

## THE DAILY SPECIAL



JENELLE SCHNEIDER/VANCOUVER SUN

Drew Jurjaks (left), a guideway service person for SkyTrain and Andy Schmuland, a guideway technician, work on the line in Burnaby after the trains are off the tracks for the night.

# Keeping transit on track after dark

Bus drivers and SkyTrain maintenance crews ensure the system runs smoothly in the wee hours

BY DAVID KARP  
VANCOUVER SUN

A scruffy middle-aged man carrying a Safeway bag filled with empty beer cans and a bulging garbage bag steps onto the bus. He squints as he puffs on his cigarette.

"Cigarette, please," says bus driver Bubba Saini, with a patient but assertive tone of voice. "Oh, sorry," the man replies, his apology genuine. He tosses his cigarette out the front door of the bus.

The man fumbles through his pockets for 20 or 30 seconds until he finds his bus pass, showing it to Saini. He waddles to a seat just behind Saini, putting another cigarette in his mouth but not lighting it.

It would have been more comfortable for Saini if the transit security guard was still on board, but he had got off the bus minutes earlier when he noticed a man passed out on the sidewalk.

But the bus driver is not fazed. It's all part of a normal night at the office for Saini, who has been driving buses for 10 years, often at night.

Saini, a smiling 49-year-old with a small black moustache, soul patch, shaved head and glasses, has seen almost everything driving at night. These days, he drives the No. 106 route from Metrotown to the New Westminster SkyTrain station, his shift starting at 6:45 p.m. and wrapping up around 3:45 in the morning.

"We've had people taking leaks at the back of the bus," he says. "I've seen kids come on and dump their Slurpees all over the seats. Graffiti on the windows — that's common."

"We get a lot of sleepers at night. They come from the bars and fall asleep at the back of the bus. So we have to call security to come and wake them up," he says. "It happens a lot on the night buses. Not so much during the daytime."

Recently, Saini had to call the police after a passenger who missed the bus caught a cab, followed Saini's bus to a SkyTrain station, and pounded on the doors and windows trying to break in to exact revenge on the driver who had passed him by.

But Saini takes it with a grain of salt.

"I've never had any problems in my 10 years on the job," he says. "No one has spit on me. Nobody has hit me. Sure, I'll call the cops now and then, but no fights or anything big."

Perhaps that's because of Saini's sturdy frame. More likely, it's because he has developed a deep understanding of people. He earned a bachelor's degree in psychology in India as well as a master's in defence studies.

"Most of the passengers are nice. You talk to them and meet



JENELLE SCHNEIDER/VANCOUVER SUN

Bubba Saini works the night shift driving the No. 106 bus between Metrotown and New Westminister. The night shift allows him to care for his daughter at home during the day while his wife works.

people every day," Saini says. "But in this job, sometimes it's better not to talk to someone. I can tell by their face. My education in psychology helps me, too. You want to try to be nice with everyone, but you can tell by the face."

Saini moved to Winnipeg from India in 1986. With his university education, he had aspirations to become an RCMP officer, but couldn't get hired because he wasn't a citizen at the time.

Saini's friend found him a job as a truck driver. He spent six years in Winnipeg and three in Toronto before landing in Vancouver, where he has been driving buses for the last 10 years.

## The choice to work nights

Driving buses keeps Saini closer to home than trucking did, which is important now that he has a young family.

"It's my choice to work nights right now," he says. "I have a small child at home — 3½ right now. You can't leave her with a babysitter. It's too expensive."

Working the night shift allows Saini to care for his daughter, Sabiha, while his wife works at a bank during the day. Saini's wife takes over the child-care duties once Saini leaves for work.

The lifestyle has its ups and downs. After Saini's shift ends at 3:45 a.m., he heads home and is usually in bed by 5:30. He wakes up whenever his daughter does.

"My little one sleeps to 11 o'clock, sometimes 1," he says. Saini drops Sabiha off at her after-school preschool, often returning home afterwards for a quick nap before picking her up. That doesn't leave much time to see his wife. "She comes home at 6 p.m. and I'm ready to go [to work]. So it's tough," he says. "It would be nice to spend more time with the family."

However, one of the perks of

working nights is that Saini gets to work slightly longer shifts in exchange for four-day work weeks. Currently, he has Monday through Wednesday off.

"I can choose my days off," he says. "It's a good part of the job. No other job has this flexibility."

Driving a bus at night has its perks, Saini maintains. You don't have to contend with rush-hour traffic. Sometimes, the bus is empty.

It's 12:30 a.m., and the evening crowd has cleared out. Only two passengers remain on the bus. "It's nice and quiet now. Peaceful," Saini says.

Meanwhile, high above Saini's Metrotown bus loop, Andy Schmuland and Drew Jurjaks are dealing with a problem. One of the switches on the SkyTrain tracks isn't working as well as it could.

Schmuland is a guideway technician for B.C. Rapid Transit Co., which operates and maintains the Expo and Millennium lines. Jurjaks is a guideway service person. The pair is part of a team of workers who roam the tracks in the middle of the night to ensure that trains run smoothly during the day.

Their shift starts at 8 p.m., but

Schmuland and Jurjaks's work really gets going around 1 a.m., after SkyTrain stops running for the night.

"It's when everything happens," Jurjaks says. "Last night there was about 30 people out here, and probably six different pieces of equipment."

Schmuland and Jurjaks inspect track switches along the SkyTrain line, which can be shifted to move trains from one set of tracks to another. There are roughly 90 switches on the two lines. Each one needs to be inspected and oiled every two weeks, with more thorough quarterly and annual inspections for each switch.

On this night, Schmuland and Jurjaks have discovered an issue with one of the switches: Its connection pin is excessively worn. The connection pin moves the switch's inner rail, allowing the train to change from one track to an adjacent track. If the switch's movable inner rail is separated too far from the outer rail, debris could get caught in the tracks, preventing the switch from locking into place.

"Basically, we want zero gap between the point rail [the inner rails] and the stock rail [the out-

er rails]," Schmuland says. "Any kind of minor adjustments like this, it's best to get at them right away so they don't get any worse. All it takes is for a piece of paper to get stuck in it."

Schmuland doesn't finish his thought.

"Say [the point rail] was in the position it's in now and a train came along," says Jurjaks. "It could derail the train. You need [the point rail] to be all the way over."

Schmuland and Jurjaks, decked out in royal-blue jump suits, travel along the SkyTrain tracks in a bumpy little train car called a speeder. Although the trains run on electricity, the speeder runs on diesel so the power rails that provide 600 volts to SkyTrain cars can be shut off for the safety of the workers.

The speeder, with bright spotlights illuminating its path, is one of the few sources of activity in the suburbs after the trains stop. Some condos near SkyTrain stations still have lights on, but the streets below are strangely quiet.

## Peace, quiet and toilets

A few people are still working. The speeder passes above the set of *Smallville* near Royal Oak Station, where a crew is hard at work filming around 1 a.m. And back at the SkyTrain depot near Edmonds Station, cleaners are busy in a lemon-scented garage, wiping down and vacuuming trains so they are clean for morning commuters. Most Vancouverites are fast asleep, oblivious to the hustle and bustle on the tracks.

"It's kind of funny how many people don't look up at the SkyTrain at night. They just assume the trains are off the tracks and nothing is happening," says Jurjaks. "We have caught people stealing stuff or vandalizing. You just kind of go, 'Hello,' and they will look up, not thinking that someone is watching."

People occasionally throw items onto the SkyTrain tracks, Schmuland adds. Last year, maintenance crews found a toilet discarded on the tracks.

"That's what we are here for," Schmuland says.

Nights offer SkyTrain workers some calmness and solitude.

"It's nice to work at nights because you don't have the crowds. It's not as hectic," says Schmuland. "You go out, you do your stuff, you come back. During the day, you have people doing inspections, but you have to wait for clearances between trains."

Still, the maintenance crews work year-round, even through cold winter nights. "Wintertime is pretty bad," says Schmuland. "We are out in the elements every night. There is somebody out here 365 days a year, so we do run into quite a bit of rain."

## THE NIGHT SHIFT

While most of us are sound asleep, dedicated professionals staff essential jobs throughout the night. In this three-part series, we take you inside three vital operations.

- **TODAY:** The transit workers who keep the system running when the city sleeps.
- **THURSDAY:** The night shift community workers at RainCity Housing's Triage Shelter in the Downtown Eastside
- **FRIDAY:** The veterinarians who work through the night to take care of sick and injured animals.

The night shift allows crews to complete important maintenance work that can't be done during the day with trains on the tracks. But night work is not always easy on the workers.

"No matter how much you think you've got your body adjusted, you will never adjust to night shifts," says Jurjaks. "Your body is meant to sleep when the moon is up and be awake when the sun is up."

But like Saini, Jurjaks finds the night shift is the only way for him and his day-shifting wife to avoid costly child-care expenses for their son, who is entering Grade 4 in the fall.

"There are pros and cons. Some parents don't get to be as active in their kids' lives," Jurjaks says. "Yeah, it's tough for me because I may not be able to sleep that much that day, but I go on all his field trips."

For Schmuland, 38 and single, the night shift was the only one available when he got promoted from service person to guideway technician. "I had no choice, really. I'm a junior technician, and it's one of the last slots. The night shift is just an unfortunate circumstance of being junior."

B.C. Rapid Transit Co. provides its night employees with courses on sleep management, with employees advised to go to sleep as soon as they get home from work. But it's not always easy or practical.

"Most mornings I don't get to bed right away. I'm probably up until 9 a.m.," says Schmuland. "This morning I was up to 11 a.m. ... It was so hot in my place that I couldn't really sleep right away."

Ultimately, Jurjaks says, you can choose to see the glass half full or half empty.

"It's a good job, and we do a lot of good things that we need to do to keep the track safe. But we have to do it all at night."

dkarp@vancouvernews.com



TO SEE A PHOTO GALLERY GO TO VANCOUVERSUN.COM