

# Pace driver aims for smooth ride

By Renee Wijnen  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

After nearly a year and a half of driving a Pace Dial-a-Ride bus for the elderly and people with disabilities, Naola Coggins has become familiar with her passengers' habits.

She knows who needs extra help getting on and off and who would be offended by an offer of assistance. She knows who likes to talk about their lives and who would rather sit in silence.

"I like helping people. It's ... one of the best things about this job. I like taking people from Point A to Point B, and ... I love driving," says Coggins, who drives a route that serves a section of northern Cook County and southern Lake County, including Deerfield and Northbrook.

Coggins doesn't usually initiate conversation, but she likes to listen and has gradually developed relationships with her passengers.

"The ones who want to talk, they always talk," Coggins says. "They may talk about shopping or their grandchildren, or sometimes they tell me, 'Don't ever get old.'"

Coggins also expresses concern for her passengers through her actions. Sitting in her bus on a Monday afternoon, she watches until a passenger makes it safely into his home. He has a mental disability that sometimes leaves him confused or prone to wander off.

"I don't have to do this—it's not part of the guidelines," she says as she shifts the bus into drive after the man's front door closes behind him. But if it were her relative being dropped off, she would like to know that someone was watching, Coggins says.

Spending those extra few minutes waiting for passengers to make it indoors safely was difficult when she first began the job, Coggins recalls. "I was falling behind, but I kept thinking, 'I can't leave.'" Now that she's familiar with the territory, it's easier, she says.

Coggins, 34, grew up in a small town just south of Atlanta and received her high school equivalency diploma in 1978. She lives on Chicago's North Side with her daughters, ages 6 and 12.



Tribune photo by James O'Leary

Dial-a-Ride bus driver Naola Coggins helps Constance Tshild settle in. Some passengers decline aid, and Coggins respects that, too.

decided to move to Chicago three years ago and took a job driving a shuttle bus at O'Hare International Airport. After being laid off, she saw an ad for the Dial-a-Ride position, applied for the job and was hired.

Coggins handles a multitude of tasks for Premier Transportation, 1830 Pickwick Lane, in Glenview, the company that

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Pace has contracted to run the Dial-a-Ride service in the region where Coggins drives.

"I don't just drive—I take calls, I work dispatch, I train other drivers," she says.

Dale Berg, the company's general manager, describes Coggins as a dependable driver who works well with passengers.

"It's not a job for everyone—you have to be empathetic," he says. "Naola's a conscientious, reliable person. She's a very caring individual. I've never had any complaints about her."

Premier Transportation, which has 48 drivers, transports about 300 passengers a day, Berg says. Passengers must register with the Regional Transport Authority to use the service and must call a day in advance to schedule a ride. The fare is \$1.50, and passengers

may take one attendant for free. Transfers are free.

Many passengers say they have come to rely on the service. Helen Snowble, 70, says she and her husband use Dial-a-Ride buses for doctor appointments.

"On weekends, my daughter takes me shopping, but she works during the week, so we have to use the service," Snowble says. "It's my husband's turn tomorrow."

Snowble has brought Coggins apples and other treats to show her appreciation.

Cheryl Grafman has taken the service to work every day for 2½ years. "I don't know what I'd do without it," says Grafman, 23, who can't drive because of a learning disability. She likes to sit in the seat directly behind Coggins to talk with her during the ride.

Grafman has come to know most of the drivers so well that, as another Dial-a-Ride bus crosses an intersection ahead, she takes one look at the bus and says, "That must be Patrick [driving]."

One of the things that Coggins likes about the job is that she can explore the suburbs with a small group of passengers with whom she is accustomed.

"Time goes by so fast when you're doing this," she says.

"If you'd ask me what I'll be doing in 20 years, I'd say driving."

*For more information on Pace Dial-a-Ride, call 950-8066.*

She began her commercial driving career six years ago when she was working for Greyhound. While based in Atlanta, she drove buses to Boston, Washington and Montreal, among other places. She gave up the job after two years because the schedule sometimes meant long separations from her children.

"I always wanted and still want to be a truck driver," Coggins says. "I feel it's a challenge for me to be a lady and maneuver something that big. But I can't drive a truck because of my girls. They need guidance. Relatives and friends can't raise your kids like you can."

Wanting to start a new life for herself and her daughters, she