



THE WHEEL

News Publication - September 2025

sunrise photo by driver David Taylor

The Road Before Dawn

The streets are still dark when the engines start. By the time most people wake up, they've already been on the road for a few hours. Long before sunrise when the streets are still draped in silence and traffic lights blink for no one, the drivers move- taking passengers where they need to go. Many passengers are headed to early morning dialysis treatments or scheduled medical procedures. Their work begins in the dark, with cups of coffee, the low hum of engines and the quiet understanding that while others sleep, we have drivers out on the road keeping us moving.



We have many early morning drivers who ensure our passengers meet their early morning appointments. Among them is **Josh Spears**, who starts his day often by 3:30 a.m. He sits behind the wheel of the OATS Transit bus, his motions practiced, his mind already miles ahead. Josh

drives in the Warrensburg MO area, and each day can vary depending on the number of passengers he has. When Josh isn't driving a route, he helps train new hires or does ride alongs with fellow drivers. When asked what motivates him to start so early, he said he enjoys starting his day early so he can get off early to spend more time with family, run personal errands or just have time to relax. One of the biggest challenges of starting a driving shift in the dark is there are a lot more animals on the road to watch for. "I keep my head on a swivel to avoid them," quipped Josh. "I have

always been a morning person, but twenty years in the military definitely helped my ability to function that early," added Josh. The best part of early mornings on the road is a lot less traffic!

Driver **Michael Conard**

drives a long sheltered workshop route in the Monett MO area that usually starts well before 5 a.m. Michael has always been an early riser, but with that being said, its not easy to get up at 4 a.m. "After coffee, a prayer, and a devotional, I am off before the roosters are crowing," said



Michael. He drives a split shift, so he works early in the mornings and is done by 8:30 a.m., then hits the road again in the afternoon to take his passengers back home. "I have been driving buses for 15 years and really enjoy getting done early in the morning, then having the middle of the day off. This allows me time to get vital chores done, which frees up my weekends for some much-needed "wind therapy" riding my Goldwing," added Michael. As an experienced driver he shared some advice- "do not sleep in too much on the weekend because our internal clock was not designed to be reset every 5 days, so if you do this, you will find getting up Monday morning not nearly as difficult."

Northwest Missouri driver **Mertland "Mert" Hughes** has been driving for OATS Transit since 2014 and usually does medical and dialysis runs, behind the wheel by 5 a.m. Mert said he doesn't mind getting up early because he would rather get up and get the work done, no



chances are you have heard Mert singing the National Anthem. He also finds time to do Zumba or participate in local plays in the area, so he stays quite busy outside of OATS Transit. Mert likes driving in the early mornings because there is less traffic at that time of day, and the best part of his day is meeting and talking to people.



5am most days but said he has always been an early riser. After he gets his morning coffee, and watching the weather, he hits the roads to see the morning sunrise. "I think a lot of people miss out on seeing the beautiful sun rise in the morning, added Stan. He said "I see more deer and raccoons on the roads, and in the wintertime the early morning snow fall can be pretty." Stan loves the morning shift so he can spend his afternoons and evenings doing what he wants to do. Those things include gardening, going to the gun range, deer hunting with his grandson, and spending time with his new

matter what time that is. His morning routine is to get up one hour before his pull-out time, have a good breakfast and then start his day. "Being in the military we always got up early, and that hasn't left me yet, and sometimes I get up early just to exercise," said Mert. If you have ever been to a Mustang's baseball game in St. Joseph,

Stan Sunderland spent many years serving and protecting his community as a police officer, but now he's found a new way to give back- behind the wheel of a bus. He drives in the St. Joseph MO area providing medical and dialysis transportation, which he has done since 2014. He hits the road before

great-grandson Charlie. Now, with every safe ride, Stan continues his lifelong mission of serving the community- just in a different uniform.

David Taylor is a lifelong Hannibal resident, so he knows the area well. His days start very early as he provides dialysis transportation, starting before 4 a.m. David is motivated by the true friendships he has made while transporting his riders. "They aren't passengers, they are family!"

While most of us are sleeping, David gets up at 2:30 a.m., makes his coffee, fixes his lunch, and gets himself ready for any problems that may lie ahead. He finds it's a challenge to go to bed by 9 p.m. when some of his favorite television shows are just coming on. Because he hits the road so early, he sees things that many of us don't get to see. "I see some of the most beautiful, and also some gnarly, sunrises. I didn't know that God or nature could make so many different colors to fill the sky, and many leave me at a loss for words," added David. *Sunrise banner photo was taken by David Taylor.*



When we asked **Richard Casady** about his early morning work, he had so many great things to say. He started working for OATS Transit in 2017 and his days always start by 4:45 a.m. Richard lives in Bucklin MO area, and was even a Preacher there before he retired from that profession. He

knows his riders depend on him three days each week to get them to their life-saving dialysis treatments, which motivates him to do his best each and every day.

"I set two alarm clocks to wake me up at 3:40 a.m.- but I never hear the second one chime because my feet have already hit the floor" said Richard. A set routine is very important; he has things ready to go the night before, so he is prepared for the day ahead. "Breakfast is simple, and my microwave is my best friend because it makes my time as efficient as possible," added Richard. When his day is over, he still has time for a quick nap before heading out to watch his grandchildren two hours away at their various school activities. OATS Transit's mission of "safe, caring and reliable" is an extension of his ministry. He spends so much time with his riders that he has formed a special bond with them, creating an extended family. He said "going to bed at 9 p.m., in order to get up so early is an acquired habit, but knowing the boss lady (Beth) is an early riser too, helps knowing she is there for any issues that may arise. "Because I'm out so early, I also see all the others who work the graveyard shift- especially construction workers, truck drivers and nursing home workers. "We are everyday people making a difference, we just get started a lot earlier than most," added Richard.



LaDonna Johnson lives in Monett MO and drives a very long workshop route, so she hits the road by 5am every day. She started driving for OATS Transit in June 2015. LaDonna admits she has never been a morning person, so it was a difficult adjustment at first, but ten years later it's just routine. She loves being on the road before the

morning rush when things are calm, low key and a lot less traffic. LaDonna said she is surprised by the amount of wildlife that she sees at that time of day. "I have seen bobcats, fox, coyotes, night hawks, owls, deer, bats, turkeys, and so many other small critters on the roads", said LaDonna. Most of us miss those creatures unless we are out during the dark hours. She loves having a break midday, during her two shifts, so she can get personal errands done during that time. "The icing on the cake are my riders. They have a dedication to work that is difficult to find sometimes, and I love their different personalities and quirks," added LaDonna. She loves being a part of their morning to ensure they start their day off with a smile.

Driver **Charles "Chuck" Lear** lives in Hannibal MO and each day is different for him, but often on the road well before 4am taking people to medical appointments. Chuck is one of those drivers who will step up to help transport dialysis riders on holidays to ensure they don't miss their treatment. He has been driving for OATS



Transit for 16 years. Chuck said he will do whatever the job calls for. "I know for the people we pick up early, it's a life and death situation, so I am happy to do what I can to make their day easier" added Chuck.

The drivers mentioned in this story are just a small snippet of the 450 drivers we have on the road daily. Whether it be our drivers who are getting people to life saving medical appointments and treatments, ensuring people get to work on-time each day, taking riders to get groceries, or whatever other life needs they may have, our drivers are dedicated to making other people's lives better. And let's not forget the ninety office staff we have behind the scenes, ensuring the drivers' days run smoothly and our riders are satisfied with our service. By the time the last riders are dropped off and the buses are parked for the night, the streets are quiet again. The same drivers who started in the dark now end their day knowing they've carried more than just passengers- they've carried stories, struggles, and lives. As the engines rest, the work continues in spirit, ready to begin again before the world wakes.

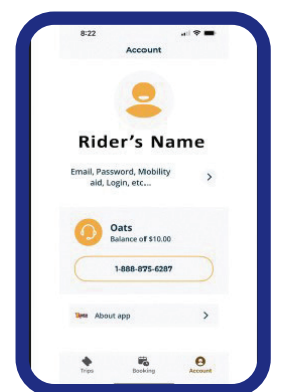
The OATS Transit App

Did you know we have an app for riders who pre-schedule their trips where you can:

- See upcoming trips;
- See balance account \$;
- Cancel scheduled trips.

See all the details on our website and ask your region office to set you up for the App.

<https://www.oatstransit.org/oatstransitapp>



2025 Operator of the Year Awards

Presented by the Missouri Public Transit Association at their annual conference this month.



Geralyn Pardo



Gerald Browning



Mike Born



Magdalena Villarreal Reed



Terry Burns



Forrest Williams

- Geralyn Pardo- Labadie MO, Mideast Region
- Jerry Browning, Nixa MO- Southwest Region
- Mike Born- Lees Summit MO, Midwest Region
- Magda Villareal Reed- Calhoun MO, Midwest Region
- Terry Burns- Braymer MO, Northwest Region
- Forrest Williams- Camdenton MO, Mid-MO Region

Tell us something good on Facebook.....



Jane La Chance Corpora · 12h

OATS transit has been transporting our daughter for decades. I've always been impressed by the kindness and professionalism of the drivers. I don't know what we'd do without OATS!

Beth Langley Recognized for Service by Legislator

Beth Langley of St. Joseph MO was honored this week with a plaque for being an Outstanding Missouri Citizen who has demonstrated exemplary service to the community. This special proclamation was offered by Missouri Senator Tony Luetkemeyer's office to recognize Beth for her 32 years of service in Northwest Missouri.



THE WHEEL

Please contact the editor if you have news stories or photos you would like to share with us. We would love to hear from you and use them in our next newsletter.

Jill Stedem, Editor

Email: jstedem@oatstransit.org

Phone: 573-443-4516

Social Media Sites:



facebook.com/oatstransit

instagram.com/official_oatstransit.org

linkedin.com/company/oatstransit

youtube.com/@OATSTransit

Bus schedules and fare information can be found at: www.oatstransit.org/schedules