operate it.

She explains her solution to the extremely high cost of paratransit by way of another story. One of her riders was a gentleman who lived in Newmarket, in northern York Region, and

would go down to the City of Toronto twice a day. Paratransit would pick him up from his house, drop him off at the Finch subway station—the border between York and Toronto—and he would take the subway to his final destination. To make these twice-daily trips on paratransit, the region paid over a thousand dollars per week. “So I phoned him and had a little talk,” says Sharon.

She learned that the man had been living in a group home in Toronto but had recently been moved to Newmarket, where he said he had no friends. In order to maintain social connections, he needed to get to Toronto. Why twice a day? Because he went back to Newmarket for lunch, which

was provided by the group home. On the phone, Sharon told him, “Okay, we’re going to provide this trip a little differently.” A paratransit vehicle would still pick him up from home, she told him, but instead of taking him some twenty miles to the subway station, the vehicle would drop him off at a transit center close by, where he could catch a rapid transit bus to the subway station at Finch.

At first, the man didn’t like the idea. “He said, ‘No, I don’t want to do that,’” recalls Sharon. But she insisted. She reassured him, “We’re going to travel train you and make sure somebody’s with you the first couple of times you do it until you’re comfortable.” (Travel training is transit-speak for coaching passengers how to use conventional transit.) Once the man got used to the trip, he came to value the greater independence that he earned with it. Eventually, he even refused the paratransit service from home, saying he preferred to use local transit. He told Sharon, “I’m not waiting on you guys to come here. I can get on a bus, no problem.” Sharon was delighted. “Everyone should have the option of spontaneous travel,” she says. “And we spend so much money making sure the conventional buses are accessible, we need to utilize them.”

After the first success story, Sharon and her team identified other trips that could utilize their full “family of services,” which is how they refer to the multiple forms of transit—fixed route, bus rapid transit, shuttles, paratransit, and dial-a-ride. “We did it very

slowly,” she says, referring to the transition of riders from paratransit to accessible conventional transit. Because the paratransit trips to and from stations were far shorter than those to a final destination—a kilometer or two versus 20 or 30 and each trip is paid by the kilometreMobility Plus at YRT could accommodate many more riders for a much lower cost.

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Though not everyone involved in the shift was receptive, Sharon stuck to her guns. She took time to listen to concerns and uniquely addressed each one. For example, one concern came from the contractors operating the service (in Canada, some transit agencies contract out their operational services to private companies that operate and maintain the vehicles as well as employ the operators). “As soon as they [the contractors] heard about what we were doing, they balked,” recalls Sharon. “They said, ‘Wait a minute, you’re taking all our long trips away from us. That’s where we make our money.’” But Sharon reminded them that, on long trips,

they are only making money one way. “You may make your money going down,” she said, “But you may not make money going back, because you’re deadheading, and we don’t pay for deadhead.” (“Deadheading” refers to the act of driving a vehicle without any paying passengers.) The new business model, she assured the contractors, would cut down on the

“family of services” model, says Sharon, has been in coordinating the transfers to other transit agencies, predominately the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC), which Sharon refers to as YRT’s “big brother” that operates subways and buses in Toronto. In 2015, when Toronto hosted the Pan Am and Parapan Am Games, Sharon offered



Caption. (Photo used with permission from Sharon Doyle’s family collection.)

deadhead and the downtime. “We’re going to keep you busy,” she said.

Sharon leans toward me. “It’s a balancing act,” she says. “We don’t want it to be about the disability anymore. We want it to be about what a person *can* do. Not *wants* to do, but what he or she is *able* to do.”

Besides the riders and the contractors, the greatest challenge to implementing the new

to be the host transit agency for visitors requiring paratransit to get to the venues in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area (GTHA). As host, she managed the call center and coordinated with neighboring transit agencies to accommodate the needs of passengers traveling across regions. “It was an unbelievably rewarding experience,” says Sharon. “It really brought all the transit agencies together to achieve a common goal.” She hopes the successful event sparks

further collaboration in the future. “Maybe one day,” she says wistfully, “We will have a regional call center where customers only have to make one call to book a trip.”

Other transit agencies have observed Sharon’s success and reduced costs with curiosity and maybe a little envy. “They asked me, ‘How are you getting away with that?’” recalls Sharon. “But it’s not about getting away with anything. It’s about providing transit in a way that makes sense. It’s about communication and having the continued support from the elected officials at the Region.” Now she welcomes teams from other agencies to do site visits at YRT and learn from her success, so they can implement similar programs. She is also Vice Chair of the Accessibility Committee for the Canadian Urban Transit Association—CUTA, APTA’s Canadian counterpart. “My advice to other transit agencies is always, ‘Do it gradually,’” she says, adding a reminder that “everyone is different. You have to look at each case individually. Though it’d be easier, you can’t paint everyone with the same brush.”

Ultimately, when she sees the satisfaction in people’s faces once they discover they *can* take conventional transit, “To me that’s worth everything,” she says. “When they say, ‘I can do this.’” Once, she continues, she received a call from a local community center that organized activities for people with cognitive disabilities. The group wanted to go to a shopping center in downtown Toronto, and Sharon offered to

accompany them on the bus and subway ride, travel training them along the way. “It was a humbling experience,” recalls Sharon.

*It was a
humbling
experience.*

“There were young adults in their thirties in wheelchairs being pushed by their moms, who hadn’t been down to the City of Toronto since their children were born and they dedicated themselves to raising them.”

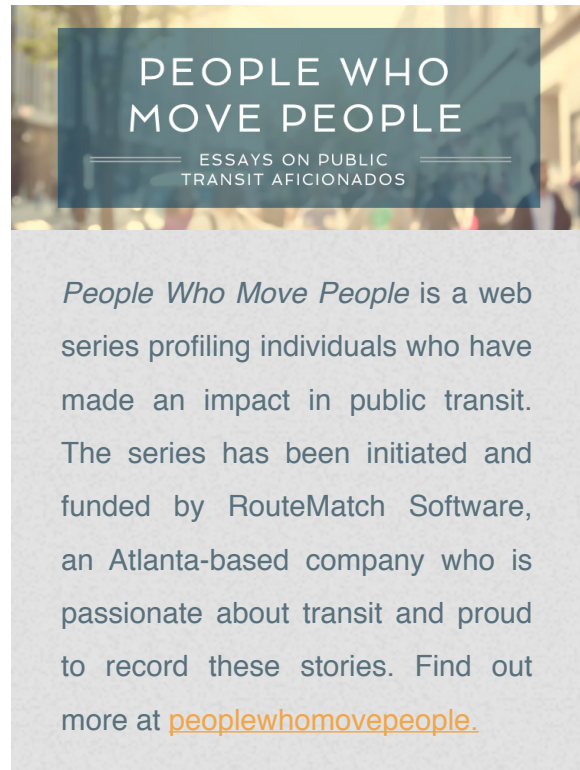
When they came out of the subway station, one woman started to cry. “She said, ‘I just can’t believe this,’” Sharon tells me with watering eyes. “To live 40 minutes north of Toronto and not see it in 30 years—what we take for granted.” She says it was one of the most rewarding days of her career, though she happily admits most days are good. “I go home most nights saying, ‘Today’s been a great day,’” she tells me. “Or, ‘I hope I made a difference in somebody’s life.’”

After lunch, Sharon drives us to YRT's new headquarters to introduce me to the rest of the Mobility Plus team, which, Sharon insists, is the reason behind every one of her successes. We walk to a sprawling garage where the bus fleet parks, and Sharon points to a back corner of the garage, to an alcove the size of a large classroom. "It's a little hard to visualize now," she says, "But that's going to be our Assessment Center at least until we build a new garage." She plans to build a bus platform and a shelter where any passenger can practice boarding a real bus with a working ramp. While they put together the fare and get on the bus, YRT employees will assess their ability to use conventional transit. The assessment center, Sharon tells me proudly, will be the first of its kind in Canada.

Soon Sharon drives me back to the transit station where we started, from which I'll catch the Viva Bus to the Finch Station and a TTC subway to my hotel in Toronto. As we're pulling up to the station, she is talking about a recent CUTA Conference. In the Accessibility Committee meeting, a fellow committee member had asked her, "Where do you see us ten years from now?" She replied, "I'm hoping we don't have a committee. I'm hoping that we are all one. That we're not talking about accessible transit as a separate entity. That everyone is comingled." ■



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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