

Lemoore bus driver
Debbie Oliveira
minds the road.



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Rural drivers key link between home and school

Buses in small Central Valley community carry generations of kids

In the heart of the San Joaquin Valley, midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, sits Lemoore, a town of 22,000. It is home to dairy and turkey farms, the Naval Air Station and the Santa Rosa Rancheria Reservation for Tachi Yokut Indians.

In this agricultural region, 25 school bus drivers, represented by the 110-member Lemoore Federation of Classified Employees take about 2300 children to and from 16 elementary and high schools among four districts.

In close-knit rural towns like Lemoore, it is not uncommon for a long-term driver to transport the children of children whom they've had on their routes. Nor is it unheard of for a driver to have grown up in the same community.

Phyllis Duncil graduated from Lemoore High in 1962 and retired last July after 26 years of driving Lemoore children. A substitute with routes for five schools, Duncil has driven all over the region and knows many families.

"We start driving the kids when they're in kindergarten and know them well by the time they're in high school. We drive their brothers and sisters. And drivers like me...we took their mothers to school."

Leatha Petruzzi, who's been driving Lemoore children to school for 10 years, concurs. "When the kids get to know you, you're like part of their family," she says. "When you drive the same kids for five to six



Alex Dobrovolsky holds the giant get well card signed by all the students who ride on his bus. It took a week for the students to sign the card.

years, you see the difference you make. When I lose a route, the kids get upset," adds Petruzzi, also the vice president of Local 4870. Drivers bid for their routes each year and are sometimes unable to keep their same student passengers.

Petruzzi believes that "out in the country" where houses are far apart, school buses provide children with an important socializing outlet. "The kids are working hard at school, but on the bus, they get to visit. They have time to bond," she says.

Quite often, except for their families, bus drivers are the first and last people these kids see each day. "Every morning, first thing I say is 'good morning' with a smile... and, in the afternoon, 'have a good night, see you

in the morning.'"

Caring about the kids and their families is what it's about for 52-year-old Alex Dobrovolsky who's been driving for

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Lemoore for the last seven years and is president of Local 4870. A Special Olympics coach, and the father of a special needs child, Dobrovolsky also runs a group home for developmentally disabled young adults. He started driving a Lemoore school bus seven years ago after suffering an accident while working as a heavy equipment mechanic.

Having a special needs child gave him the "bearings, knowledge, and patience to deal with kids," he says. A friend in his bowling league who was a Lemoore school bus driver at the time invited him to try driving and he hasn't looked back.

"I love 'my kids' and I love making them happy. I treat them as if they're my own and respect them as I want them to respect

me," he says of the approximately 150 to 200 kids he buses each day on morning and afternoon routes, most of whom are Hispanic or come from the reservation. He prepares small gifts for them for the holidays, making sure to have enough for the children to bring home to their siblings, "not candy-type treats, but little toys, like puzzles."

Yet, he says, he's stern and doesn't let them get away with mischief on the bus. "I've never had a control problem. Kids know they can't get anything over on me. I'm a big guy and won't take a lot of bull. I tell them that flat out."

Dobrovolsky considers himself more than a bus driver. "On the bus, I am also a counselor and parent." He often talks with teachers to see how he can do what's best for the children. Dobrovolsky frequently finds small tasks for students who are being picked on, or are having other problems, so he can keep

MINDY PINES

From the
COUNCIL
of Classified Employees

Fight the Big Lie

Recently, the board of education of the Los Angeles Unified District lived up to its responsibility as an employer and increased the hours of employment for 2,352 cafeteria workers. The increase from three hours per day to four hours per day made these workers eligible for full health care benefits.



This significant decision will improve the lives of many families, lives very deserving of such a change. Yet all Californians need the security of full health coverage and the opportunity to have the finest health care for little or no cost.

Everyone is promising to do something about health care these days. The promises of universal health insurance from the current presidential campaigners will eventually collide with the law of the Big Lie. As in Los Angeles, the opponents of providing full health care benefits to more workers will claim "There is no money. I'm so sorry, there just isn't any money."

The war in Iraq has used up much federal money, and national security interests have continued to plummet. The official line is that the situation in Iraq is improving, but no resolution is in sight.

The guilt is back home where no one admits that our soldiers are on the ground to secure Iraq's oil reserves for the petroleum companies that control the United States.

If there is money to go to war, and sustain human injuries requiring health care for the benefit of the oil companies associated with the Bush Administration, then surely there was always enough money to provide everyone in the United States the best in health care. Fight the Big Lie.

How is it that the federal budget could accommodate tax cuts for the wealthy while not being able to afford a national health care solution? And it is left to us to fight the Big Lie.

Robert Chacanaca
President, Council of
Classified Employees

— Mindy Pines

October 19–20

Don't miss the Classified Conference

Classified employees and paraprofessionals can register now to attend the CFT Classified Conference to be held Oct. 19-20 at the Holiday Inn by the Bay in San Diego.

The conference kicks off on Friday, Oct. 19 at noon, with a first-time participants orientation shortly before at 11:15 a.m. Guest speakers will include officers of the CFT and state Assembly candidate Marty Block, who is running for a seat in the 78th District.

Workshops will covers topics such as Your Personal Safety at Work, Career Ladders, Your Rights on the Job, Understanding Workers' Compensation, Personnel Commissions and Merit Systems, and Politics and Labor.

► The conference fee is \$75. To learn more, call the CFT Bay Area Office at (510) 523-5238 or email rosannact@aol.com.