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Determined bus rider conquers obstacles

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Every now and then, it's a good idea to look at everyday life through someone else's eyes — especially if the view's rather different from your own.

Getting There took the opportunity this week to ride the local bus system with a young Monsey woman who is a student in human services at Rockland Community College.

Rachel Bodek, 20, also is learning something that most of us take for granted: how to get around.

Bodek has retinitis pigmentosa, a vision impairment that began making it hard for her to see starting when she was about 13.

"My doctor says what I can see is like looking at a doughnut. I can see the doughnut, but not the hole or what's outside the doughnut," Bodek said Monday morning as she trudged up a side street off Route 59 to catch the bus to her 10 a.m. biology class. "My vision seems to be stable. On my most recent visit, the doctor said it wasn't getting worse."

So the plucky, recently married woman leaves her home a few days a week to catch a bus and go about her business.

Thanks to a trainer like Jayne Malkin from the Association for the Visually Impaired in Spring Valley, Bodek is extending her reach on the county's public transit circuit, making it a little easier every day to get where she needs to go.

Malkin, a 25-year veteran, annually trains about 100 people who don't see well to do various daily functions. She said only about 15 take public transportation regularly.

"Public transportation is the highest level of mobility for someone who is visually impaired," Malkin

On the Web

For more information regarding visual impairment and the agencies available to help, log onto these Web sites

The New York State Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped

<http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/cbvh>

New York Low Vision Centers, including the Association for the Visually Impaired, in Spring Valley.

http://www.macular.org/lowvis/low_ny.html

AVI runs a support group for those with limited vision, held the first and third Thursday of each month.

said. "I work with a lot of elderly people who aren't comfortable taking buses. You have to be physically fit and determined, able to understand schedules and willing to walk a little."

Bodek has already committed her TOR bus schedule to memory, so she doesn't need to be able to see any fine print on the schedules most commuters use. But she still has plenty to overcome.

There's the quarter-mile walk from her home to Route 59, come sun or the cold rain that Monday brought.

That's nothing compared to getting across the busy state highway, which can be intimidating even for those with 20/20 eyesight.

She walks against traffic on the way to Route 59, like she's supposed to, then walks to the intersection and listens as well as watches for the traffic.

"I can see enough to get around without a cane," Bodek said. "But I can see signs only if the letters are really big."

Cars and trucks are another story.

She listens for traffic coming off Remsen Avenue and across Route 59, letting her know she's got the light. She uses the vision she has to look for any vehicle coming and then scampers across the road.

Then she stands near the driveway to a gas station and holds up a small placard with big letters that say simply "BUS." The Transport of Rockland drivers have been trained to recognize the needs of disabled riders, and spotting the placard is part of the deal. Bodek needs the sign because she can't really see the bus coming enough in advance to flag it down.

She braves the weather like the rest of the riders, but she also has to deal with trying to hear and feel the coming bus rather than see it.

"I probably take too many risks," she said. "But I'd rather take risks than stay home."

Taking risks is how she learned she could handle public transportation.

Last year, she got a ride to a meeting at the Lighthouse, a center for the vision-impaired in White Plains, and decided to try getting home by herself.

"Somebody said there were buses to Rockland," Bodek said. "I got to the White Plains bus station, and I think a driver pointed to where I was supposed to wait, but I couldn't see where he was pointing."

She used the special patience she's learned in the last seven years and waited for another bus to ask a driver exactly what the correct waiting spot was labeled.

"It just happened I got home," she said with a chuckle. "It was my first time, and I realized I needed training, so I got in touch with the Association for the Visually Impaired."

She and Malkin started small, taking a trip to Finkelstein Library in Spring Valley and back to

Bodek's home. After about eight months, including trips to the Nanuet Mall and other places, she now solos with no trouble.

She's not averse to grabbing rides with her husband, Yoel, or members of her family, when they're available, but she believes so much in taking public transit that she's talked her older sister into taking the bus for family shopping trips.

"She's one of our success stories," says Malkin.
