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# On NYC's Paratransit, Fighting for Safety, Respect, and Human Dignity

*An incident on lawyer Britney Wilson's ride home from work exposes her vulnerabilities as a Black disabled woman.*



*Illustration by Kjell Reigstad, Photo by Chris Sampson (via Flickr)*

*Britney Wilson | Longreads | September 2017 | 18 minutes (4,410 words)*

He pulled up on the wrong side of the street fifteen minutes late for my pick-up time. I was sitting outside, in front of the New York City office building where I work, in a chair that the security guards at my job have set aside for me. They bring it outside when I come downstairs in the evening and take it back inside whenever I get picked up, so I don't have to stand while I wait anymore. I was on the left side of the street; he pulled up on the right. I stood when I saw him, and taking a few steps closer to the tide of people rippling endlessly down the sidewalk that early evening, I waved one of my crutches in the air trying to get his attention. He looked up and down the street. I wasn't sure if he'd seen me.

“Excuse me,” I said, taking a few more quick half steps forward, trying to catch the attention of a passer-by, “do you see that **Access-a-Ride** across the street?”

“The what?” the passer-by asked.

“The Access-a-Ride,” I repeated. “That little blue and white bus across the street.” I pointed my crutch in its direction, and his gaze followed its path.

“Oh,” he said. But just as I was about to request the man’s assistance, I saw that the driver had finally spotted me. He put his hand up as if to tell me to stay put.

“Nevermind. I think he sees me,” I said. “Thanks anyway.”

My Access-a-Ride driver, a skinny older Black man with glasses and a graying beard, exited the vehicle and crossed the street toward me. I bravely parted the latest oncoming wave of pedestrians and made my way to the curb to meet him.

“Come on,” the driver said when he reached me, urging me to step right out into traffic on Broadway and cross with him, but I was reluctant.

“I’d rather wait for the light to change,” I said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll stop traffic for you,” he said, moving toward the middle of the street, his right hand extended making a “stop” motion toward the oncoming cars. I tried to pick up my pace while also being careful not to place my crutch tips on anything slippery, or get too close to other pedestrians rushing to the other side of the street.

“Take your time. I’ll make them wait,” he attempted to reassure me. I wasn’t reassured.

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Access-a-Ride is New York City’s paratransit service. It provides transportation within the five boroughs of New York City to hundreds of thousands of elderly and disabled New Yorkers unable to use a transit system in which **less than twenty percent** of subway stations are accessible. It is a “**shared ride, door-to-door**” service in which New

York City Transit **contracts** with private carrier companies, who use “Access-a-Ride-branded” vehicles, including cars, mini-vans, and small buses to transport passengers. The **fare** is the same as all other public transportation in New York City.

*A native New Yorker born with Cerebral Palsy, I began using Access-a-Ride sixteen years ago at 11 years old.*

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Passengers usually have different drivers and carriers for each trip. So, even passengers like me — people who use the service twice a day to travel to and from work — will usually have a different driver in the morning and evening, and a completely different set of drivers the next day, and likely for the rest of the week. I had never seen this driver before.

A native New Yorker, born with Cerebral Palsy, I began using Access-a-Ride 16 years ago at 11 years old, around the age that I suspect many New York City kids begin riding public transportation by themselves. Over the first eight of those 16 years, I protested the service’s inefficiency and unreliability in true Millennial fashion: I complained to family, friends, and social media followers, wrote blog posts, and

started Change.org petitions, generally only filing formal complaints when something especially ridiculous happened.

But that was only phase one. My ultimate plan was to go to law school and gain the knowledge and skills necessary to fight, on behalf of myself and others, all the rampant “isms” I’d faced as a disabled Black girl born and raised in Mike Tyson’s hometown.

Two years ago, after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania Law School, I returned home and increased my advocacy for passengers using the service. Since then, I’ve been documenting and filing formal complaints about routes and other general incidents of bad service.

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As I was getting on the bus that evening, a news segment I’d been featured in was scheduled to air on the local news. Although I work only eight miles away from my job — an approximately forty-five minute drive for most — the reporter followed Access-a-Ride as it took me from my home in Brooklyn, through Queens, to a stop on East 64th St. in Midtown Manhattan, before dropping me off at work in lower Manhattan nearly two hours later, not to mention fifteen minutes past my scheduled appointment time. Because the rides are shared, such roundabout two-hour excursions each way were a common practice. That evening, I had no idea what to expect when I got on board. I just hoped that I’d at least be traveling toward my house.

Things seemed to be going pretty well at first. There was another woman on the bus when I boarded it. The buses are not the big ones you might associate with New York City. They usually have only about six seats and some open space in the back for wheelchairs. The woman was seated in the second row on the left side in a window seat. I sat in the front right corner closest to the door. The driver started heading to Manhattan Bridge — Brooklyn-bound and toward home — and I thought it might be a good day. I put my headphones on and responded to the flurry of text messages I had received from my uncle about my 6 p.m. news segment.

*For years, I protested Access-a-Ride's inefficiency and unreliability in true Millennial fashion: I complained to social media followers, wrote blog posts, and started Change.org petitions.*

"I'm missing it," I texted him. "I'm on Access-a-Ride, of course. Does it highlight the changes I recommended?"

I'd recently spoken at a Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) board meeting to propose three major changes to Access-a-Ride: improved routing, not requiring riders to wait outside for rides that are not close by, and more direct communication between customers and drivers about rides.

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Access-a-Ride customers must **schedule** rides by 5 p.m. the day before travel. Depending on our “**appointment time,**” we receive a computer-generated pick-up time. Travel **times** are supposed to be coordinated by the distance between a passenger’s pick-up and drop-off locations, but pick-up times are often as many as two hours ahead of appointment times. For example, Access-a-Ride **anticipates** a “maximum ride time” of one hour and 35 minutes for a travel distance between six and nine miles.

Rain, shine, and seasons aside, passengers scheduling rides are **instructed** by call center operators to be *outside* our pick-up location at our scheduled pick-up time, even though our ride may be nowhere near at that time. We are also **instructed** to be prepared to wait up to 30 minutes for our drivers in case of traffic or delays. Drivers who **arrive** within that “30-minute window” are still considered to be on time, even though the passenger may have been outside for up to half an hour at that point. Those 30-minute delays may actually turn into hours-long waits for many customers, as drivers must follow predetermined routes that lengthen trips and exacerbate travel conditions. Drivers, on the other hand, are **instructed** to give late passengers only a five-minute grace period. Drivers are also **encouraged** to call passengers if they do not see us when they arrive, but such calls are considered a courtesy, not a requirement.

One winter evening while I was on the bus, the driver stopped to pick up a passenger who wasn’t outside when we arrived. After a few minutes, a Black woman who was probably in her seventies exited a nearby McDonald’s hurriedly pushing a walker in front of her. There

were three black garbage bags resting on her walker's seat. As the driver got off the bus to let the lift down, he yelled:

"You're lucky I didn't leave you. It's been more than five minutes."

"Five minutes?" she asked. "I've been waiting for this ride for over three hours. The people in the McDonald's let me sit down and wait inside, and I didn't see you when you first pulled up."

"You're over the bag limit," the driver added. "The limit is two. You have three. That's what's wrong with Access-a-Ride people. You take advantage. You're spoiled and entitled."

The concept of entitlement is familiar jargon in discussions of race and class, and it is just as widespread in the realm of disability. It's the idea that we are acting as if someone owes us something rather than merely asking to be treated with the respect and human dignity we deserve. It is the belief that people of a certain status or apparent condition have no right to demand better because we should just be happy with whatever we get. We should be happy we have anything at all.

*As a civil rights attorney, despite many of the eccentric, annoying, inappropriate, and sometimes disturbing things some Access-a-Ride drivers do, most of my complaints have to do with policies and not individual drivers.*

Outraged at the driver's callous attitude, the woman told him he didn't even have to touch her bags, because they were sitting on her walker. She explained that she had the three garbage bags because she only got to go grocery shopping once in a while. To make the most of her limited trips, she put as many grocery bags as she could into the three garbage bags, to lessen the number of individual bags she traveled with to heed the Access-a-Ride limit.



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“Do you have a mother?” she asked him. “Would you want someone treating her this way when she gets old?”

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In one of the world's most crowded cities, where traffic is jammed almost more often than not, maybe it's not surprising that Access-a-Ride vehicles can take a long time to get where they're going. But the inefficient protocol for communicating with drivers unnecessarily adds to users' stress and anxiety. For example, a passenger who wants to **locate** the ride he or she is waiting for must call a Transit switchboard operator, who then reads a GPS to tell the passenger where the driver is. If the Transit operator cannot track the passenger's ride by GPS, or the passenger needs to communicate some other information to the driver, the Transit operator must call the carrier who dispatched the ride, who then calls the driver, before Transit relays all that information to the passenger. **Violations** of any Access-a-Ride rules, including cancelling a trip with less than two hours' notice, can lead to point assessments that affect passengers' service eligibility. A recent Access-a-Ride **audit** by the New York City Comptroller found that more than 31,000 passengers had been **stranded** in 2015.

Presumably to alleviate some of these issues, Access-a-Ride's **reimbursement** policy allows passengers whose rides have not arrived within the 30-minute wait window to take a taxi and request reimbursement from Transit. However, this is not a viable alternative for many Access-a-Ride users, given the **limited** number of accessible taxis in New York City and that many people cannot afford to pay up

front for expensive taxi rides that require two or three months for reimbursement.