

The Adventures of Carolyn McHugh "The Traveling Apprentice" Spotlight on Smart Ride

On a morning when school was still in session I reported to Smart Ride, Inc., a full service transportation company located in Prince Frederick, for my Traveling Apprentice experience. There I was assigned the task of accompanying a driver, James, to the Calvert County School to pick up a wheelchair-bound teenage quadriplegic student and transport her home from school. I watched in fascination as James lowered the lift at the rear of the truck, gently loaded the wheelchair bound teenage into the van, then cautiously checked the clamps and other paraphernalia to ensure the chair didn't budge during the ride.

I realized this was an assignment in which I could only observe; I couldn't participate. James had a special driver's license designation and he'd undergone specialized training on loading wheel-chair bound clients into vans. I had neither his skill nor his experience. What could I do instead? I returned to the Smart Ride office and asked the co-owner, Cynthia Thorne-Carter, if I could help out Carla in the office. Cynthia seemed skeptical, but she agreed. I soon appreciated her skepticism.

Carla is the nerve center of the operation. She's a monitor of communications between the drivers of vans, sedans, and wheelchair accessible vehicles, drivers who are on the road 24/7 transporting clients to regional airports, train stations, hospitals, schools and other sites in a service area that covers Maryland, northern Virginia, D.C, and parts of Pennsylvania and Delaware. She's a customer service manager, a special events manager, a quintessential multi-tasker, a dispatcher, a mapper, a router, and a keeper of records such as driver's time sheets, equipment use and vehicle maintenance, and mileage logs. Whew. What help could I be to Carla? Hmmmm. Maybe I could answer the phone and take down information for a simple transportation request.

I answered a call and listened to the request. *They wanted what?* This wasn't a simple request: I was way out of my league. I handed the phone off to Carla and listened as she skillfully calculated the number of vans required to make multiple trips and shuttle 125 wedding guests from various hotel sites to the Running Hair vineyard for an outdoor wedding, have the vans remain on site to shuttle the guests to the reception pavilion, shuttle them back to their hotels following the reception, and then remain on call to shuttle the guests elsewhere later that evening. She did it without blinking an eye.

I tucked my tail between my legs and offered to do something I felt I could handle - -filing. I left Smart Ride feeling that, despite my ineptitude, the day had been successful. I learned what goes on behind the scene of a home-grown Calvert business, a business that fills the complex transportation needs of many people throughout Southern Maryland. I knew I'd never win an award as Cynthia's Employee of the Year, month, or even day- -but I'd learned much and I was thankful for the opportunity.

But. . . I wonder. Will I be a more valuable employee next month when I apprentice at another local business?



Look for next month's issue to find out about Carolyn's next assignment.