

# just a streetcar person

PROFILE OF YOLANDA BROWN,  
Streetcar And Bus Operator,  
New Orleans Regional Transit Authority

*Interview location: O'Henry's Restaurant on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans*

*How we got there: On foot and by streetcar*

*In one word, she describes herself as "grateful,"  
then asks for one more word, which is "strong."*



Yolanda Brown beside the St. Charles Line tracks in New Orleans in April 2016. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

The green streetcar crawls up the tracks on the St. Charles Line in New Orleans with one headlight beaming like the eye of a Cyclops. I'm waiting for the streetcar going the opposite direction, on my way to lunch with Yolanda Brown. Yolanda is a streetcar operator, a New Orleans Native from the Lower Ninth Ward, and a breast cancer survivor. She recognizes the driver—an older man she calls Mr. Willard—and he slows down to greet her, ringing the bell twice. "How you doin'?" shouts Mr. Willard. >

# give me the heat

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“I’m doin’ good,” says Yolanda, “Here with my friend Miss Laura Lee. I see you’re back on your line!”

An enormous grin spreads across his face. “You knew I was coming back,” he says, ringing the bell once more before continuing down the tracks. Yolanda turns and tells me that Mr. Willard was the person who taught her how to drive. Recently, he had asked to be transferred to the Canal Street line. “Those cars have air conditioning,” explains Yolanda, while the St. Charles line is open to the elements, which, in the Big Easy, can get sticky. “But I told him, ‘You’re not gonna like it. It’s a different breed of people that take Canal Street.’” After a few months of driving in the air conditioning, Mr. Willard was bored. “He said, ‘Give me the heat or whatever,’” recalls Yolanda, flipping her curly blond ponytail. “So now he’s back on St. Charles.”

A streetcar, by definition, is a local rail transit vehicle powered by an overhead electrical wire. The St. Charles made its first run in 1835, and today it has the distinction of being the longest continually operating streetcar line in the world. The track covers a distance of 13.1 miles, taking passengers from uptown all the way to the French Quarter.



Yolanda's tattoo of a streetcar on her right arm. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

Yolanda wipes her forehead, explaining that chemotherapy gives her hot flashes and makes her sweat easily. We are standing in the sun across from the water fountains in Audubon Park. Behind us is Loyola University, and Tulane is around the corner. Streets are buzzing with students, locals, and tourists.



Church bells ring in the distance, and the blooming Jasmine flowers—also known as the “Maid of New Orleans”—fill the air with perfume. I can see how St. Charles gets to your senses.

Yolanda had to stop driving a streetcar on June 7, 2014, two days before her double mastectomy. She expected to be back to driving in six or eight weeks, but in the month between her diagnosis and surgery, the breast cancer had progressed from stage one to stage two, invading her lymph nodes. Chemotherapy, reconstructive surgery, and physical therapy kept her out of the streetcar until the end of October last year.

A few routine tasks of the job had become extremely painful. “At the end of the shift, you have to put up all the windows,” she says, stretching her arms out, palms up, pretending to close a bus window. “That motion hurt a lot.” At the end of the line, she had to get out of the car and pull the trolley pole, which weighs about fifty pounds. Despite her soreness, she kept driving until one steamy fall Louisiana afternoon, when she felt lightheaded. She parked the streetcar and called her dispatcher. “I was leaning against the pole right up there,” she recalls, pointing a few blocks down St. Charles. That’s the last thing she remembers before blacking out. A few weeks later, she was transferred to driving a bus in air conditioning, which she describes as “more laid-back.”

“Do you miss the St. Charles Line?” I ask.

“I miss the streetcars, period,” she says. “I’m just a streetcar person.” At that, she rolls up her sleeve and shows me a tattoo—a fist-sized streetcar on her right bicep, angling straight toward her heart. “People look at that and say, ‘Oh, you love your job,

*“People look at that and say, ‘Oh, you love your job, huh?’ And I say, ‘I sure do.”*

huh?’ And I say, ‘I sure do.’” She tells me that she’ll be back to driving a streetcar one day soon, but for now, she’s focused on her health.

Another streetcar passes, going the same direction as Mr. Willard, and she greets the driver, Miss Adaire, in the same bubbly manner, waving vigorously. Yolanda looks at her pink-faced watch—we’ve been waiting a little over ten minutes—and guesses, “It must be real busy at the Canal Street stop.” Traffic and construction always slow down the line, but Yolanda tells me pedestrians pose the greatest challenge. “Cars you can predict a little, but pedestrians, you don’t know what they’ll do.” Runners like to jog in the tracks with ear buds blasting music, so they can’t hear the operator ringing the bell to warn them to move out of the way.

Yolanda is a cautious driver. She informs me that the streetcar takes a half-block to come to a full stop—longer when the tracks are slick—so operators have to anticipate everything in advance. When stoplights turn green, she gives the intersection a few extra seconds. “There’s always some car tryin’ to beat the light,” she says. “We’re always looking around, looking ahead. If our head’s not moving, our eyes are. You have to be really focused to be a streetcar operator. Real focused.” I notice that when she talks about braking, she



Yolanda riding the St. Charles streetcar while her boyfriend, Larry, drives. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

moves her right hand in a clockwise direction. “There’s not a brake by our feet in a streetcar,” she explains. “We use a handbrake. Right hand is for braking, left hand is for shifting gears.”

“Has that ever gotten you in trouble when you go back to driving a car?” I ask.

“Girl,” she says, affectionately resting her hand on my shoulder for a moment. “Let me tell you.” She says that before she starts her bus shift, she is supposed to do a “pre-check,” where she walks around the vehicle inspecting the tires and body. “Now I do that when I get in my own car,” she says, cackling. “And then,” she continues, laughing harder, “Just the other day, I was changing the signals, doing like this.” She stomps her foot, which apparently is how you turn the blinker on in a bus. “So I think, *Oh Lord*, I’m not on the bus! I’m in *my car*.”

The fourth streetcar arrives going the other way, and the driver slows to a halt in front of us. “You doin’ all right?” he says in a friendly Southern drawl.

“I’m doin’ okay,” she says.

“I heard about what happened,” he says, “But by the time I got there it was all over.”

Yolanda gives him a feisty look and puts her hands on her hips. “You know I was good,” she says.

“I know you can handle yourself,” he says, nodding as he accelerates.

I ask what he was referring to, and she looks down. “There was an incident,” she says. “I was struck by a male passenger on the bus.” She starts to tell me the story, but she’s interrupted when

our streetcar pulls up. It's not crowded, but the driver tells Yolanda that we might want to wait for the next one. Yolanda asks why. "Brumfield's driving," says the woman, pointing behind her.

Yolanda slaps her knee with excitement. "Okay, thank you," she says. "We'll get on with him." Larry Brumfield, she explains, is her long-time boyfriend. "He's gonna be smilin' now," says Yolanda. A minute later, Larry pulls up the tracks and beams when he sees who he's picking up. As we climb aboard, Yolanda calls out, "Hiiiiii, Honey!"

**A**fter a short ride, we are sitting at a table on the balcony of O'Henry's Restaurant, overlooking the tracks of St. Charles. Our waiter recommends the Heartburn Hamburger. "That's my favorite," he says, "It's spicy, though."

I am a wimp when it comes to spicy food, so I go with the Bourbon St. Chicken, which I embarrassingly read aloud as "Bourbon Saint Chicken." Yolanda corrects me discreetly, then orders a Heartburn Hamburger for herself. "I'm a spicy girl," she says. "I always do spicy."

When I ask Yolanda how she got started in public transit, she says, "My momma used to drive the bus." I immediately imagine Yolanda as a little girl, starry eyed in a bus seat, admiring her mother, whose name she shares, behind the steering wheel.

"Did you just love riding with your Mom?" I ask.

Slapping the table, Yolanda folds into laughter, and I follow suit. (When Yolanda laughs, she is so committed to laughing that you feel foolish being serious.) "I'll tell you that story," she says, setting me and my sentimentality straight. "I was a bad child," she continues, clarifying that she wasn't 'bad-bad,' but she was a feisty tomboy who wanted to do what the boys were doing—cutting class, messing around.

Her punishment was to ride the bus. "People wonder why I know so much about buses, and it's because I used to take my momma's papers and go sit in the back of the bus and look through 'em," she recalls.

***When I saw my momma driving a bus, that showed me how strong of a woman she was.***

Yolanda admits she got punished a lot—riding with her mother after school and on weekends and holidays—and hated it. "I did not want to drive a bus 'cause that bus brings back memories," she says. But one positive impression stuck with her. "When I saw my momma driving a bus, that showed me how strong of a woman she was," says Yolanda, cracking open a peanut from the basket on our table. Before the bus, Yolanda's mother had been a truck driver, but when Yolanda was



born, she wanted to stay close to home. “My momma loved driving the bus,” says Yolanda. “But after her breast cancer, she wound up catching seizures, so she had to stop driving.” Now her mother works in the RTA office as a clerk. “She did not want to stop driving. They almost had to pull her off that bus.”

Yolanda says she never saw her own cancer coming. “Even though my momma had it and my grandmother died of it, cancer wasn’t nowhere on my mind,” she says. Talking about her experience, she recalls exact dates.

“Everything was on the ninth,” she says. At 34 years old, she was diagnosed on May 9th, 2014. She had a double-mastectomy on June 9th.



Historic marker for the St. Charles Line. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

***Even though my momma had it and my grandmother died of it, cancer wasn't nowhere on my mind.***

On July 9th, she began chemotherapy, which she believes came closest to killing her. “One of the medicines was called the Red Devil,” says Yolanda. “The Red Devil wasn’t nothing nice.” But for three months, the Red Devil swam through her veins, entering her blood through a port in her upper arm. Rolling up her left sleeve, she shows me the scar, which disappears into another tattoo. The scar runs between a pair of lips. Right above the mouth, in cursive, is the word Sexy. I’ve never before seen a cancer scar repurposed for such a powerful effect.

Yolanda can’t remember the name of the other medicines she took. “I’ve been trying to forget what it’s called,” she says. “It was that bad.”

Chemotherapy stole her energy, her memory, and her hair. “My hair was my thing. How long your hair is,” she says pointing the hair spilling over my shoulders, “That was how long my hair was.” I ask if losing it was the worst part of chemotherapy, and she shakes her head. “The hair was just a mind thing,” she says. “The worst part of chemo was being in so much pain that

you can't get out of bed. It has your body hurting so bad. You really wanna give up on everything." Meeting Yolanda today, it's impossible for me to imagine her as bedridden and sickly. She says that's intentional. "When I'm in public, you're gonna see a smile on my face," she says. "You're not gonna know I'm going through anything. You gotta stay positive. If you stay positive, you'll have a good journey."

"But how did you do that?" I ask. "How did you stay positive when all you want to do is throw up and lie down?"

She repeats the question aloud, wiping ranch dressing from her fingers. "Have positive people around you," she says. "And think of something that makes you happy. Like I had a dog and on the nights when I couldn't sleep, I'd go and play and with my dog. And if I felt bad, I'd call a friend and let them get me through the day." Her daughter, who is now 17, and her son, now ten, were an enormous source of motivation. "Nobody's gonna take care of your kids like you," she says. "I didn't want them to know how scared I was. I wanted them to see that just because you're sick doesn't mean you have to look sick." For becoming physically strong, she credits her physical therapist, Miss Laurie, who works for the Survivor Training and Rehabilitation—STAR—Program at Touro Hospital. "She was my physical therapist, but she was also like my real therapist," says Yolanda. "She was always there for me, listening to me and encouraging me. I love Miss Laurie."

Of all the bad that came with cancer, she says the disease brought her family closer together,

and she is the best version of herself that she's ever known. "I'm looking at things and people differently," she says. Knowing what pain can do to a person's psyche, she gives people the benefit of the doubt. "I've always been a friendly person, but now if I see someone ill in the street, I'll be like, There's more to your story."

Eventually we get back to the incident that happened a month earlier, on May 5th, when a man tried to board her bus with a cup of alcohol. "You're not allowed to have an open container on the bus," says Yolanda, dabbing the corner of her mouth with a napkin. "So I asked him to please throw out the cup, which he didn't like."

***If you stay positive, you'll have a good journey***

Once the passenger dumped his drink, he came on board and things went downhill from there. When they got to the end of the line, as is the rule, Yolanda asked the man to run his Jazzy Pass through the fare box again. "He started calling me all sorts of names," says Yolanda. She was trained to ignore disruptive passengers and not provoke them by talking back. "I wasn't reacting like he wanted me to react, and that

*In the midst of driving, I couldn't turn the wheel like I normally do.*

upset him,” she says. “He wanted me to go back and forth.”

She leans toward me and drops her voice to a whisper to quote the man. “He tells me, ‘I’m gonna smack the piss out of you.’” He started to charge the front as Yolanda braced for an attack, covering her head and chest, but the man stopped short and said, as Yolanda pronounces, “I’m not gon’ do you nothing, ‘cause you’s a woman.”

The pause gave Yolanda a chance to pull out her phone and dial the dispatcher. While she was reporting the disruption, the passenger swung his shoe across her face. Screaming for help, Yolanda fought back until the man ran away and the police arrived, in that order, so they never caught him. When she told her mother what happened, “She almost had a heart attack,” recalls Yolanda. But the following day, Yolanda was back at work. “In the midst of driving, I couldn’t turn the wheel like I normally do,” she says. “I guess I bruised my arm, and with the chemo and all that, I don’t heal as fast as everybody else.”

The injury has forced her to take the last month off to recover. “It was traumatic,” she says. “I wasn’t able to sleep for two weeks. I had to take medicine just to get to bed.” Still, she’s ready to return and hopes to be back in the driver’s seat in the next week. “Nothing like that had ever happened to me before,” she says, “and I’m not thinking it’ll happen again.”

Just then her phone rings. It’s her son’s teacher, and she apologizes, saying that she needs to answer. The teacher tells Yolanda that her son wants to go home with a cousin, but Yolanda wants him to take the bus. When she hangs up, she calls her son a “miracle baby,” because she was three months pregnant with him when Katrina struck. Doctors had ordered her to be on bed rest—it was a high-risk pregnancy—but instead, she was wading through neck-deep water and dead bodies in the Calliope Projects, trying to get to higher ground. Listening to her Katrina story confirms to me that breast cancer was by no means her first, or only, struggle.

**W** We both want dessert, so we share a brownie sundae with two scoops of vanilla ice cream. A streetcar passes, and Yolanda says, “There goes my best friend.” She is talking about the driver but she speaks of the streetcar culture with similar affection.



“What do you miss most about the streetcar?” I ask.

“The people,” she says without hesitating. “The passengers, and my coworkers from the streetcar. We were a family.” She says the bus has a different feel to it. “I think on the streetcar, the passengers are a lot more understanding. On the bus, the passengers look for you to mess up. If you’re late, they think you’ve done something wrong instead of the line being messed up or something like

that.” In the streetcar, there’s also more interaction with the passengers, which she likes, even if sometimes it felt like her days were filled with back-to-back games of twenty questions. “The streetcar is a questionnaire,” she says. “They get on and before they get off, they’re gonna have asked you 21 questions. And the person standing right behind him is gonna ask you that same question they just heard the other person



Yolanda, shortly after chemotherapy. (Photo used with permission by Yolanda Brown.)

ask. But you love it because it's your job. I signed on for this. I signed on to help people." It hurts her feelings when passengers don't respond to her greeting with a "good morning" or "good evening," and I make a note to say hello to my bus driver the next time I board.

I ask about the most memorable scenes she's witnessed on the streetcar, and she tells me she once got to be part of a wedding. "They got on with a pastor and had the music playing," she says, placing her hand on her heart. The bride "had on the wedding dress, and they asked me to ring the bell and stuff. I thought that was so sweet."

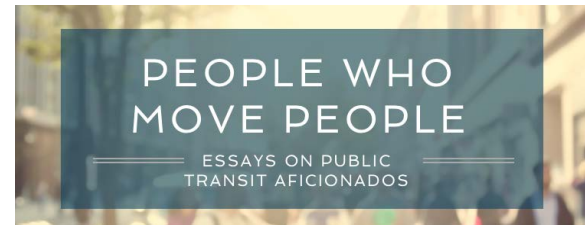
After the last bite of brownie, we are full and decide to walk back to Audubon Park. She tells me that because there was a time when a tomorrow didn't seem likely, she squeezes every drop of goodness out of her today. "Everybody says, 'Girl, you're always going,'" says Yolanda. "And I say, 'Yeah, I'm going, cause I don't know what tomorrow holds, baby. I'll be jolly one day and sick the next.'"

Her passion for life could intimidate those who are just trying to get by, but Yolanda wants to be more than just a survivor. She is grateful for being able to share her story. Just as she repurposed the scar, she's trying to offer a new narrative around breast cancer. "Like my Auntie," she says. "The way she was looking at it before, she knew her momma died from it, so she thought I'm gonna die from it. But seeing it spread in her little niece, and her little niece is still alive and strong and everything—well, she knows another ending. And I tell you this much. No matter what my next step is, I ain't givin' up." ■



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](http://www.LLHuttenbach.com).

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