

SUSAN ODGERS Local columnist

Adapted in TC: It's our bus

Roan Lee Tharp, 67, would have smiled knowing I'd rode the BATA bus last month to his funeral at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Lake Leelanau.

Tharp, a person with polio since his first birthday, was a lifelong disability advocate, a "try anything once," well-liked family man.

As the bus left Traverse City that summery morning — mist rising from the waking bay, swans diving headfirst to feed — an able-bodied passenger and I watched our bus driver wave to children running with their dog, a farmer plowing his field, bicyclists crossing the TART trail and folks hanging laundry, getting mail and working in their yards.

During the bus ride, I put on my headphones and listened to the end of an audio book and a little bit of music, returned a few quick calls, sent an email and a couple ! of texts, chatted with the other passengers, closed my eyes for a few winks and watched the scenery, much of it new, instead of the road.

I've ridden BATA or the Benzie Bus for several years, and watched bus drivers avoid brick streets because the extra jostling might hurt a fragile rider, carry groceries to the door for seniors and moms with small children, wish teenagers "a great day" at the door of their jobs, sing, joke, and endlessly adjust the heat or air conditioning to comfort a person riding the bus a few hours daily, several times a week, for dialysis or chemotherapy.

I know of a bus driver who went to great lengths to guarantee a person got to their pharmacy before it closed in order to pick-up life-sustaining medications and another bus driver who always waited for the rider to turn on her kitchen light when she came home in the dark from her nighttime job.

Over the years,! the Benzie Bus and BATA have made numerous improvements. The Benzie Bus was recently awarded the 2017 Rural Community Transportation System of the Year by The Community Transportation Association of America. In May of 2017, voters in Grand Traverse and Leelanau counties approved a mileage increase for BATA. Both bus systems are well-equipped to respond to rider concerns. They offer seasonal, loop and link routes, lots of discounts, bus tracking apps, security cameras, wheelchair lifts, a buddy system orientation for new riders, social media presence, air conditioning, bike racks, service to the airport, National Cherry Festival, Traverse City Film Festival, Interlochen concerts and automatic reminders for reserved rides.

I've ridden the bus with typical workers, skiers, volunteers, seniors, people with disabilities, environmentalists, migrant farm workers, Grand Traverse Resort workers from Jamaica, college students! and children, bicyclists, people without drivers licenses or those with a car in the shop, those new to the area and tourists. For lots of people, the bus is their only mode of transportation. While most area taxpayers overwhelmingly support the bus systems, many do not ride. That includes members of our community in government and nonprofit leadership positions.

I encourage you to ride the bus with me. It can be a fun adventure. Call the bus systems to discuss any barriers you think prevent you from using the bus. Benzie Bus <http://www.benziebus.com> 231-325-3000 and BATA <http://www.bata.net> 231-941-2324 Taking the bus to Roen's funeral was a nod to him and allowed me to contemplate the day.

Odgers is a 30-year resident of Traverse City and has been using a wheelchair for 41 years.

