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Why I ride the bus

Feel better about yourself and your planet

By LaRae M. Donnellan

MY VIEW

I'm a creature of habit. I eat Special K Red Berries and skim milk for breakfast, and during the school year (I teach at Florida A&M), I eat an open-face peanut butter and banana sandwich for lunch. I'm a workaholic, so I spend hours on end tweaking lesson plans, grading papers, meeting with students, doing research, handling committee work - whatever fills my day. On Thursday nights, I watch "Grey's Anatomy" and "ER." And until last summer, I'd driven my 1997 Honda Civic to work by myself.

Not all habits are good. And driving my car by myself - I finally admitted - was a habit I needed to break.

I'd watched Al Gore's Academy Award-winning documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth." I'd followed news accounts and read books about global warming and climate change. I'd become convinced that the world, as we knew it, was changing for the worse. It was time to be responsible and enjoy the gift of public transportation.

How could riding the bus be considered a gift, you wonder? After all, isn't driving a car a sign of wealth and independence? Isn't riding public transportation (except in big cities) a sign of poverty or being uncool?

Riding StarMetro has its downsides. First, it takes me twice as long as driving by myself. Second, I'm locked into StarMetro's schedule. If I miss one bus, I have to wait an hour - an hour! - for the next bus. How could a busy workaholic like me live this way? Third, I have to share "my space" with strangers. And finally, riding public transit is inconvenient. The nearest stop is three blocks from my home. Boo hoo.

At first, I was angry at what seemed like a loss of control. But a funny thing happened along the way: I felt better about my life.

First, the extra time on StarMetro actually is a blessing. I read the newspaper or grade papers on the morning ride; at night, I relax by doing Sudoku puzzles. Second, conforming to StarMetro's schedule means that I get to work without rushing (I used to wait until the last minute before anxiously driving to campus). Even better, I am forced to leave work earlier. No more staying until 8 or 9 p.m. to finish just one more project. I can't miss the last bus, which leaves downtown

at 6:40 p.m. As a result, I have more time at home with my family. And my concerns about sharing space with others turned out not to be an issue: My seat is my car.

I recycle, use compact fluorescent light bulbs, monitor my air conditioning and heating, turn off unnecessary appliances, and teach my students how to be good stewards of the earth. I ride my bike to the bus stop and to the gym. I even bought a Prius. But riding StarMetro has required the biggest change in my lifestyle and thus has brought the biggest personal rewards.

As a white professional, I can't help but notice that there aren't many people who look like me riding StarMetro. Having the luxury of owning and using a car has social consequences. A whopping 32 percent of all carbon dioxide emissions - a major source of greenhouse gases - comes from the transportation sector, but according to Carnegie Mellon University, only 1.38 percent of those emissions comes from buses.

Why not give StarMetro a try?

From Sept. 4 through Dec. 7, Greenovation and StarMetro will be sponsoring a pilot park-and-ride project on Route 16 for people living on the northeast side of town. By committing to using StarMetro at least twice a week, you can park your car at Premier Health & Fitness Center or in the Smith, Thompson, Shaw & Manausa law firm lot. You'll receive a special bus pass with discounts from local businesses. And then, starting Oct. 23, you'll have the option of riding an extended Route 80X bus, which will run every half hour all the way to Wal-Mart and Target on north Thomasville Road. That bus will be fitted with WiFi.

Riding StarMetro is a gift for you - and for our planet. Change a habit and make a difference.