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North Side taxi driver is a jack of many trades

By [Mike Wereschagin](#)
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Monday, February 18, 2008

An ambassador, psychologist, historian, tour guide, baggage handler and chauffeur climbed into the driver's seat of the Ford Windstar.

It would have been crowded if they weren't all John Morrison.

"People think we should be Superman," said Morrison, 46, a taxi driver with Yellow Cab, the North Side taxicab division of the Pittsburgh Transportation Group.

Morrison of Oakland took the three-day training course to become a cab driver as a way to bring in some money for him and his wife while he looked for steady work. Six years later, he doesn't want to look anywhere else, choosing instead to work the job his stepfather worked for 23 years.

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John Morrison
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"This is the most important job in the world if you've got to get somewhere," Morrison said. On any given day, he might rush a best man to a wedding or take a pregnant woman to a doctor's appointment. "At the end of the day, you feel like you've done something."

Like the 650 or so other drivers at Yellow Cab, the city's dominant company, Morrison is an independent contractor who leases his taxi from Yellow Cab. Leasing agreements run from 10 hours to 24 hours, and Morrison chooses to keep his cab with him at all times. A typical shift runs from 10 hours to 12 hours, he said.

Morrison declined to say how much he makes in a typical day, but says drivers start each day with an income goal and try to work until they've made it.

"You can only work so many hours before your body says, 'Sleep,'" said Morrison, adding that he's never gotten a ticket or had an accident.

Steady customers -- those who call his cell phone rather than the main dispatch number -- provide a base of predictable income. Morrison said he hopes eventually to have 30 percent of his customers in this category.

"Most of them are going to the airport," which costs about \$35, Morrison said. A trip in Morrison's cab doesn't automatically end with the customer getting his personal number, though. It's like starting a friendship. "I choose who I want as a steady customer."

Cab drivers have divided the region into about 50 sectors and find their way around the few unfamiliar areas by memorizing landmarks and asking for directions from those spots. Global positioning systems remove even more guesswork, and Morrison likened their use to "an accountant ... using a calculator."

By the time customers are picked up, the cab driver has an impression of them based on where they live, where they're going, the time of day and their gender.

Stories, photos and videos from Trib's weekly series on Monday that spotlights people whose work goes unnoticed or underappreciated.

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"You (make assumptions) about the personality of the person before they get in your car," Morrison said. If it's a late-night call from the Strip District, for instance, a cabbie should expect some drunkenness. "That's why I don't work at night."

Morrison said it takes him about 10 seconds to determine if the passenger wants to converse. If not, jazz streams from the satellite radio he bought. Some customers use the back seat as a sort of confessional, feeling comfortable sharing secrets with a stranger because they see only the back of his head, Morrison said.

"One woman told me she was dating four boyfriends," Morrison said. "She wouldn't tell me that (face to face). When people trust you with their life, they trust you with all of their life for that time."

Visitors picked up at the airport often meet a taxi driver before anyone else -- something the late Mayor Bob O'Connor realized before the 2006 Major League Baseball All-Star Game. He met with taxi drivers and asked them to be Pittsburgh's ambassadors.

"I want to be an ambassador for the city," Morrison said. He then rattled off facts about the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and local trivia, such as part of the first World Series being played here. "That's important to people. They want to know where they are. They want to know where to go shopping."

Mike Wereschagin can be reached at mwereschagin@tribweb.com or 412-320-7900.

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