

New kid on the bus in Farmington

BY SUE BUCK
STAFF WRITER



Phail

When Robert Phail came back to the bus office after the first half-day of school Monday, he had his co-workers rolling in laughter as he told them about his experiences.

Starting his third year with Farmington Public Schools, Phail is a regular bus driver this year. He previously worked as a substitute driver.

The first day's confusion required some adjustments. "I had nothing but crying kids on my bus," he told his co-workers.

"WAAAAA!" he demonstrated. His true-to-life resonance caught everyone's attention, and their reaction grew from smiles to hearty laughs.

"They were like, 'I just want you to get me home, buddy,'" Phail said. "I said to one little

girl, 'Look there's your father.'"

The girl reportedly peered, then walked again. The man Phail pointed out wasn't even

from the same country as she was.

"Oops, I guess that's not your father, wrong house," Phail told her.

As soon as she saw her street, she alerted her bus driver by calling out, "This is it! This is it!"

Relieved, Phail told her, "Yes, I'm taking you home."

Though he picked up a busload of morning kids at the intersection from Lanigan Elementary, he wasn't the same bus driver who had dropped them off earlier in the day.

The regular bus driver would drive them to school again in the morning. Phail had the overflow from Beechview Elementary.

The family needed health insurance when wife, Ellen, became pregnant. Phail called around and found other school districts didn't offer health insurance to substitute drivers. The Farmington District did.

"I talked to Bill and he said, 'We're the best in America. We give health insurance to our subs.'"

Phail already had the necessary bus license.

"God just dropped on my heart," Phail said. "He said, 'You love kids, right? Then you can drive buses.'"

Phail, a Redford Township resident, and his wife Ellen have two children, Joshua, 3, and Emily, 1.

the school where he taught downsized, Phail started a window washing business.

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Driving a bus was an unexpected career change. When

DRIVER

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"In between, because I'm president of the union, I have release time and sit on many committees and deal with issues which come up in the bus yard on a daily basis."

Her longevity and knowledge of rules signaled a time for her to step forward years ago as the drivers' representative. "I'm outgoing and know all the drivers," she said. "We have good days and we have bad days."

She works with Bill Tousey, Farmington Transportation director, to solve problems so they never turn into big ones.

"You work together to make safe schools, the transportation version," she said.

There've been improvements in buses through the years. Kin remembers her first bus as one that had a manual transmission, had no power brakes and no power steering.

"Being a senior driver, there's things you don't even think

about learning anymore," Kin said. "There wasn't any training when I started. I took a bus out of here, drove down Quaker Valley and back up the hill and that was it. You had a chauffeur's license and that was it."

Since then, she's attended an eight-hour, behind-the-wheel, defensive driving training course in Marshall, Mich.

"There were seven skills we practiced," Kin said. "They put us in a full skid and then we pulled out. We drove at 30 miles per hour and 10 feet from the cones they would yell, 'Right!' or 'Left!' and you would have to swerve in between the other cones. It was just amazing what you could do. It was controlled. We never got to skid. We did a donut on purpose."

With her husband, Chuck, Kin resides in Farmington. The couple has no children—at least, not their own.

"Just the ones who are on the bus," Kin quipped.

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OBITUARIES

Irene P. Bonnell

Services for Irene Pauline Bonnell, 100, formerly of Farmington, will be held at 10 a.m. today, Aug. 29 at St. Gerald Church in Farmington with the Rev. Gerald McEnhill officiating.

Burial will take place at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Southfield.

Mrs. Bonnell was born Aug. 19, 1902 in Ontario, Canada and died Aug. 27, 2002 at Marywood Nursing Home in Livonia.

She worked as an industrial nurse and was a member of St. Gerald Catholic Church. She is survived by her nephew, William (Ilene) Birge; and great-nephew, Joseph (Joanne) Thimm.

She is preceded in death by her husband, Edward.

Memorial contributions may be made to Marywood Nursing Home in Livonia. Arrangements made by Heeney-Sundquist Funeral Home in Farmington.

Thomas J. Hankins
Services for Thomas Joseph

Hankins, 69, of Farmington Hills, were held Aug. 27 at St. Sebastian Catholic Church in Dearborn with the Rev. William Brennan officiating.

Mr. Hankins was born Oct. 4, 1932 in Detroit.

He died Aug. 23, 2002 at Providence Hospital in Southfield.

He worked as an inspector for General Motors and was a Korean War veteran.

He was also a member of the Livonia VFW Post No. 3941.

He is survived by his sons, Mark, Michael, Jeffrey, Thomas and Charles; daughters, Barbara Birecki, Joanne Hankins and Mary Mart'n; 12 grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

He is preceded in death by his wife, Barbara.

Memorial contributions may be made to the Alzheimer's Association, Detroit Area Chapter, 17220 W. 12 Mile Road, Ste. 100, Southfield, MI 48076.

Arrangements made by Thayer-Rock Funeral Home in Farmington.

FOIA

FROM PAGE A1

the candidates' names at the very beginning, if they would just let us know at one point we will know who the candidates are," she said. "We'd like to be in on this."

People who come into the bakery have thanked her for submitting the FOIA request.

"Any citizen has the right to make freedom of information requests," Burns said. "More citizens should, they are not meant to wreak havoc. I'm doing what I am legally entitled to do."

Burns is concerned with business vacancies, thinks some businesses could use some technical guidance and believes the Farmer's market could be more than it is now.

These problems could be tackled by the new DDA director. "We'd like to see more local business downtown," Burns said.

Burns, a former newspaper reporter, questions why public input seems to be so feared. Farmington City Manager Frank Lauhoff said the DDA board is referring all com-

ments now to Farmington City Attorney Tom Schultz. The Aug. 21 FOIA response, however, to Burns' Aug. 15 FOIA request were signed and came directly from both Bill Richards, assistant Farmington City Manager who has withdrawn from handling the hiring process, and Ron Oglesby, DDA president.

"With respect to your request for access for the names and applications of all candidates for director of the Farmington Downtown Development Authority, your request is denied pursuant to MCL 15.243(1)(a), because the information is of a personal nature where public disclosure of this information would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of the individual's privacy," the officials said.

"At this point in the selection process, no names of candidates have been forwarded to the DDA Board or any subcommittee thereof. No application materials have been forwarded to the DDA Board or any subcommittee thereof. No interviews have been conducted of any applicant for the position. No discussions of any application or applicant have

been conducted or held by the DDA Board or any subcommittee thereof.

"Under these circumstances, and until names and application materials are forwarded to the DDA Board or a subcommittee thereof and are either considered by such board or subcommittee or lead to an interview (underlined) with the applicant, it is believed that the release of the information would constitute an unwarranted invasion for the applicant's privacy."

The same analysis applied in denying Burns' request for "any other documents—memos included—generated or received by anyone in your office (city manager's office), the Farmington City Council, the City Clerk's office and or any member of the DDA Board regarding these candidates," officials said.

Also because there was no meeting of the DDA Board or subcommittee meeting in which discussion of any candidates occurred, no written minutes existed.

Farmington DDA Director Judy Downey, who will retire by the beginning of next year, has held her position for 10

years. The DDA director plans and coordinates activities in the downtown area. The position will pay \$47,000-\$53,000.

Since Richards withdrew from the process, the DDA board agreed that Downey should contact five search firms to continue the process. The DDA board will meet again at 8 a.m. Sept. 4 in the Farmington City Council conference room and this topic is on the agenda.

Some downtown business owners want the hiring process open to the public. Schultz said at this point candidates have the right to expect privacy. When there are final candidates, the number of whom the DDA board can specify, those names will be released to the public, he said.

Schultz who will be at next Wednesday's DDA meeting said the search firm selected must choose to look at all original 31 applications.

Schultz said he gets nervous when people say Richards "whittled down" the 31 candidates to 10 semifinalists. Richards was merely making a recommendation, Schultz said.

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