

COLUMN ONE

## These senior amigas long for the ride



Anizeta Lopez, 77, front row left, Eloisa Ruiz, 75, Josefina Gonzalez, 73, and Clarita Trujillo, 79, enjoy one another's company while riding on the Dial-A-Ride shuttle bus in Bell Gardens. [More photos](#)

*The comadres del camion, as some of the women call themselves, have made the Dial-A-Ride shuttle service a social club on wheels.*

BY ESMERALDA BERMUDEZ

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GENARO MOLINA

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**W**hen the bus is full of women, anything or anyone is fair game. The men who get on board are wise to stay out of the way.

"They sit in the back very quietly," said Armida Marquez, 70. "They don't want us coming after them."

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Every day in Bell Gardens, the Dial-A-Ride shuttles around town picking up seniors. They catch rides to the grocery store, the hair salon, the hospital, the pharmacy. The trips are quick, five, 10 minutes at most, but here at least, they never feel alone — and the sorrow of old age is often loudly trumped by laughter.

Lots of it.

On a recent Friday, the women were cracking up so hard that tears trickled down their cheeks.

"They ask me at the senior center, 'Maria, how come you never dance with the men?'" said Maria Ruiz, a quiet 87-year-old wrapped in a blue scarf. "I tell them, 'Because ... look at them. They're all falling apart.'"

"It's true!" said Salud Suarez, 65. "And that's all we're left with. Where did all the good men go?"

"They're taken," said Anizeta Lopez, 77.

"They're dead," said Ruiz, altering her assessment.

Like girlfriends on a high school bus, the *comadres aei camion*, as some of the women call themselves, have transformed the shuttle service into a social club on wheels.



Dial-A-Ride bus driver Laura Torres, reflected in the mirror at left, shares a light moment with her passengers. She greets each rider in a loud, playful voice: "Come in, come in. Where are we going today?" Half the time, she doesn't need to ask. She knows nearly everyone's address by heart. **More photos**

Often they board meticulously styled: sapphire earrings paired with pink tennis shoes, flower-topped hats with homemade knit sweaters, strings of pearls draped over lace shirt collars. Their gray hair is dyed in shades of gold, brown, black, burgundy or blue.

They open up about everything: their husbands and their families, their aches and their regrets. (Many wish they would have spent much more time with their children.) They cook their best dishes — chile relleno, beef mole, chicken tacos — for their favorite drivers. Mostly, they like to joke. Especially about men.

Up at the wheel, Laura Torres said she's heard it all in the few years she's worked the route.

She greets each passenger in a loud, playful voice: "Come in, come in. Where are we going today?"

Half the time, she doesn't need to ask. She knows nearly everyone's address by heart.

"I'm like the bartender," Torres said, cruising to a stop at a red light next to Ross, a popular destination. "And this is their confessional."



Salud Suarez, 65, left, and Maria Ruiz, 87, share a laugh on the Dial-A-Ride bus. The amigas open up about everything: their husbands and their families, their aches and their regrets. **More photos**

Every so often, a woman takes her seat only to find the risqué chatter unbecoming of women their age. She stares them down, asks them to change the topic. Sometimes it works. Most of the time she gets ignored.

The Dial-A-Ride, after all, is not the place to come and judge.

Like the *americana* who didn't want anyone on the shuttle to speak Spanish. Or play Latino music. She was afraid they would talk behind her back.

"I told her: 'Don't worry. They don't even know you. They just like to have fun,'" Torres said.

Some of the women enjoy tooling around town so much, they tell Torres to make their stop the last. Or, like Clarita Trujillo, they choose to stay on board as the shuttle makes its rounds.

The 79-year-old said she spends many of her days home alone and tends to get depressed. She walks around her block, cooks and cleans and watches a few telenovelas. But there's nothing like having "*una comadre con quien chismear*," a girlfriend to gossip with.

She hasn't worked up the courage to visit a senior center and meet people. The thought of being the new girl in the room is too intimidating.

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## I'd rather hang out with my amigas on the bus."

— Clarita Trujillo

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"I'd rather hang out with my *amigas* on the bus," Trujillo said.

When she recently found herself riding alone, without her friends, an 85-year-old passenger dressed like a cowboy saw his opening.

"Hey, I've never seen you here before," said Felipe Lopez, looking across the aisle. "You're very good-looking."

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Trujillo, her hair pinned up in a bouffant and lips painted strawberry red, rolled her eyes and looked out at the Super A Foods Supermarket parking lot.

"Maybe I can take you to a nice restaurant," Lopez insisted. "Where do you like to eat?"

As the shuttle rolled on, Trujillo answered sheepishly:

"I like to eat at Denny's."

"Then that's where I'll take you."



Asuncion Gomez, 55, exits the Dial-A-Ride bus as driver Laura Torres writes in her log. Some of the women enjoy tooling around town so much, they tell Torres to make their stop the last. [More photos](#) 📷

A minute later, Lopez carefully stepped off the bus. Stiff and bit wobbly, he walked toward his driveway. Torres turned back to look at Trujillo.

"No, Clarita! Be careful!" she yelled. "That man's married."

"Ay, no," Trujillo said, her face blushing. "That's what I get for being so easy."

Minutes later, when more women joined the ride, she recounted the story.

They all threw their heads back, laughing.

"That's what happens when you carry cinnamon in your purse," said Asuncion Gomez, 55. "Men will smell it and come after you."

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