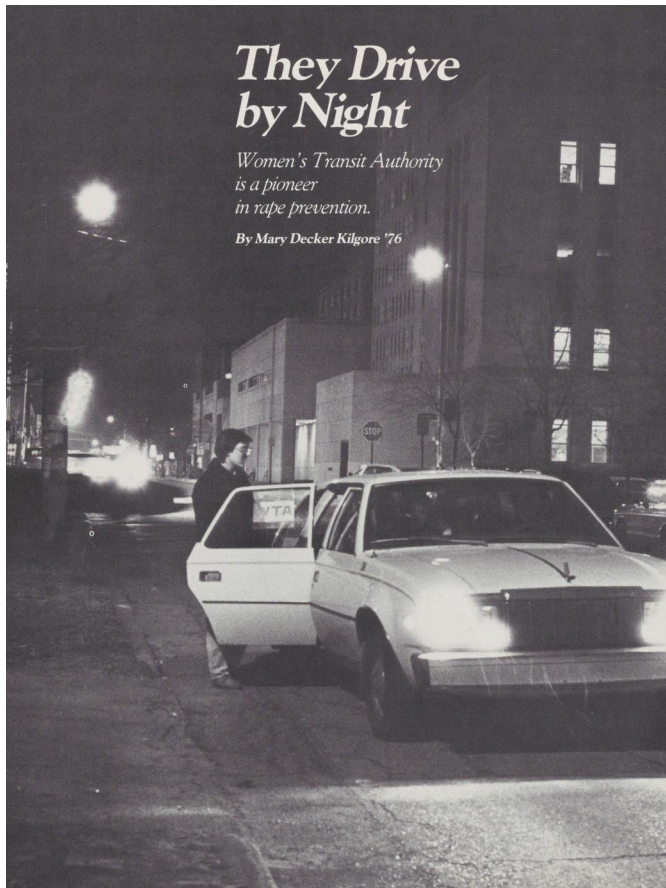


# *They Drive by Night*

*Women's Transit Authority  
is a pioneer  
in rape prevention.*

*By Mary Decker Kilgore '76*



**T**he Women's Transit Authority car with me as a "guest rider" has pulled up in the lot at Mills and Spring to drop off two volunteer drivers at their cars for their shift. "Car One," a voice crackles through the radio, "this is base. There's a woman on Milton Street who needs a ride to work." Next to Car One's driver is a plastic dishpan containing a flashlight, maps and radio equipment. She fishes out a heavy, laminated map. "I don't know where Milton is," she says. By the time she finds it, the other two drivers are ready to go—they have the radios hooked up, the antennas on the roofs, the signs on the doors and the motors running. We wave good-bye and head towards Madison General to find Milton Street.

This scene is enacted every night with different casts. The cars belong to the University fleet; the women are volunteer drivers for the Women's Transit Authority, a rape prevention service. It provides free rides to women within a four-mile radius of the Capitol between 7 p.m. (8 in the summer) and 2 a.m. It is one of two services which began in 1973 in reaction to a sudden increase in rapes. Outraged women formed the Women's Coalition on Rape Prevention and from it came WTA (and the Rape Crisis Center, which counsels rape victims.) That spring, seven women began driving their own cars, charging riders just enough to pay for gas. This worked until the local taxi companies got into the act; they complained these were "gypsy cabs" and invoked a city ordinance which prohibits charging for rides by unauthorized vehicles. The University, supportive of WTA's goals, offered fleet cars, office space and a ride home for the last driver.

Three part-time coordinators each work thirty hours a week. Dispatchers and drivers are scheduled from a pool of volunteers who come from a variety of backgrounds (30-40% are UW students). There are three drivers on the 7-11 shift; three others take over from 11 to 2 with a fourth on a swing shift from 9 to midnight. The "business office" is in the campus YMCA at Brooks and Johnson streets; dispatchers work out of the Campus Assistance Center at 420 North Lake Street.

We take the woman from Milton Street to work and get a call to pick up a woman on Dayton Street. She takes forever to get out to the car, offers no apology for making us wait and then, a block away, begins to yell "I've forgotten something important!" She starts frantically digging in her bag. "If I don't find it I'll go back for it and walk home." She finds it and relaxes. Next, two students get in, obviously miffed at the distance they have to go to work with a third on an honors project. "Next time we're working at one of our houses," says one. "Yeh," her friend agrees, "last week when you were sick I took a bus out there. It's terrible, walking to the bus stop after dark in that neighborhood." We let them out, and five minutes later we pull

up in front of the first woman's destination. She is sound asleep in the back seat.

Last fall when the UW Parking and Transportation Board was reviewing budget requests, the UW Committee to Evaluate Security Needs and Concerns urged it to allocate funds to WTA because "reliable public transportation for women after dark is an essential element in the prevention of crimes of violence against women. Every ride which WTA provides for a woman translates into freedom from fear for her own personal safety." For the same reason former driver Donna Rounds volunteered one night every two weeks. "Sometimes I would wonder why I got myself into it, then I thought of those who were assaulted and I felt if my efforts spared even one woman that, it was well worth it."

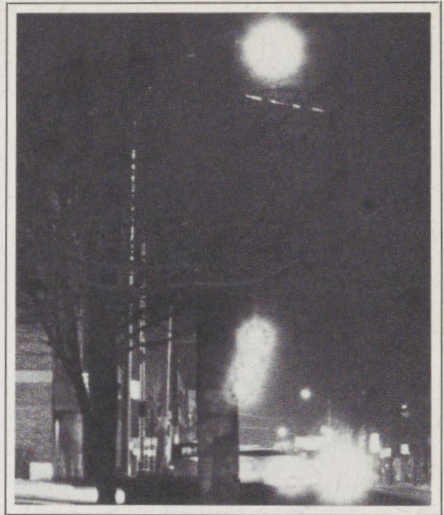
We pick up two passengers going south to Badger Road and, four blocks later, two heading for Westmorland. As the driver turns west, the first two look at each other. One of them says, "Hey, we were here before them, you should take us home first. They're out of our way." "Yes, they are," says the driver, firmly but politely, "but I have to pick up someone on the way to their house who's going near yours." They continue fussing to each other.

**C**oordinator Lesley Slusser says, "Drivers often quit from what I call 'volunteer burn-out.' The situation is inherently stressful and sometimes it gets to people, especially if they get an abusive passenger." Ann McGettigan avoided this by changing to dispatching. "Most of the interactions I had in the car were pleasant and supportive. I like helping people but I felt the need for a change so I switched jobs for variety. This is in some ways more stressful, with two phones ringing and three—sometimes four—drivers to keep track of, but what has saved my sanity is my co-worker, Ann Campbell. We are assigned together and have developed a close and positive working relationship."

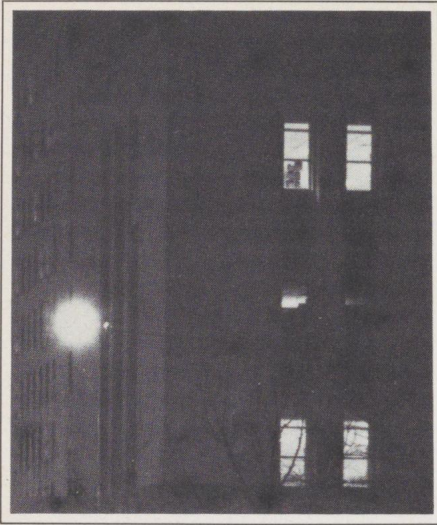
There are anywhere between 100-200 in the volunteer pool so one of the coordinators' biggest problems is that of the schedule. There is a substitute list of those who will come in at the last minute when changes are necessary. WTA asks for a minimum commitment of one night every two weeks.

Car One's driver radios that we are nearby and can swing past Memorial Library for the hourly stop at the Langdon Street entrance. This time there is a bonanza: six passengers. Two "mature students" engage in a lively discussion on teaching personnel and policies in a particular department; one elegant-looking woman remains quiet; two others discover they have a mutual acquaintance; and the sixth carries pizza wrapped in aluminum foil.

While the rewards are not tangible for



the time and effort required, there is a definite and strong payoff, say the volunteers. The bond of sisterhood coheres the operation. Volunteers and passengers are as diverse as any random group of people; their only commonality is gender and the fear of sexual assault. The feeling of solidarity that comes from participation in alleviating that fear is satisfying. This was emphasized one night last fall when an anti-pornography group was protesting outside The Pub on State Street. *Oui* magazine was picking up the tab for bar patrons who brought in a copy of its issue containing an article on the Wisconsin Student Association's past leaders, the Pail & Shovel party. (WA Jan '80). When WTA driver Laurel Kinosian drove by, the group saw the car and cheered loudly. "It was a surprise since I was unaware of the situa-



tion. The recognition gave me a lift and when they cheered, it made me feel a part of the protest—and I liked that.”

After dropping off everyone from the library, we drive to the east side of town near the East Washington Avenue K-Mart. It is just within the border of WTA's service. As we near the street the driver calls in for the exact address but the dispatcher can't hear her. "Car One, this is Car Three, I can hear both you and the base so I will relay the message." So with Car Three acting as go-between, we get the address. The driver recognizes the building. "Oh, I remember this woman. She lives upstairs and takes a long time getting down here." Sure enough, a light goes off on the second floor and it's a while before the rider gets to the car. "Thank you so much for waiting on me. I don't get around as good as I used to, so it takes me

longer on the steps. I'm going to my niece's on Fair Oaks to stay with her children." "It's all right," says the driver, "that's what I'm here for." After we take her to her niece's, we find ourselves back in radio range. The next passenger is at University Hospitals. As we pull in the driveway the driver spots a hearty-looking middle-aged woman in a plain brown coat and "sensible shoes." The woman totes a large purse and a shopping bag. The driver tells me this lady always carries a small TV with her. When she climbs in the car I can hear faint but familiar sounds—something about a headache and a cure. The driver asks, "What are you watching tonight?" " 'Charlie's Angels' . . . they sure can get themselves in the darndest messes." She turns down the volume and offers, "I had a pretty decent day. How about you?" The driver replies, "Right now I'm having trouble finding Eugenia Avenue." "I think you passed the turn a couple streets back."

Each night in the car brings the driver in touch with a kaleidoscope of strangers. Ann McGettigan says, "Sometimes it's fun to fantasize what their lives are like. Some become regulars and you become familiar with them, find out what they think, and what's going on with them. It's always interesting because you meet so many types of people."

Since we don't have a call after letting off the TV lady, we head back to the base to see if we can exchange the radio equipment for another set. But the last one is in the swing-shift car. As we pull out of the driveway three teenagers flag us down for a ride home. They had been to a movie. "This is neat. We'll get home before dad gets to the house with the car and we won't have to bother mom," says one. "Well I sure hope: Julie and I don't have much time before our curfew. Mom will be furious if we're very late," worries Janet. The driver gets a call to pick up a woman at the Hill Farms Building. There she discovers the radio is on the fritz again and there's no passenger at the front door. "Well, maybe she's in the back. I'll go check. I can also use the phone in the lobby to call the base." The teens are getting very anxious. "What time is it now?" "Two minutes later than the last time you asked. Hey, my folks are going to be doubly furious if my mom goes after us and can't find us because we're sitting here." The driver returns alone. "I couldn't find her or a telephone so we'll just go on without her. I know you girls are upset that you're going to be late. I'm sorry I couldn't take you directly home, but that's not the way WTA works. I'll be glad to come in and explain to your folks if you'd like," she offers. "No, thanks anyway, but I think that would only make them angrier," says Sandy. By now it is raining and the going is even slower. The driver continues, "I'm a parent too, so I'm sure that if you tell your folks what happened they will be more understanding than you think." "Hey, you don't know our folks. We'll be lucky to get out of the house by Christmas," says Julie,

looking at her sister. At Sandy's house they bolt out of the car and run up the walk.

Some complain about the slow service of WTA. A tight budget and inferior equipment sometimes limits efficiency. Despite this, WTA has survived for eight years and has served as a model for others. When word spread about the program, women from all over the country called, asking for tips in setting up a similar service.

While we're on the way to pick up four evening shift workers at a cheese-packing plant a call comes in to pick up three nearby students. One factory worker is going to another job, sitting with a sick woman. "I know her daughter likes to leave by 11, but if I'm not there she'll have to wait. It just can't be helped," she tells a companion. "Is she usually asleep when you get there or do you have to help her to bed?" questions her friend. "Lots of times she's in bed watching TV if she's not in a bad mood," she replies. When we pick up the students we have a full car and several conversations going on behind us. "I'm so tired, but I have to finish that paper by tomorrow." "I think that new foreman is a lot nicer than old Herb." "That chem test is going to be a killer and I have to get at least a 'B' on it." "I sure hope my daughter has the kids to bed when I get home."

The majority of WTA's clients are students and low-income people. Last fall the UW Parking and Transportation Board considered the renewal of WTA's three-year contract plus its request for additional funds to meet higher costs of operation. The board granted the increased funds but renewed the contract for only one year with a proviso for the group to check into other funding sources. One possibility is to alter the city ordinance to allow charging a minimal fare. Coordinator Lesley Slusser is "apprehensive of this for two reasons: one is that the safety of our drivers would be jeopardized by carrying money; the other is that many of our riders simply could not afford alternative transportation. When people are willing to wait up to an hour for a ride, you know they really need it."

During this fiscal year the UW and the city each provided 40% of operating funds. The remaining 10% came from the Wisconsin Student Association; Employees Combined Campaigns (both state and federal); and donations. The Madison Common Council showed additional support by proclaiming February WTA month. By now the cry of budget cuts and economic hard times is familiar to us all, too familiar. Anyone wishing to help may send contributions to Women's Transit Authority, 306 N. Brooks Street, Madison 53715. □

NOTE: In mid-April the UW Parking and Transportation Board announced it will continue its portion of WTA's funding through December, 1982. MDK