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Smith: An IndyGo regular's amazing story

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Anyone who has tried to use IndyGo as a sole source of transportation -- even for a week -- would probably look at Warner Avery with a mix of amusement, amazement, skepticism and admiration.

I did.

Known to his friends as Ernie, the 70-year-old Eastside man learned Monday that the IndyGo bus stop at East 42nd Street and College Avenue would be renamed in his honor. It's an unusual gesture, IndyGo officials said.

Then again, Ernie is an unusual man.

He's ridden the bus to work -- by choice -- for more than 30 years.

He wakes up at 3:45 a.m. and trudges a half-mile through whatever weather Indy is serving up that day to catch the bus on College Avenue.

He has to get up that early to transfer buses and make it to his first job at the CVS/Pharmacy Indianapolis Distribution Center near I-70 and Shadeland Avenue.

He starts work at 8 a.m., and he has never been late or missed a day in 30 years. (That's a feat most people with cars can't manage.)

At 4 p.m., when his shift ends, Ernie boards another bus to take to his second job at a cleaning service inside an Eastside Kroger store.

He gets home about 11 p.m. each night, and does it all over again the next day.

"Riding the bus is fun," Ernie told me after a ceremony at the Distribution Center, where Mayor Greg Ballard presented him with a proclamation.

"Fun?" I asked, remembering the migraines after my weekly trips on IndyGo last summer.

"Fun!" he insisted in an Alabama drawl that you can still hear even though he's lived in Indianapolis for decades.

What's *not* fun, he says, is being chased by big dogs on the way to the bus stop in the morning darkness.

"The owners always say, 'Oh, he won't bite,' " Ernie said. "Yeah, right!"

Even Mike Terry, president and CEO of IndyGo, seemed a bit amazed during Monday's ceremony by Ernie's devotion to the bus.

Terry will be the first to tell you that IndyGo is a "transit-dependent system," meaning most people

who ride don't have any other options for getting around town.

Not Ernie.

He had a car once -- a 1968 Rambler that he bought from his sister. Half the time it wouldn't start, and the rest of the time it was in the shop.

"One day, I made a deal with it," Ernie said. "I told it, 'If you get me home, I won't ask you to do anything else.' "

And he didn't. He sold the car to a junkyard the next day because it was too unreliable.

Ernie says he doesn't understand why people say IndyGo is bad. It's better than it used to be. It gets him to work on time.

Even the weather, including the days when snow is piled so high on the sidewalks that he has to walk in the street, "isn't bad if you get some good shoes."

At the same time, Ernie says he'd love to see a more robust transit system -- one that would allow him to get to work and perhaps even sleep in a few more hours.

That isn't too much to ask.

As Central Indiana considers whether to dedicate money to expand bus service and add commuter rail lines, it's important to remember people like Avery -- people who work hard to be self-sufficient and to contribute to our local economy.

"No, no," Ernie said at the idea of owning another car. "I'll be on buses for the rest of my life."
