

# Burlington County Times

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Opinion

## Mullane: Aboard the River Line in Burlington County, life chugs along despite coronavirus

By JD Mullane

Columnist

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Even during the coronavirus panic, life goes on aboard the RiverLINE train in Burlington.

Coronavirus has New Jerseyans sheltering in place, but mass transit still runs, and the River Line is on its regular schedule.

On Monday, a day of rawness, rain and more bad news about the virus' spread, engineer Caylan Gordon, 27, brought the train into the Camden station, emerged from the control cab, and took a seat in the lead car.

"I'm not really worried," he said, holding his phone in gloved hands. "I'm healthy. Never had the flu in my life. Not once. I make sure to wash my hands. They're sanitizing the trains at night more than they normally do. So, no, I think we're pretty safe here."

He was cool and professional. A young man with an important job. He glanced back into the nearly empty car.

"This train should be crowded this time of day. And look, hardly anyone's here. I've never ..." He interrupted himself, looking at the time on his phone.

"Sorry," he said, popping up like toast from a toaster. "Got to depart."

He vanished into the control cab. Shortly, the River Line was on its journey to points north through Burlington and on to Trenton.

Even before Gov. Phil Murphy locked down the state last weekend, NJT's ridership had dropped up to 90%. But some people still need public transit to get around. Like "Edward," who sat across the aisle.

"You want to know the truth about all this stuff?"

Sure.

"It's a plot to dwindle the population," he said.

Really?

"Everyone's talkin' about it," he said.

Who?

"Everyone," he said, looking around at the few silent souls in the car.

In the seat behind him were a young couple, Andre and Janelle, who asked that their last names not be used. Asked where he was headed, Andre told me where he had been, shaking his head slowly, as if at a long-ago tragedy.

"I played ball for Kansas State, but I blew out my ACL my sophomore year. I never returned," he said. "I should have gone to Ohio State. But at Kansas, I knew I could start any time I wanted. Kansas. Some of the best times of my life."

Not like today, right?

"Oh, you mean the virus," he said. "Everybody's worried about it. I am, but she's not."

He pointed to Janelle.

"She's not scared of anything."

"Not a thing. Not a person. I'm from Camden my whole life," Janelle said.

"The only thing she scared of is the man upstairs," Andre said. "She fear nothing but God."

"Yup," Janelle said.

"I tell her all you have to do is have a conversation with someone, or shake someone's hand, and you got it. It's on the news -- you gonna get it, I'm gonna get it. All of us," Andre said.

Janelle rolled her eyes.

"You wanted to go to Wendy's?" she said.

"What? Oh, Wendy's. Yeah," Andre said.

"I wanted Puerto Rican food," Janelle said. "But if you want Wendy's, OK."

"See this?" Andre said, putting his arm around Janelle. "This is the worst virus in the history of the world, ever. It's life and death and the world's goin' crazy and she's thinkin' about food."

"Got to eat," Janelle said. She sat on his lap and kissed him on the cheek.

The train stopped in Palmyra. Mary Pappas boarded, choosing a fold-down jump seat, a spot safely remote from several other passengers. She pulled the collar of her heavy black coat up around her mouth and nose, like a mask. She was coming home to Riverside from her shift at Country Fresh, a market/deli in town.

"I have my sanitizer," she said, pulling a small bottle from her pocket, "I have a mask.

"It's crazy. It's scary," she said. "I never thought I'd ever live through anything like this. I think in the end there's going to be a big toll. After work? I stay home. On the weekends? I don't go nowhere. I'm only out because of my job."

"You know what I don't understand," said Bob Pierce, who boarded at Cinnaminson and took a seat across from Pappas, "the toilet paper thing. Why are people buying so much?"

"Yeah, right," Pappas said. "I heard on the news that if you take all the toilet paper people bought, to use it all up in a couple weeks would mean people would have to go to the bathroom something like 183 times a day."

"That's a lot," Pierce said.

Pierce was on his way home to Riverside from his job at Sea Box, a manufacturing plant deemed essential by the government, and exempted from the government's shutdown.

“I watch what I do, but I’m not really afraid of it,” he said. “I really think it’ll pass by, like all these things pass by. But right, now, it’s crazy.”

The train rolled on. When it pulled into the station at Delanco, no one was left in the car. The doors slid open. They remained open for about a minute. The engines idled down. Things went quiet. All that could be heard inside were birds chirping outside. It seemed oddly normal in a world panicked by the virus.

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