

Earning a CDL leads to life-changing opportunity

Lucinda Blend, a driver for Clemson Area Transit (CATbus), was following her usual route through Clemson University campus on January 19, 2018 when she began to smell an electrical aroma in the bus. As she reached for the radio to advise headquarters, a passenger in the back of the bus yelled "Fire!"

Smoke and flames began pouring out of the engine compartment in the rear of the bus, but there were no flames inside the bus. Lucinda immediately pulled over and opened the doors, then helped the passengers to evacuate.

Clemson University Fire and Emergency Medical Services responded quickly to a call about the fire and it was soon extinguished.

CATbus Executive Director Keith Moody said that Lucinda followed her training perfectly. "She did an awesome job, acting quickly and efficiently" in getting the passengers off the bus. No-one was hurt.

Lucinda is a former VR consumer and the first to earn a commercial driver's license (CDL) through a partnership between VR's Anderson office and CATbus. She came to the Anderson Training Center in early 2017, about two months after the partnership had been discussed by Andy Blondeau, Clemson Assistant City Administrator; Sonya Holloway, CATbus Director of Training and Safety; Keith Moody; and Steve Ackerman, VR Training Center Manager.

Through the partnership, VR provides intensive training for consumers to receive their commercial learner's permit (CLP), and then CATbus teaches them how to drive a bus and pays for the CDL examination.

"We also teach them the pre-trip inspection," says Linda Gilbert, Job Preparedness Instructor, referring to the procedure for inspecting a bus and its various systems to ensure that it is working properly. This procedure is also a significant part of the CDL exam. "We want them ahead of the game when they get to CATbus."

Lucinda has physical limitations that make it difficult for her to stand for long hours, so her VR team thought that she would be a good candidate for the training. She had never driven anything like a large bus, but she was excited about the opportunity. As she studied and trained for her CLP, staff worked with her to help build her confidence.



Lucinda Blend, left, former VR consumer, with Steve Ackerman, VR Training Center Manager in Anderson.

In August of 2017, Lucinda earned her CDL and started her new career as a driver with CATbus, with a good wage and benefits. Attaining her CDL and becoming a driver has not only boosted her confidence professionally, but it has helped her manage day-to-day challenges with greater ease. She has purchased her own car and works as an Uber driver to help supplement her income during the slower summer months.

"She has really flourished," says Ackerman. "This has been life-changing for her."

He adds that CATbus is a tremendous asset to VR. Providing consumers with an opportunity to obtain a CDL at no cost is a life changing experience that affords them a competitive wage, good working environment and benefits. It is also a career choice that provides freedom and flexibility; consumers with a CDL have the opportunity to become gainfully employed anywhere in the state.

The success of the partnership with CATbus has led to other businesses approaching VR to help with training drivers for them, including a concrete company and the City of Anderson.

Lucinda continues to grow in her job. CATbus operates an articulating 62 foot long bus, affectionately called the "Bendy Bus", which she recently trained on and is now driving.

She says that she is "over the moon ecstatic" about her job, and that she "couldn't have asked for a better group of people to help me get here."

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