

mass transit

PROFILE ON LEAH HARNACK
EXECUTIVE EDITOR, *MASS TRANSIT* MAGAZINE

Interview location: Beans and Barley Restaurant in Milwaukee

How we got there: On foot and by MCTS bus

In one word, she describes herself as “Pragmatic”

By Laura Lee Huttenbach



Leah Harnack in front of the Milwaukee Art Museum and Lake Michigan. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

The fare box on the Milwaukee County Transit Bus isn't accepting my quarter. I slide it repeatedly into the ticket dispenser, and each time it clangs as it hits the change tray below. Leah Harnack, who is Executive Editor at *Mass Transit* Magazine and a Wisconsin native, is watching me from her seat. "Do you need help?" she asks. >

recording genuine stories about public transit

I fumble around in my purse, digging out another quarter before asking if I can borrow a dollar. It's almost ten in the morning and fortunately the bus isn't crowded. We are approaching a curve, and the driver tells me to hold on, so I grab the closest handrail. Leah hands me a dollar that the machine eats, yet somehow I'm still short on fare, which is \$2.25. "That's okay, hon," says the bus driver. "You're good."

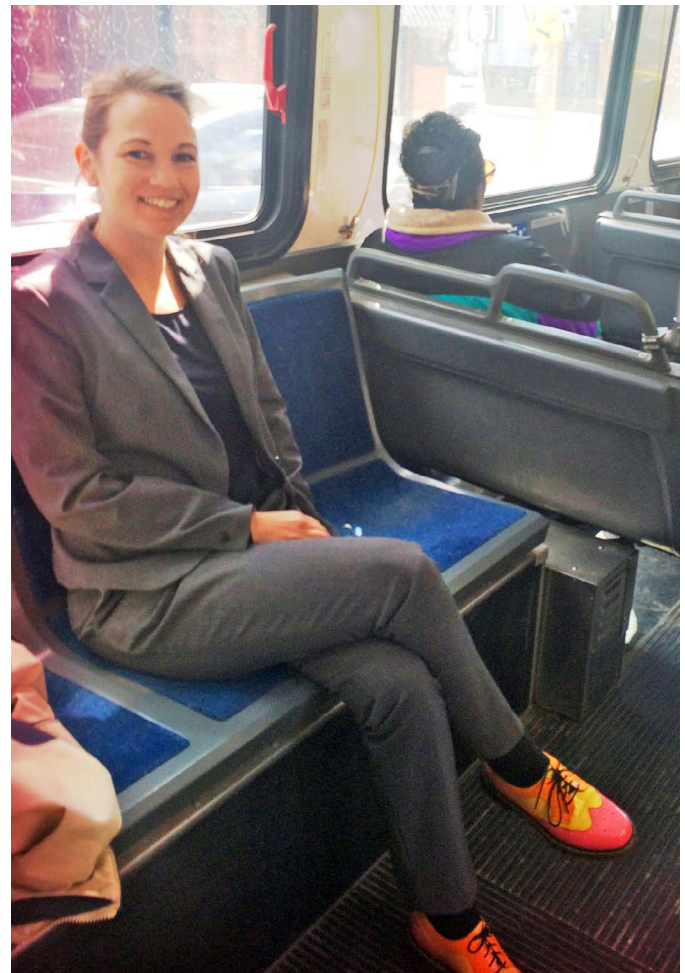
Embarrassed, I thank him and sit down beside Leah. "It's tough to remember to have exact change," I say.

"I know," she says. "It's different in every city. You have to spend so much time researching each system," adding that fare cards make terrific souvenirs and her collection is almost up to twenty.

"I asked for directions from the airport yesterday," I say, "but the woman at the information desk told me the bus was complicated and suggested I take a taxi."

Leah isn't surprised. "They usually tell you that," she says. Once, she explains, she was with her husband at a fancy hotel in Orlando,

and a Lynx bus stop was right outside the building. "The concierge wouldn't tell us how to use the bus," she continues. After scouring the website, she wound up having to call Lynx customer service to get the route. "Of course the ride took about an hour when a car would've taken fifteen minutes," she says, casually adding, "but we only spent one night there before flying out for our honeymoon."



Leah Harnack on an MCTS bus. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

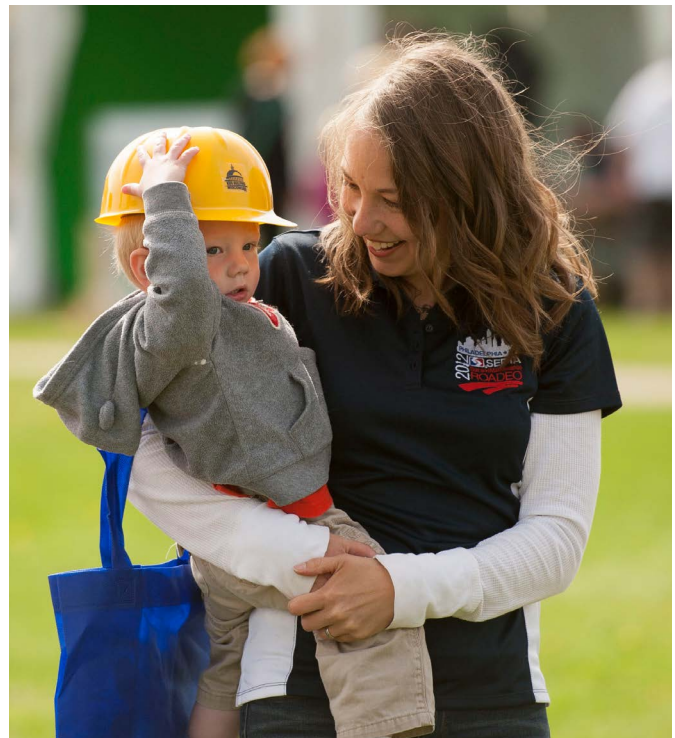
This was on their honeymoon?

“Yeah,” she says. To record genuine stories about public transit, she feels obligated to use it whenever she travels. “My husband played along,” she continues. “He’s a good sport. He’s easygoing.” Public transit and honeymoons are two things I don’t normally associate but when Leah tells me that her husband’s grandfather, Harold, was a streetcar operator, I understand that transit runs in their family.

We get off the bus two stops later and walk to Colectivo Coffee Shop. We sit in a heated room with a glass ceiling that feels like a greenhouse, which is way better than the cold, windy—albeit sunny—day outside. “This is actually really horrible,” she says cheerfully. “Now I know how the people feel when I go and interview them.” She says that people often protest that they don’t like to talk about themselves, and she is used to assuaging their discomfort. But now, she says, “I totally get it. I hate talking.”

***We [Mass Transit]
share best
practices.***

I tell her I know exactly what she means. Writers only like to be on one side of questions—asking. “You feel so vulnerable,” I say, “but don’t worry, I’m not a *gotcha*-type journalist.”



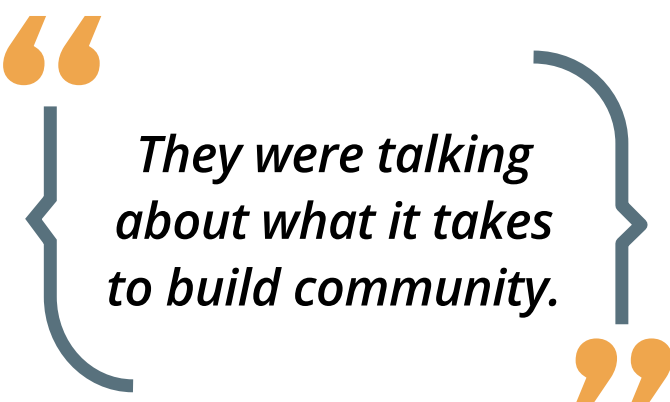
Leah Harnack with her son in 2015. (Photo used with permission by Leah Harnack.)

“Neither are we,” she says. “We [Mass Transit] share best practices, so I’m like their dream interview. I’m just there to share what’s working and that sort of thing. I’m not trying to do investigative reporting. But some of them are beat up by the press a lot.”

At *Mass Transit*, Leah oversees eight print issues per year, a daily newsletter, a twice-monthly security newsletter and a website. Her problem is never a lack of content. How she started writing about public transit is “so random,” she says, taking a sip of her green matcha latte. She has a bachelor’s degree in Art History and assumed she’d spend the rest of her life writing grant proposals for a history museum in Milwaukee, where she worked in multicultural programming after college. Then, ten years ago, she accepted a job at *Mass Transit* and attended her first American Public Transportation Association (APTA) Conference.

Without experience in that world, she worried

about the knowledge gap. “I thought everyone was going to be talking about fuel type or bus batteries or train bogies” she says. “But people running agencies weren’t talking about vehicles. They were talking about what it takes to build community.” The community they build, she says, starts in the conference room with fellow transit workers. One man who introduced himself was a VP at Motor Coach Industries named Michael Meliphany. “People are usually focused on talking to the people they know... but he didn’t care who you were. He just wanted to share the word of what transit is,” she says. “That really stood out.” Her meeting with Michael, who went on to head APTA, is representative of how the general industry received her. “There are so many people waiting there to help,” she says. “I was shocked. Our industry is just so much friendlier than other industries.”



They were talking about what it takes to build community.

Still, the learning curve was steep. “The acronyms,” she says, a smile spreading across her face. “How are you with the acronyms?” I say that I’m trying to catch up, but it’s tough. “We keep joking we should have a story where the whole first paragraph is all acronyms,” she says, “but the funny part is most of the transit managers wouldn’t get the joke.”

Today Leah is fluent navigating in their alphabet soup, but like any innately curious person, she is always open to learning new things from unexpected sources—for instance, *Thomas the Tank Engine*, which she watches with her two-year-old son, Harris. “I don’t even remember what it was,” she says, trying to recall what Thomas taught her. “It was something super obvious, and I was like, *How did I not know this?*” (She isn’t able to remember the term during our interview, but later that afternoon, after she consults her husband, I receive an email from her with the subject line, “SLIP CAR.”)

We agree that it’d make for a good story—best children’s books on transportation according to transit professionals. “We want to do this totally underground transit magazine that’s all fun and ridiculous stuff,” Leah continues. “Like best tchotchke you got from a transit conference. Or memorabilia you have. Or most ridiculous things found in a lost and found.”

She especially gets a kick out of riding buses with her colleagues. “You’ll have a group of transit nerds on a technical tour saying, ‘Oh who’s this seating by? Is this American Seating? That fabric! It must be new!’” she says. “Or you have like ten people taking pictures of a ticket vending machine, and everyone else is looking like, *What are they doing?*”

I ask about the most popular stories she’s published in her decade at *Mass Transit*, and four come to mind. “One that was totally unexpected was an article that someone contributed about Catenary-Free light rail,” she says.



Leah Harnack and her family in 2015 (Photo used with permission by Leah Harnack.)

“Canterbury what?” I say.

“Catenary,” she repeats, explaining that a catenary is the overhead wire that transmits electricity to trains, trams, or trolleybuses.

“They can run train cars now off of batteries and the rail, so they don’t need the catenary.” Originally published in June 2011, the story is still one of the highest-read *Mass Transit* articles ever.

“One that I got more emails on than I normally do was looking at the impact of PTSD”—post-traumatic stress disorder—“on operators,” she says, “whether it’s a bus

driver that accidentally turns the corner and into a pedestrian or, on the rail, there’s a lot of suicides.” At first I misunderstand that there is a high incidence of suicides amongst train operators, but she quickly sets me straight: it’s people jumping in front of trains to end their lives. “It takes like a quarter-mile to stop a train,” she says, citing an organization called Operation Lifesaver. A driver has to look at the person he will run over for an entire football field. “They can’t stop, they can’t turn,” she says. “There’s nothing they can do. They can start to stop it, but it’s not going to stop it.”

I ask about workers comp for operators that suffer from PTSD, and she says it depends on the agency,

referring me to the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) and Transport Workers' Union for more information.

Leah's favorite topic to write about is the economic impact of transit. She recalls one article about a light rail line in the Dallas–Fort Worth area, and another centered on Phoenix. “With that one it was interesting because the Mayor of Mesa at the time [Scott Smith]—now he’s the interim CEO of the Valley Metro Agency—actually took highway money and used it to build a rail,” she says, explaining that the citizens of Mesa voted in a referendum to use the highway budget surplus to extend Phoenix’s rail to Mesa. To write these pieces, she likes to include voices from people outside transit, including politicians, developers, and business owners. “I think when our readers hear about the value that transit brings to a community, not just by providing mobility but the economic development,” says Leah, “and when it’s coming from total outsiders who are just looking at it from a financial standpoint—or improving their community standpoint—it has more weight in a way.”

From Colectivo Coffee, we walk to lunch at a restaurant called Beans and Barley. We step inside, and before leading us to a table, the hostess points to Leah’s feet. “I love your shoes, oh my God,” she says, admiring Leah’s yellow, pink and orange patent leather Doc Martins.

“Thank you,” says Leah, adding that she once tweeted a picture of those shoes at a transit conference, and it was retweeted by the FTA (Federal Transit Administration), so they’re basically famous. It’s still windy outside, a cold

Leah’s favorite topic to write about is the economic impact of transit.

Wisconsin spring, so we both want something warm. We order toasted sandwiches and artichoke dip.

I ask Leah about her favorite part of our shared craft, and she says, “Actually I hate writing.” Her candor catches me off guard, but I recall a quote from the American poet Dorothy Parker, who rightly observed, “I hate writing but love having written.”

Leah tells me that her work is fulfilling because she is able to connect people who need information with people who have information. Just the other day on social media, she saw a post from someone wanting to know about transit agencies using Periscope, and she’d just attended her first Periscope press conference, hosted by Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA). “So I’m like, *Talk to [SEPTA spokesman] Andrew Busch, I’m sure he knows about it.*”

She also loves it when people whom she has profiled tell her they receive good feedback from the article. Writers compile words in isolation, so it feels awesome when readers report a story moved them. A few years ago, she wrote an article about an agency director. “After that came out, he had I forget how many different agencies call him up and come to tour his system and ask questions about what he talked about,” says Leah, beaming. “It’s like, so people do read it and do respond more than we even know about.”

As a confessed lover of puns, I ask if she’s ever tempted to play with all the transit words. “We don’t do anything

with derailing,” she says, taking a bite of her veggie sandwich. Not long ago, she tells me, a headline that she pulled from the Associated Press Newswire got her in trouble. It was about someone at an agency being “thrown under the bus.”

Immediately, she received an email from a transit manager in Portland. “We’ve had to scrape bodies out from under buses,” he wrote. “I would’ve expected that you guys would have more respect for how things are phrased.” From that complaint, she added a line to *Mass Transit’s* editorial code of ethics that “we should be more cognizant of what’s being inferred from our phrasing.”

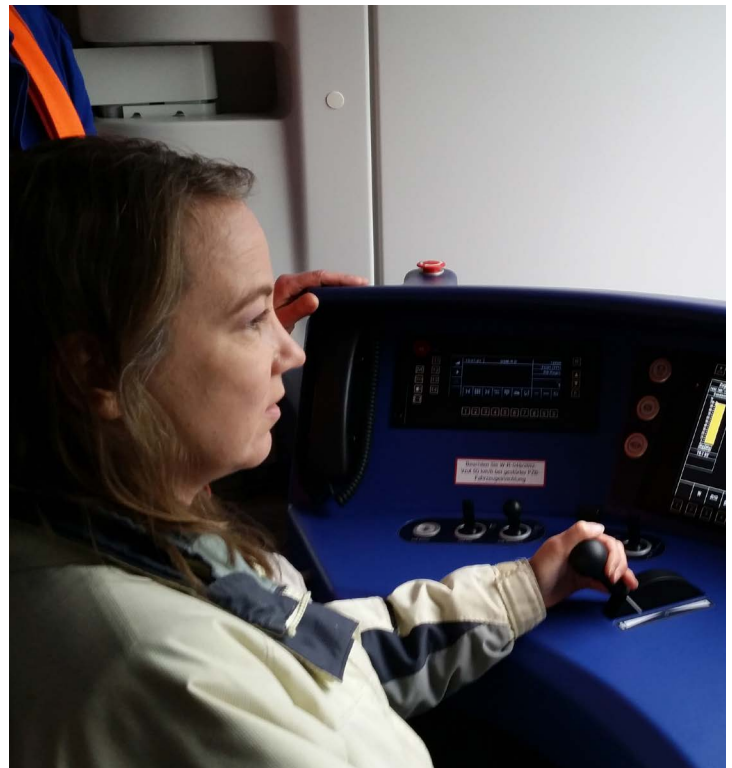
At lunch, we talk more about bus and train operators. “That is one job I wouldn’t want to do,” she says, dabbing the corner of her lips with a napkin. She actually has a bit of experience. “I taught a transit general manager how to use Photoshop, and he taught me how to drive a bus in the parking lot,” she explains. On her first try, she hit every curb. “You have to turn really wide,” she says. “It’s not like a semi or a dump truck, where you have points that pivot. With a bus, you just forget how long it is.”

I mention Sandra Bullock’s famous line from the movie *Speed* that driving a bus is like driving a really big Pinto.

Leah shakes her head. “Definitely not a Pinto, unless you’re just going straight and fast.” Leah has had several opportunities to improve her bus skills. At the APTA Bus Rodeo, where bus operators come from all across the nation to compete in a driving course, an instructor guided her through the barrels. “I’m flying through the course,” she recalls of the event, “And at the end you have to stop without knocking over the

cones,” so she slammed on the brakes in a dramatic show. Then the instructor told her that her high-speed obstacle course had been undertaken at only nine miles per hour.

As a spectator, she appreciates the bus operator customer service challenge at the conference, where APTA sets up a fake bus and gets people to act out scenarios that have really happened to operators. For example, “You’ll have someone that comes on the bus that’s afraid of germs, so they’re pretending to spray Lysol all over the passengers,” explains Leah. “People are yelling, and the operator is graded on how they handle the situations.” It’s hilarious to watch, she says, but sobering to realize the kinds of things bus drivers have to deal with all the time. She says they face a high occurrence of workplace assaults. “You just don’t know if the next person getting on the bus is going to deck you,” she says. Dealing with that, “on top of not having to hit people who are walking around with ear buds in that can’t hear you,” makes Leah conclude that operating a bus is one of the most challenging jobs around.



Leah Harnack in 2014, driving a Bombardier train at the Hennigsdorf production site and test track. (Photo used with permission by Leah Harnack.)

Noticing the sign that says *exact change required*, I ask the driver of the MCTS bus if I can pay five dollars for both fares. The driver, who has grey hair and glasses, smiles. “That’s fine,” he says. I try to slide in the five, but the machine won’t take it. I try again. “It can’t be counterfeit,” jokes the driver.

Leah laughs. “You’re on to her,” she says. “Let me try.” She slides it in like the transit professional she is. “I like it when the bus drivers have a sense of humor,” she says as we take our seats in the back.

I notice an electronic placard at the front of the bus flashing the word, Kane. “Do you think that’s our bus driver’s name?” I ask.

“That’s the next stop,” she explains. “It’s an ADA [American with Disabilities Act] requirement. They have to call out the stop and have a visual of the stop, but if you’re from a different city, it also helps, because I’m usually following along with Google Maps saying, *Where the hell am I going?*”

Lake Michigan is on our left—turquoise with white caps that look like tiny mounds of Cool Whip. In my two days in Milwaukee, I have thought, *I can’t believe that’s not the ocean*, approximately thirty times. “Yesterday I rented a bike and pedaled along the coast,” I say. “It was awesome.”

Leah nods. “You used Bublr,” she said, referring to the city’s bike share system. “Isn’t it great?” I nod emphatically. For three dollars, I’d taken a bike from a station at a museum called Discovery World downtown a couple miles to the Public Market, a charming, multicultural food court.

I slide across the aisle to snap a picture of Leah as fellow passengers look at us funny, wondering why we were treating their daily commute as a spectacle. A minute later, Leah pulls the wire to request our stop. We get up and stand in front of the doors. The bus stops. We remain standing in front of the doors, waiting for them to open. I wave at the bus driver, thinking he’s playing a joke. “Thank you,” I shout to him, smiling.

Still nothing. Then Leah says, “Oh wait, I forget we have to open the doors ourselves.” She extends her arms and shoves the bar. We step off the bus in a fit of laughter. “That was awesome,” says Leah. “The driver’s totally watching us from the mirror, like, *Can you guys please just get off my bus?* I feel like I’m *that* person a lot.”

On the sidewalk, she gives me instructions how to take the bus to the airport, which involves one transfer from the Gold Line to the Green Line at Wisconsin and Water Street. The airport is the last stop. “So once you get on the bus, you should be fine,” she says, handing me her business card. “But that has my cell phone, so whatever happens, just call me, and I’ll come pick you 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.



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