

WTA: A History of Strength Through Safety

by Susan Podebradsky

Women's Transit Authority celebrates her eighteenth birthday this spring. Like any eighteen-year old, she's gone through many changes, but the core of her identity has remained the same — volunteers providing rides for women at night to prevent sexual assault and harassment.

Over the years the organization has experimented with a variety of internal structures. In the mid-1970s WTA became a non-profit organization. Today three full-time staff members deal with the administrative tasks. Currently almost one hundred women staff the ride service, including students, and 30 men and women volunteer for special projects.

Women's safety is the first priority. Two or three cars are out every night to pick up women who call in requesting a ride or wait at designated shuttle stops near campus. In 1990 WTA gave rides to nearly 20,000 women and their children.

WTA was started in the spring of 1973 during a conference organized by the Madison Coalition Against Rape to address Madison's growing problem of sexual assault. Local women, concerned about their own safety and the safety of other women, pooled their resources to

offer inexpensive transportation to women. Only women volunteers were allowed because there was no way to screen out men who would be dangerous. WTA was a means for women to feel strength in creating their own safety; not relying on others (usually men) to protect them.

In the beginning, the ride service operated on a shoestring budget. Drivers used their own cars and had to make contact with base by stopping to use a payphone to ask for the next ride pickup. WTA took requests for rides and also made campus shuttle stops. Routes were within a limited distance from the UW campus. Volunteer coordinators rotated on a monthly basis and were responsible for scheduling, fundraising and publicity.

Accused by local taxi companies of operating an unlicensed "gypsy" cab service and encountering insurance problems arising from the use of private automobiles, WTA closed temporarily in June of 1973. A few months later the service reopened with fiscal support from the University of Wisconsin's Police and Security Department.

P&S supplied two fleet cars, two-way radios, office space, a telephone, and furniture. The University work-study positions enabled Transit to have paid

coordinators for the first time in its history.

1978 marked the first year of a substantial operating budget for WTA. As the need and demand for the service began to be recognized, new methods of fundraising were developed.

In 1988, WTA faced a severe funding cut from the City. Members of the community rallied, appearing en masse at the City council meeting at which the final decision was made. The city agreed to restore \$5,000 of the \$15,000 cut if WTA could match that amount through increased fundraising. Again, members of the community pulled through for WTA and the challenge was met.

1988 was also the year WTA faced a threat to its women-only volunteer ride service policy. A male student at the University filed a complaint with the Wisconsin Student Association. The WSA student court found that WTA's women-only volunteer policy for the ride service was justifiable and dismissed his complaint. The student attempted further complaints through the university system, but his case was eventually dropped as he moved out of the state.

In 1989, WTA boundaries were expanded to nearly five miles from the Capitol and include most of the areas with affordable housing which were

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previously only served through cabs.

Currently, more than one-fourth of WTA's \$175,000 annual budget comes from fundraising and participation in Community Shares of Wisconsin. The rest is split between the City of Madison and the University.

WTA has been a model for similar services in other cities, even in Germany. However, few have been able to maintain the safety and success of the service over time, especially with only women volunteers. Unlike many campus escort services, WTA does not close during student breaks or over the summer, or limit rides to a campus area.

WTA serves as a link between the University and the rest of the community, and has a volunteer core of both students and non-students. Transit volunteers have the opportunity to interact with women they might not otherwise meet.

In the beginning WTA volunteers were mostly white UW students and so were their riders. But things have changed. A survey done in 1989 shows that WTA riders are most often women of color. Many WTA riders have small children and most have yearly incomes between \$5,000 and \$10,000. The need for WTA has increased greatly as the feminization of poverty continues to increase. The number of homeless women and children needing

rides to or from a shelter is increasing. The women who use WTA really need WTA.

A lot has changed since 1973, but much remains the same. A sexual assault still occurs somewhere every two to three minutes. The threat of sexual assault affects all women in everyday life. Instead of taking advantage of community and cultural night-time events, women may choose to stay at home. Women may not take night-time employment or late night classes. Fear, by limiting opportunities, affects how women live, play and learn. WTA seeks to open up the world for women by providing safe transportation at night.

Susan Podebradsky is Director of WTA.

To keep WTA going every night of the year, new volunteers are continuously needed. Volunteers come for a four-hour shift once a week or once every other week. Project volunteers (including men) help with outreach, publicity, and fundraising efforts. If you are interested in volunteering to help keep this vital feminist organization alive, call 256-3710.

NOTE: This article merely scratches the surface of WTA history. WTA is looking for a volunteer to do an in-depth study of the past eighteen years. This could be an excellent term paper project.