

Dec. 31, 82

On The Road With Women's Transit



Driver Kris Corwin handles a call for the first and largest free transit service for women in the nation. Photo by Glenn Trudel

by Ann Lamboley

At the Women's Transit Authority's home base in the Campus Assistance Center on N. Lake Street, the phone starts ringing well before service begins at 7 p.m. "Some of those are time calls—women calling ahead for rides," explains Judi Weston, a UW student and WTA volunteer. Tonight will probably be hectic because of the cold weather, she tells me. During the next hour, I watch as her desk becomes cluttered with ride requests. The phone rings continuously.

Women's Transit Authority—the first and

largest free transit service for women in the nation—will celebrate its 10th anniversary in February. Originally

oriented operation, WTA now answers up to 80 calls a night between 7 p.m. and 2 a.m. from students, the elderly and working women. With its recently approved \$75,000 city grant, the organization will soon expand.

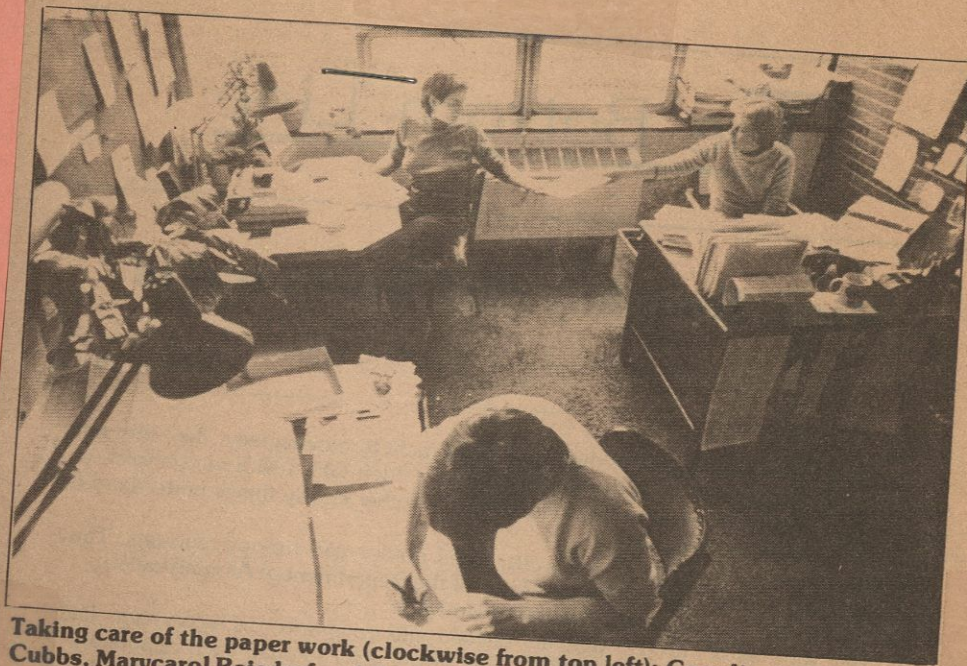
WTA, like the Rape Crisis Center, was organized in 1973 in response to an alarming increase in reported sexual assaults. Its objective over the past decade has been to get lone women off the streets after dark and out of danger by providing them free transportation. The service

operates within a four-mile radius of the Capitol.

ist collective, WTA allows no male volunteers. But as coordinator Ann McGettigan points out, the policy is also a precautionary measure. "There is always the potential for a male volunteer being an assailant," she says, "and we have no way of screening for it." In another community operating a similar service, she notes, a woman was once assaulted by a male driver.

The usual wait for a ride is about 45 minutes, but on busy nights like tonight, service is often backed up for more than an

Continued on Page 6



Taking care of the paper work (clockwise from top left): Coordinators Marylee Cubbs, Marycarol Reisdorf and Carol Rynning. Photos by Glenn Trudel

On The Road With WTA

Continued from Front Cover

hour. Part of Judi Weston's job as dispatcher is answering complaints about delays. "Most abusive calls come from misunderstanding," she tells me. "Some women think WTA is like a cab service. I try to be understanding and wait until the person calms down." But Weston sounds less patient when talking about callers who fail to show for their rides without canceling. "We're here to perform a service," she says, "and we can't afford to waste time."

A Modest Beginning

WTA started out with fewer than 20

volunteers who drove their own cars. One car was on the road every night transporting 15 to 25 passengers, mostly University students, who paid 25 cents for a ride. Service shut down briefly when drivers developed problems with their insurance companies, but resumed a few months later with volunteers using cars and gas supplied by the University.

Over the years, about 1,500 women have worked with WTA. Today, over 150 volunteers keep four cars on the road while three full-time paid coordinators and three part-timers administer the \$90,000-a-year program. The money comes from the University, WSA, the city and private donations.

"We've gone through some rough times getting funding," says McGettigan, "but now we are part of the community and are strongly supported." Over the years, she explains, WTA has developed a good, reliable organization. "Our riders can depend on us to be here seven nights a week," she says, "and we are accountable to our funding sources." While public concern over the safety of women has helped bolster WTA, this concern comes "in waves," McGettigan points out. "It sometimes takes

Continued on Page 7

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something horrendous, like a murder," she notes, referring to the slaying of Donna Mraz on her way home from work last summer. "Then people look for solutions and they see that violence is going on all the time."

The city council's recent approval of a \$75,000 grant to beef up WTA service, for instance, may be seen as evidence of the wave effect. Under the terms of the proposal, WTA would use part of the money to contract for cab service to handle the overflow of requests during busy times. Cabs would also be called to transport women outside WTA's boundaries. The rest of the money would go toward hiring a fourth coordinator to administer the backup service.

Most requests for the service are "everyday calls," as McGettigan puts it, but WTA is specially prepared to assist women who have been sexually assaulted or battered. A car is dispatched immediately and the driver acquaints the victim with various places, like the Rape Crisis Center, where she can get help.

Reflecting upon public reaction to the rash of assaults during the past year, driver Peggy Munson says, "There's been a lot of emphasis on women's safety, and that's good." But she thinks that greater emphasis should be placed upon getting at the source of the problem. Another volunteer adds that some of the responsibility for preventing assault rests with women themselves.

A case in point is Nancy Meuer, who works as a babysitter. Two summers ago, Meuer rode with WTA regularly. She finished work after dark and "felt nervous" walking through her neighborhood because a group of men would regularly harass her. So instead she walked to the Campus Assistance Center and waited for a ride to her front door.

UW student Susan Resek started riding with WTA last year after making "a conscious decision" to stop walking home alone at night, she recalls. Sabena Whitfield, also a University student, says she has been using WTA service more frequently out of a growing fear of sexual assault. But both are quick to add that WTA offers more than safe transit. "The drivers are really friendly," says Whitfield, and Resek agrees: "When I get in the car I get a very comforting feeling."

On The Road

Out on the road, it is seldom quiet in the car. I remember Munson saying that she

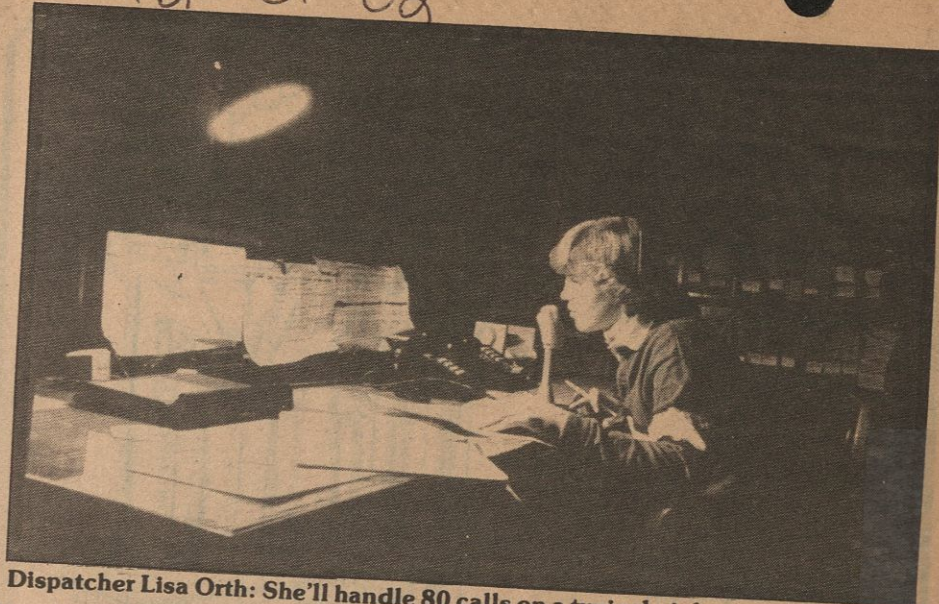
enjoyed the challenge of chatting with women of different backgrounds. The driver next to me, a three-year WTA veteran who asked to remain unnamed, says she enjoys talking to her regulars, who are mostly middle-aged women getting off from work at the various hospitals.

In contrast to the hubbub at the dispatcher's station, the atmosphere in the car is relaxed. We pick up several frazzled students at the library, drop off one woman for an evening out at the Crystal Corner Bar and hear how another rider's husband has been laid off from his job.

When the back seat is empty, I ask the driver if she has ever had problems with abusive riders. "I've heard riders insult each other," she says, "but the driver has some immunity." She points to a sign above the windshield which reads: "Have you thanked your WTA volunteer tonite?" She continues, "There are two kinds of women who use WTA—those who are patient, who know the service well and call ahead, and those who take it for granted."

Two of our riders are former WTA volunteers. Says Geree Ware, who worked as a dispatcher: "I often work at night, and when the bus drivers were on strike I had to depend on WTA. Cabs were too expensive. At the time I was barely making it on minimum wage." Walking to work during daylight hours took Ware two-and-a-half hours.

Because she used the service almost daily,



Dispatcher Lisa Orth: She'll handle 80 calls on a typical night.

Ware decided to volunteer some of her time. "I felt indebted," she explains. "I wanted to do something in return."

Ware knows the driver and remarks several times on the length of her service. "It's hard to get people to be dedicated over a long period of time," Ware says. "You sometimes have to drive under adverse conditions, and people are not always kind."

On our way back downtown, the driver confides that she is looking forward to having her Saturday evenings free again. Tonight is her last night on the job.

After she drops me off at home, I pause to think about all the women I'd met throughout the evening and the way they're linked by giving and getting rides. WTA has grown and developed into a sophisticated organization since its first volunteers transported riders in their own cars. But the group's efforts to protect women are only defensive measures and can't solve the problem of sexual assault. Despite well-publicized bursts of public concern, a woman is probably no safer walking alone at night now than she was 10 years ago.