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Buses are their route to a brighter future

It's a grueling 15-hour day for Carmen Mendoza and her children as they leave home before dawn and trek to far-flung schools and work. But they expect a payoff someday.

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By Steve Lopez

December 17, 2013 | 7:12 p.m.

It is 5:35 a.m.

"Let's go," Carmen says to Andy, 14, and Nicole, 11, as they head up the street toward their Florence Avenue bus stop, all of them wearing backpacks.

On weekdays, Carmen Mendoza does not see the sun in her Bell Gardens neighborhood. She's out the door with her two kids before dawn, and the evening darkness always beats her home.

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One reason for the 15-hour days is that like thousands of people in a region built for the automobile, Carmen Mendoza doesn't own a car. So she and the kids commute to work and school by bus, with lots of transfers along the way. On a typical day, the bus that takes them back home is their eighth or ninth of the day.



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It is still dark when we get off our first bus in Huntington Park.

"Hurry!" Mendoza implores her kids.

We turn the corner and hustle up Pacific Avenue as Bus No. 2, the 760, lumbers past us toward the stop a half block away.

We all make it and head north toward Vernon, where the bus lurches west before turning due north once again. It is still dark outside, the downtown skyline in lights. Riders who can't find seats grip railings and poles for balance, swaying in unison on turns. The bus plows ahead urgently, as if the life of the slumbering city — its waking breath — depends on the safe delivery of these calloused hands and strong backs.

We arrive at 7th and Broadway at 6:40 a.m. and walk to Hill Street, where Andy and his mother say goodbye. Then we catch the 51 to go back in the direction we just came from, toward Nicole's school.

Through the windows of the bus, dawn seems a revelation as the walls of skyscrapers begin to absorb light and the city is re-created. We bounce off the 51 at 9th and San Pedro, and Mendoza looks for the 66, but it's not coming, so we hoof it to Nicole's school at 8th and Sanford.

Mendoza has worked a deal to leave Nicole with the principal, Janet Alvarez, every morning just before 7 a.m. Nicole will rest, read and study for the hour before school begins. Mendoza races off to her job a few blocks away, hustling through the vast outdoor 7th Street Market, dodging forklifts and vehicles.

Mendoza arrives at Groceries Apparel a few minutes late, but she says the owners know her situation and appreciate her work ethic, so they're flexible. She walks into the warehouse and sits at a sewing machine with a cheery hello to co-workers. Over the next eight hours, she will sew hems onto 600 shirts.

I joined them for the journey recently, meeting Mendoza and her kids as they emerged from their home to go catch the first bus of the day.

Nicole is still tired, and Andy seems to be sleep-walking, but to look at their mother, you wouldn't know the hour was so indecent. She has bounce in her step, and there is something expectant in her eyes.

About 1.1 million times a day, someone boards a Metro bus in greater Los Angeles. Metro officials say 79% of their riders list themselves as "transit dependent," 90% are minorities, and the average household income is \$25,540.

At 5:50 a.m., the Mendozas' bus arrives and we board silently. Route 311 runs from Norwalk through Downey, Cudahy and Huntington Park, collecting its cargo of nannies, housekeepers, produce workers and students, shuttling them westward under cover of darkness.

"There are problems here, like drugs and gangs," Mendoza says, explaining why she doesn't send her kids to more convenient neighborhood schools. Mendoza and her husband, a delivery man for a health supply company, did not finish school in Mexico. It will be different for their children.

Carmen Mendoza visited nine schools before deciding on an Atwater Village charter called the Environmental Science and Technology High School for Andy. Nicole attends Para Los Niños Middle School Charter downtown.

The daily drill is to take Andy to the downtown L.A. stop where he catches his next bus, then backtrack to get Nicole to her school. Mendoza then races through the produce district to get to her job as a seamstress by 7 a.m.

In the evening, she repeats the trek, adding an extra leg. Nicole goes to dance class after school, while Andy plays for his high school soccer team. It makes for a long, grueling day, but Mendoza says they're used to it.

"I want them to have not just a good education, but other opportunities," Mendoza says.



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"She's amazing, she really is," says Patricc Reed, director of operations, who tells me he is about to promote Mendoza to a management position. "She knows all the machines, and she does all of our repairs."

When her shift ends at 3 p.m., Mendoza has an extra duty to take care of. This is one of the days she picks up her 7-year-old grandson, Daniel, at Para Los Niños Elementary before going back in the other direction to get Nicole. Mendoza has an older daughter who asked for steady help with Daniel, and Mendoza said OK. But only if, in addition to working, her daughter agreed to go back to school so she can build a better life for her family.

With Daniel in tow, we catch the 51 and take it back to Nicole's school, then walk from the garment district along the edge of skid row to the flower district to wait for the 360. We ride that line up to 7th and Hill, then transfer to the 720 to make our way toward MacArthur Park.

The city's rhythms are different by bus. You move slower, but you take in more. There's time to think, to read. You step off a bus and breathe the scent of flowers or sizzling food on a grill. You see people whose country of origin is hard to guess and hear languages you can't identify.

Mendoza reaches for the straps of her children's backpacks, for safety, as they cross a street. They see people they know at stops and on buses, members of their rolling community.

Mendoza had a car until 18 months ago, when she got into an accident. She decided to get rid of her wheels altogether rather than pay for repairs, gas and maintenance. She also got hit by a cyclist while walking and needed surgery on her arm. The lingering stiffness makes driving difficult.

Traveling by bus has all the obvious challenges, she says, but there are advantages, too.

"We're together," she says.

On the bus, she can look her children in the eye, talk about their days, help them with their homework. If she went off to work each day while they attended neighborhood schools, they'd have too much idle time, she says.

"I don't want them watching television or playing video games."

When Daniel sees a video game on my smartphone, he looks up at his grandmother for approval. She answers with a raised eyebrow, and Daniel knows he is out of luck. He returns to his math homework, and only after I quiz him on some problems does Mendoza let him use my phone's calculator to check his answers.

I heard about the Mendoza family from a friend named Liza Bercovici, who founded the nonprofit Everybody Dance in 2000 after her 13-year-old daughter, Gabriella, died in an accident. Gabriella loved to dance, and Bercovici, then a lawyer, wanted to honor her spirit by providing underserved kids a chance to learn ballet, jazz and other dance forms for as little as \$7 a month. Nicole has been a student there for several years.

By the time we get Nicole to her class, it is exactly 12 hours from the time we caught the first bus that morning. But she still has the energy to twirl and leap across the floor with the other young gazelles. While his aunt dances, Daniel plays with a friend. Carmen Mendoza chats with another mom and checks in with Andy by phone. After three more bus rides from school, he has arrived home safely.

Just before 7 p.m., Carmen and Nicole board the 720 bus near MacArthur Park, pass back through downtown, over the river and into the working-class suburbs. Mendoza peers through a window to see who is on the street and what they are doing there, so she can make a smart decision about the safest connecting route. Her eighth bus of the day is the 258, heading south into Bell Gardens and dropping her off for a short walk to her home.

It is just before 8 p.m. and time for Mendoza to make dinner for her family.

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