

# perspective is everything

PROFILE ON NIKKI RUSSELL  
TECHNICAL MANAGER AT ROUTEMATCH SOFTWARE

*Interview location: Starbucks in Midtown Atlanta*

*How we got there: On foot from the office*

*In one word, she describes herself as “Smiles.”*

*By Laura Lee Huttenbach*



Nikki Russell in 2015

Nikki Russell was thirty years old when she woke up one morning in May 2015 and couldn't move her legs. At first she thought she was dreaming. In an attempt to kick-start her body, she wriggled her top half around in bed, which woke up her boyfriend. “I know this is going to sound weird,” she told him. “But I can't move my legs.”

Nikki has a tendency to minimize things, so her boyfriend knew she was serious. She agreed that they ought to go the emergency room, but how was she going to get out of bed? And use the bathroom? And drive the car? >

# choosing to have a positive attitude

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“It took a minute for me to transfer from, *Oh I can’t move my legs*, to *Wait, I can’t walk to the bathroom*,” she tells me as we wait in line at Starbucks. It’s late in the afternoon on a spring day in Atlanta, across the street from the RouteMatch headquarters, where she works as a technical manager for the company that develops software for public transit systems.

I ask what she’s going to order, and the cherry blossom Frappuccino catches her attention. “I have a cherry blossom tattoo,” she says, pointing toward her ribs that are covered in a hot pink blazer, “so I feel like I need to order the cherry blossom Frappuccino.” I ask about the tattoo. “When I was twenty, I thought it’d be a good idea—you know, to symbolize the transience of life and female empowerment.” In China, she explains, that’s what the cherry blossom represents.

We both order the Frappuccino, which is strawberry-flavored with green matcha powder and whipped cream. Our original plan had been to navigate to an ice cream shop four miles away using nothing but our smart phones and a MARTA breeze card, but when we were in the elevator, Nikki casually mentioned, “Now that I’m on chemo, I have like no immune system. The doctors told me



Nikki Russell in 2016

to avoid any public confined space.” After growing up in Atlanta and working in public transit for the last five years, Nikki is familiar with the inside of MARTA, a public confined space. Walking to Starbucks, we decided, was a safer idea.

Inside the coffee shop feels a little stuffy, so we make our way with Frappuccinos to a table outside. “I’m glad you thought it was hot, too,” she says. “With chemo, I never know if it’s the temperature or just me.” Nikki radiates charisma. It makes you want to lean in and stand close, even though she speaks loudly. She is bald, her scalp pale in the afternoon light. She has no eyelashes, but her blue eyes command your attention. “I know I’ve got an Uncle Fester thing going on,” she says. “Sometimes little kids will say, *Mommy, what’s wrong with her*—I

get it, I look like an alien—but most people are shockingly friendly. Just yesterday, a woman came up to me and said, ‘You are absolutely beautiful and perfect and bald.’”

When I ask about her background in public transit before coming to work at RouteMatch, she laughs. “Zero,” she says, “I knew nothing—nothing—about transit.” She’d been a math major at Georgia Tech, where a RouteMatch recruiter found her resume and invited her for an interview. “I remember in my interview they asked me about my experience in public transit, and I said I have none. Then they asked me why they should hire me, and I said, ‘Because I’m awesome.’”

**N**ikki’s foray into public transit is similar to that of many of her young colleagues. It’s a world they fall into, rather than seek out. Nikki started at RouteMatch in 2009 on the technical support team. The learning curve was steep but exciting. “I had no idea that paratransit was as big as it is,” she says, referring to the special transportation services provided to the elderly and disabled in North America. Since the passage of the Americans with Disability Act in 1990, public transit agencies are required by law to accommodate everyone. “Even the fixed route buses, I knew nothing about,” she continues, again using industry speak for buses that operate on a regular schedule. Growing up in the suburbs of Atlanta, her family had a car and drove everywhere. MARTA only made sense when they were going downtown to watch a Braves game. “I always thought buses were what other people take—people without cars. There was a stigma attached to it.” In fact, Atlanta traffic was one

reason she moved a year ago with her boyfriend to Denver, where she works out of a satellite office.

In her first month at RouteMatch, her eyes opened. She realized all the variables that went into making an effective, efficient, and comfortable public transit system. The schedule. The routes. The vehicle. Traffic. Reporting. Billing. Drivers. Customers. Complaints. Incidents. Accidents. Loading and unloading times. Dispatchers. These were all the moving parts that her technical support was supposed to streamline through the intelligent transportation software.

***“If I make their lives better at the agency, it has an impact on the population.”***

Soon Nikki was promoted from technical support in the office to a manager going on site visits. “I love it when I show up at an agency, and they think there’s this insurmountable problem, and I’m like, *doot-doot-doot*,” she says, pressing buttons on an imaginary tablet in the air, “and it’s solved. They can’t believe it.” She recalls a visit to an agency in South Carolina. “This woman was literally in tears. She’d been doing the bus routes by hand, and it took her and two coworkers eight hours a day each—that’s 24 hours. The software took care of all that. She told me, ‘Thank you. Now I can go home to my family.’”

Making people’s lives easier is her favorite part of the job. “When agencies aren’t functioning well,



it affects a massive number of people,” she says, taking a sip of her Frappuccino. “When they’re stressed and annoyed, they are passing that frustration on to the customers. If I make their lives better at the agency, it has an impact on the population.”

**I**n theory, she came to understand the systems of public transit backwards and forward. But it wasn’t until that morning in May last year that she began to experience paratransit from the customer side.

At the hospital, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, MS, and told she might never walk again. I tell her that I can’t imagine how I would handle such news. “Well, perspective is everything,” Nikki tells me before setting the scene in the hospital’s neurological ward. Across the hallway, a man screamed in pain every time a seizure hit him, shaking loose another piece of his memory. Next door was an old woman whose descent into Alzheimer’s had become violent. “She was literally flinging her poop at her husband when he walked into the room,” Nikki recalls. “So I’m like, *It sucks my legs don’t work, but at least I’m keeping my feces where they belong, and I’m not having seizures.*”

Nikki’s mobility improved when she got a wheelchair. “I’m not gonna lie,” she says, clicking her green-and-gold-painted nails on the table. “There were times when I was annoyed I couldn’t reach something or when I couldn’t fit through a doorway. But if annoying is the worst part of my life, I’m just fine.”

After a month in the hospital, she was sent home, where her boyfriend had already installed

wheelchair ramps. But with his full-time work schedule, he wasn’t able to take Nikki to physical therapy appointments. “Fortunately, I knew about paratransit,” she says smiling brightly. She booked an appointment with a representative from RTD—Denver’s public transit agency, who also happened to be a RouteMatch client—to

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assess her mobility. “I mean, yeah, I was in a wheelchair, but I was a speed demon in that wheelchair,” she says, admitting that at first she didn’t want to take paratransit. “I was being bratty. I was like, *Please don’t make me take this.* But the people that I met were amazing.”

Fellow passengers, who were mostly elderly, praised her spirit. “They’d tell me, ‘But you’re so young! You’re not supposed to be in a wheelchair!’ And I would shrug and say, ‘I don’t know. Life happens.’ They were just so excited that I wasn’t down and upset about it. They’d say, ‘Well now I know that I can be happy. Because you’re young, and you’re disabled, and I’m 90, and I’m disabled, so I have nothing to complain about.’ I was just going about my life, and I apparently made people happy, and that made me happy. Another guy who had cerebral palsy faced tremendous challenges that I can’t even imagine, and he always had a great attitude and was complimenting me on my attitude. I’ve



Nikki Russell in 2012



got nothing compared to that guy. He's just awesome and friendly and heartwarming, and I would've never met these people had I not taken public transit. I'm so glad I didn't have a ride to physical therapy," she says, adding, "But just don't tell my boyfriend."

I asked if her positive spirit ever rubbed people the wrong way at physical therapy. "Sometimes," she says, looking uncomfortable with the question. "I hate to say it, but maybe they were jealous I was progressing. Or they'd say, 'I wish I could have your attitude.' I was like, *You can, you know. It's a choice.*" At the same time, she realizes that there are limitless ways for life to be hard on people. "I have the most unimaginably supportive parents, boyfriend, and company. And not being in pain makes all the difference. These things are such a challenge for many people. That was weight I didn't have to carry. I feel like I'd be an ungrateful jerk if I was anything less than ecstatic." Nikki's upbeat attitude aided her recovery, and after months of treatment and physical therapy, she now walks without assistance.

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Her inspiring experience using public transit convinced her boyfriend, a driver whose commute was a daily source of stress, to take the light rail to work. "That may have saved

our relationship," says Nikki. "Now he uses his commute productively. He finishes up work or learns French. He gets home more relaxed. And I feel stupid for not taking it sooner. How many days did I spend sitting in traffic and wanting to tear my hair out?"

People often come up to Nikki and share their personal experience with MS, and it's not always an uplifting story. "One guy told me, 'Yeah, my uncle had MS. It killed him immediately,'" recalls Nikki. "I was like, *Thanks.* But I guess that's natural for people to create broad generalizations based on one experience." When I mention that the same thing happens for infrequent users of public transit, she nods. "Exactly," she says. "Like if you're riding one time, and a man disrobes, you think a man is going to disrobe every time, but that doesn't always happen." Nikki actually has statistics on the number of people who undress on public transit, because one client had this problem.

I asked what she would tell a young person considering a job in the public transit industry. "Check it out," she says. "I'm a reasonably educated, intelligent person, and I had no idea how much was available out there. It was really freaking impressive." The skills she's improved in communication and management are transferrable to any industry, though she has no plans to leave RouteMatch. "When I'm sick, my bosses only care about getting me healthy," she says. "It's ridiculous how good they are."

Nikki attributes this supportive workplace atmosphere to Bahman Irvani, who is CEO at

RouteMatch. She says that working for him has taught her to see the big picture without getting bogged down in the many potential hitches.

“Bahman always says, ‘If you had a magic wand, what would you do?’ It took him a long time to get me to stop saying, ‘It’s not possible.’ But he has finally gotten me out of my own head.”



Nikki Russell in 2016

Looking back at how little she knew when she started in public transit, she says wryly, “I might’ve been an idiot.” It’s understandable to be ignorant about things that we haven’t had to use. “Having never been disabled myself, I never thought about how that’s something that dictates the lives of so many people. I’d always thought that if I were to get in an accident, I’d just take a taxi everywhere. But that’s insanely expensive. I can’t afford to do that. Most people can’t.” Public transit is something that you don’t notice until you

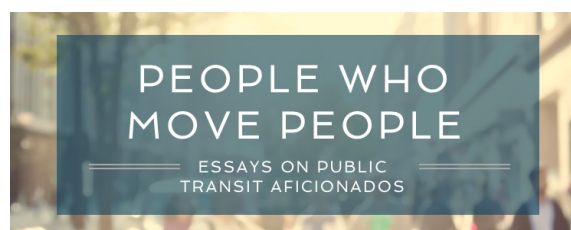
have to, she says, and we are all one accident away from having to take notice.

Taking her last sip of the cherry blossom Frappuccino, she concludes, “This tasted pretty good.” I tell her I thought it tasted kind of like a strawberry-scented candle smells. “I can see that,” she says. “It was pretty sweet.”

As a math major, Nikki always knew she liked solving problems. She finds her work at RouteMatch fulfilling—making public transit work better and enriching the lives of those who depend on it—including her own. ■



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).



*People Who Move People* is a web series profiling individuals who have made an impact in public transit. The series has been initiated and funded by RouteMatch Software, an Atlanta-based company who is passionate about transit and proud to record these stories. Find out more at [peoplewhomovepeople](http://peoplewhomovepeople).