

BUS STOP

Transit center's snack bar workers spend their days with tough guys, teen-agers and a lot of life



Volunteers Evelyn Travis and Mary Morrell work the snack bar at the Dimond Transit Center on a recent weekday.

By LINDA BILLINGTON
Daily News community editor

The boy was only 16, but he said he was ready to protect the older women staffing the Dimond Center bus terminal snack bar.

"You having any problem?" he asked.
"Cause I pack heat to school. If you got a problem, you just call me. I'll be in here every day."

Elaine Dahlgren never actually saw the gun, but she well remembers the boy. He dropped by shortly after the Retired Senior Volunteer Program started running the snack bar last February.

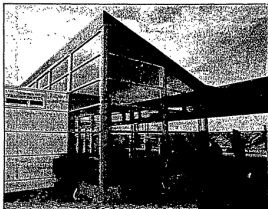
"We said, 'We don't expect any problems,'" she recalls. "But we told him we appreciated his offer."

It's become apparent since then that the senior citizens who sell candy and soft drinks and coffee at the Dimond Transit Center have a special relationship with some of their younger customers. They smile at and chat with the black-leather-jacket crowd, the shaved-nearly bald crew and the rambunctious party animals.

"They're kind of fun," says snack bar volunteer Phyllis Mendenhall, 66. "They're not rude or smart-alecky."

Adds 74-year-old Mary Morrell, "They haven't even used foul language — maybe because we're older."

For their part, the kids say the older folks don't hassle



them or look down on them.

"I just think they're really nice," says Tammie

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Gullford, 18, a senior at SAVE I who comes in almost every day. "They're really calm, not really strict. They're really laid-back. You know how most people monitor everything you do? They're really sweet."

Her SAVE I friends Kevin Avila and Sean Harry, both 17, agree.

"They take time to talk with other people," Kevin says.

This ongoing laboratory of intergenerational relations had a less-than-promising genesis, however. The glass-fronted bus stop building, on the west side of the Diamond Center, had had a snack bar vendor before, but that one pulled up in November 1990.

With no one around all day except people waiting to catch the bus — or people with no place better to go — the structure went to seed. Vandals shattered the windows and scattered trash over the tiled floor. Half-full bottles of booze were scattered around. The place smelled.

"We had people that were sleeping in there, defecating in there," says municipal transit director Dan Titus. "It was just a mess."

TAKEOVER

When RSVP — a program of Volunteers of America of Alaska Inc. — sought and received the contract late last year to operate the snack bar, the first step was a massive cleanup.

Dahlgren, RSVP's 43-year-old project director, got down and dirty with several of her seniors, scraping up unmentionable material from the floor, dumping liquor bottles and scraping frozen stuff off the windows. After the first couple of weeks, crews from Allvest Inc., started handling the heavy cleaning.

By then the volunteers, who range from their 60s well into their 90s, had moved in. They stocked the snack bar with candy bars and ice cream drumsticks, colas and gum and coffee. Because they worked free, the prices could be low — 25 cents for a cup of coffee, 50 cents for an ice cream bar — and RSVP could still make a profit.

During their six days of work in a.m. to 5:30 p.m. weekdays and 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays — the volunteers also sell People Mover route maps and schedules, bus tokens and badges for the municipality.

Amy Young, 33, who supervises the transit center program for RSVP, says the snack bar started out clearing about \$300 a month and was up to \$250 in July and August. The money goes back to RSVP to reimburse the volunteers for their car mileage.

SKEPTICISM MELTS

At first, Dahlgren admits, she was skeptical about the volunteers' ability to handle some of their more obstreperous customers.

"Seniors sometimes have a real fear of teen-agers, and that's what comes in a lot," she says. "There's just that gap that you have to bridge somehow. I wasn't sure we could do it."

There's no question that the gap has been bridged. The volunteers talk about how people tend to take care of the center now, how they mostly drop their trash in the litter cans. No windows had been broken since the seniors took over.

They talk about their regulars: the young woman with the sweet tooth who loads up on sugar and popcorn. The kids who live at Hope Cottages, and the Service High School students who change buses here. And the apparently homeless man with decrepit clothes

"I usually give them a second look if they look strange. I try not to look vulnerable. But I'm not afraid."

—Mary Morrell

and a sore on the top of his head.

TROUBLED RIDERS

Some of the 20 volunteers have talked to kids who stay away from home because they're being sexually assaulted there. They have encouraged the youngsters to report the abuse. They've talked to runaways, kids who have been 80'ed from the mall because they were too wild. They've talked to a boy from McLaughlin Youth Center who was out on work release. He was in McLaughlin, he told them, for burglarizing people's house when they were at work.

But if you ask many of the volunteers about things like this, they won't discuss them. They're just protective of the kids, Dahlgren says.

Youngsters like these troubled ones are the reason why the snack bar also carries free brochures on AIDS, family planning and child care. And why, behind the counter, there are phone numbers of professionals who can help.

GOING STRAIGHT

This summer, Darlene Collins, 64, befriended a boy who was supposed to be going to summer school. Instead, he'd dump his books and head downtown.

Collins, good-naturedly tried to straighten him out. "Look," she told him, "you're just going to mess around all day long. School's just for two or three hours, and then you'll have the whole day." Finally, he said, "Well, OK," and got on the bus — ostensibly for school. Collins doesn't know whether he actually ended

up there.

EXPERIENCE COUNTS

These volunteers have compiled lifetimes of experience in dealing with people. Evelyn Travis, 66, used to work in an airline flight kitchen. Phyllis Mendenhall is a retired bookkeeper, but she also spent five years working in a fast-food restaurant. Evelyn Hull spent much of her 71 years waiting tables; Darlene Collins managed a store.

Oh, there are problems now and then. Early on, someone broke in behind the counter at night and stole a bunch of candy. The RSVP volunteers once had to call mall security to eject three argumentative drunks. A few days ago, a volunteer crossing the parking lot had a pin ripped off her smock

by a teen-ager. Someone recently scribbled graffiti across the front of the snack bar.

Last week Mary Morrell and her transit center partner, Evelyll Travis, had a weird one shortly after they opened up. Two husky guys wandered in, looking like the last dregs of a hard time. "They looked like they'd been, beaten up," Morrell says.

One ordered a Coke. But when Morrell went to hand it over he said he didn't have the 85 cents. He looked rough and strange, but Morrell wasn't about to let him have the drink for nothing. She balked. He told her he wouldn't have the money until he could make a phone call. He used the pay phone next to the snack bar, then went outside for a while. When he came back, he pulled out a big roll of bills and paid for the drink.

SECOND LOOK

"I'm not afraid," Morrell says. "I usually give them a second look if they look strange. I try not to look

vulnerable. But I'm not afraid."

But the biggest problem, Young says, is that the center has no bathroom. A volunteer who's working alone has to climb up on the counter and roll down the heavy metal shutter to close the snack bar, then cross the parking lot to use the mall's facilities.

The volunteers get a lot of praise for their work at the center.

"They have just made it a delight," says Dan Titus. "When you talk to some of the riders, they will comment on how nice it is to have them there."

Much of the acclaim comes from a group that uses the snack bar several times a day: the People Mover drivers, who stop in to enjoy a cup of coffee and a little banter with the seniors.

"You always get a smiley face when you walk in here," says Rees Jackson, 41. Adds a grinning Chuck Arnold, 50, "They're all nice. For not getting paid, they're in a real good mood."



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