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Children line up in front of the Western Avenue Church of Christ's blue "Mickey Mouse" bus as it prepares to depart for church camp. Many route-riders from Liberal's northeast side attended regular services as well as summer camp with the church's members. Courtesy photo

## **Western Avenue Church of Christ bus ministry riders remember with gratitude**

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

When Jennifer Ward of Irving, Texas, woke up Nov. 24, she was in a church kind of mood. As she dressed and got in the car to drive to Sunday school, it struck her that her actions that morning might be very different if it wasn't for a woman named Jean Hergert.

With her friend Wilma Moore and a group of workers from the Western Ave. Church of Christ that started a bus ministry in Liberal in the mid-1970s, Hergert reached out to children from

Liberal's north-east neighborhood for nearly two decades. She taught them songs, told them Bible stories, invited them to Sunday dinner at her house. And she is remembered with gratitude and affection.



“You just don’t find people like that,” Ward said, thinking back on her childhood in Liberal. “Mrs. Hergert treated us with kindness from her heart, never treated us mean. She didn’t have to do that, but I thank God that she did. I thank God for her.”

Ward isn’t the only one. When she mentioned “Miz Hergert” in a Facebook post, Ward’s page was flooded with comments from fellow bus-riders.

“Those wonderful folks showed all of us what grace is about,” posted Tolbert Livingston of Emporia. “They did not care that there were already a few churches in northeast Liberal. They simply wanted to carry out the love mission that God put in their hearts for us. I remember being hugged, held, and the smell of Play Doh! They were awesome! True saints!”

“Those ladies had such an impact on our lives,” wrote Mark Ward of Dallas. “I’m sure without them picking us up and teaching us the word of God we would have had totally different lives and surely not for the better.”

Another bus regular, Tavian Taylor Harris, Arlington, Texas, joined in to say that the church bus “was the only bus I did not fight on. That bus showed me what real outreach really is. They went any- and everywhere to pick us up. I am grateful.”

“That just makes my heart feel good,” said Hergert, 75, who looks back on her bus-ministry

days with a mixture of affection and exasperation. “When I see those kids around town, at Walmart or out at Seward County Community College, they come up to me and hug me, and tell me they had so much fun. It’s a joy when I see them. But it wasn’t all roses. It was not,” she said as she and Moore pored over a shoebox full of snapshots.



“That’s right,” Moore recalled. “There were many times when you got home from the bus ministry and you thought, ‘I am never gonna do this again,’ but then you’d think, ‘God is going to help us,’ and you’d pray and you’d get back out there again.”

Moore’s husband, Lawrence, drove the bus, Hergert led the children in singing and told them stories along the way, and Moore “was the disciplinarian and the cookie lady,” she said with a laugh. “And we were just one of the three buses.” Many others helped with the ministry, including former Liberal residents Farice and Jeanie Bruce, and Jay and Nickie Hauser.

Western Avenue Church of Christ conceived the idea of starting a bus ministry after members attended a workshop in Tulsa, Okla.

“It was a big deal all around the country, and we decided to start one here,” Hergert said. At that time, the Western Ave. church included an elder, Jimmy Martinez, who advocated strongly for cross-cultural outreach.

“He liked to joke and say, ‘We thought we should add a little color to our church,’” Hergert recalled. “And we sure did.”

Through a “buy a seat” campaign, the church raised funds to purchase three used school buses. Members sanded the boxy vehicles and repainted them — two white and one blue bus,

each renamed with a cartoon character: Road Runner, The Snoopy Bus, and Mickey Mouse.



“I would chase the Mickey Mouse bus down,” reminisced Livingston. “I would get upset if I missed it.”

His sense of urgency was shared by many others.

“There would be kids running after it,” said Mark Ward. “They did not want to miss the church bus.”

Debra (Smith) Wilburn rode the blue bus, from the time she was eight until she became a teenager. She said its reliability was a rare and reassuring presence throughout her childhood.

“We were a hot mess sometimes,” she said with a laugh, “but there was always stability. They were constant. When the weather was bad, they still came to get us. Even if we got out of line — which was a lot — they still came. It wasn’t about, ‘You acted up and now I’m not going to do this anymore.’”

Moore and Hergert remember navigating the tricky waters of parent-child relationships.

“I had one girl who used a bad word on the bus, and I told her, ‘You may be allowed to say that at your house, but you’re not going to say it on this bus,’” Hergert said. “I told her I’d have to

come talk with her mother, and she looked at me and said, 'She's gonna cut your heart out!'" Yet when Hergert knocked on the door, things went smoothly.

"I think people knew we really cared," said Moore.

That was the case at Jennifer Ward's house.

"My momma would say, 'you know you're not getting up on that bus to act up,' and I knew if I did, I was gonna get a whuppin. The way we were raised, you didn't disrespect your elders, no matter what color they were. You did not want Mrs. Hergert to have to come to your house," she said.

Today, Ward marvels at the commitment the bus ladies displayed.

"You don't just knock on people's doors," she said. "People are crazy now. It was so different back then, but I'm not sure I would have been brave enough to say to someone, 'Your kid was cussing on the bus, and that's not OK.'"

As the individual commitment of the bus workers took hold, the ministry grew — and so did Western Avenue Church of Christ.

"We had practically the whole congregation helping out," said Moore. "We set up a benevolent room with clothing to share with the children."

The church handed out Christmas gifts and treat bags, organized skating parties and sponsored children who wanted to attend church camp.

“Eventually, the bus ministry grew so that it involved every aspect of our church,” said Hergert, “and it was a blessing to all of us. We brought the children to Sunday School and church, and different members would have the kids sit with them, and then invite them home for dinner.”

For Wilburn, the experience of attending church every week was a novel one, and it changed the trajectory of her life.

“My parents weren’t churchgoing people,” she said. “Every weekend was a three-day weekend. Shoot, had Mrs. Hergert and Mrs. Bruce not introduced me to church, I would not have a clue. Going to church would not be an experience I valued. But it is. I attend church, I’ve brought my two sons up in church, because of what those ladies instilled in us — love, trust, honesty. It made a difference to know that there was something better.”

Jennifer Ward said she appreciated the evenhanded approach the bus ladies employed.

“They always treated us like one of their own. There was all different races on that bus, and they expected us to get along. You might be fighting with somebody at school or in your neighborhood, but you’d get on that bus and you’d forget all about it. We’d have our little sacks with our candy and fruit. We got off the bus singing our little church hymns. We were happy.”

“God bless ’em for doing it,” said Mark Ward. “We were a rowdy bunch of kids. Loud. Some of us were troublemakers. But those ladies knew exactly how to channel all that energy, and I know I’m a better adult because of it.”

Wilburn said the most profound lesson she took away from the bus ministry was, “Don’t give up on people so easily. Even though we gave them every reason to not want to do it, they still came back. We got a fresh start every time. They really invested in the kids, and you could feel it wasn’t fake.”

Now raising families of their own, the former bus kids have adopted many of the principles they

learned from Hergert, Moore, and the rest of the team. Most of them attend church regularly, and take their own children along. Several lead Bible studies or teach children's classes. Jennifer Ward is teaching her grandchildren the bus-riding songs that helped her memorize the books of the Bible.

"That was the whole object, of course," said Hergert. "I'm so proud of the ones that have really gone on to do good things." Mary Washington, pastor of Heaven's Open Gates church in Liberal, is just one of many.

When former bus rider Edwin Baker returned to Liberal for a visit, "he brought his wife and kids to church," said Hergert. She paused, and said, "He told people I was his extra mom."

The affection between bus workers and bus riders remains strong, as shown in the string of comments on Jennifer Ward's Facebook page:

"An awesome lady," wrote Tonya King. "She helped instill church in us. Thank God for her."

"Because of those ladies, I was able to go and learn about God," said Donna Wilburn.

"I loved going with her, because she was so sweet," said Alexandria Webb. "Mrs. Hergert and the ladies were a blessing in so many of our lives."

"I have much love and respect for that God-loving woman," wrote J. Jackson Jr. "Still sweet, loving, caring and kind-hearted."

What the bus ladies did, said Jennifer Ward, can't be overstated.

"It didn't just happen for one year, no," she said. "That went on for years and years and years so

that you had two generations getting the blessing. When I think of it, it just amazes me. They didn't have to do that. But they did it. They were working for God."

One small result of their efforts? When the pastor cited a scripture reference on Sunday morning, Jennifer Ward paged through her Bible and found it effortlessly.

"If it hadn't been for Mrs. Hergert," she said, "I wouldn't know."

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