



## PARADISE TRAILWAYS

By Russ Willcutt

You'll be pleasantly surprised to learn about the many improvements that have been made in accessible motorcoach design in recent years, opening the road to adventure.

**T**o someone in a wheelchair, the difference between a standard and an accessible motorcoach—what most of us would refer to as a bus—mainly involves being able to reach their destination or complete their tour traveling comfortably. To the owner of the charter company providing that vehicle, the difference is measured quite differently, according to Godfrey LeBron, co-founder and vice president of Paradise Trailways and chairman of the United Motorcoach Association.

"It's somewhere in the neighborhood of \$35-\$40,000," he says with a laugh. "Each."

But well worth it, says LeBron, if it will awaken passengers with disabilities to the convenience and ease of traveling by way of an accessible coach. The challenge, as always, is spreading the word about advances that have been made in recent years in motorcoach design, specifically having to do with the function and reliability of the lifts as well as handy securement locations where wheelchairs can be quickly and safely locked into position. "The key is to help wheelchair passengers understand how far we've come in the past six or eight years," he says, "because if they'll just ride with us once, motorcoaches may well become their travel mode of choice whenever ground transportation is called for. And if we see an increase in ridership, charter companies will start adding more accessible coaches to their fleet, so everybody wins."

As for his own company, LeBron—and Lauren LeBron, who is president—have already made the decision to invest in accessible coaches, so that two out of

their fleet of 10 are lift equipped. What the passenger in a wheelchair would experience is quite simple. The lift's doorway is located at the rear of the bus, opposite the driver's position so that boarding can be accomplished from the curb. The lift is lowered, the wheelchair is rolled onto the platform and secured, and it is then raised into the interior of the coach. The passenger then has the option of remaining in his or her wheelchair and being secured to the floor, or to transfer into a standard seat while the driver stows the wheelchair beneath the coach. "What I've observed is that most people choose to transfer into a seat," LeBron says, "which is a breeze and only takes a moment or two. Then they're ready to enjoy the ride along with the rest of their friends and fellow passengers."

Beyond the fact that accessible motorcoaches actually exist, LeBron says disabled passengers might also be surprised by the support system in place to ensure their ease of transit. "We are part of the Trailways network," he says, "which provides us with a number of benefits we're able to pass along to our customers. For example, regulations require that at least half of a larger scheduled service company such as Adirondack Trailways' fleet be accessible by 2012, which in their case is approximately 60 coaches. For smaller companies like ours the requirement is that we provide an accessible coach within 48 hours of a request being made by a passenger. But as part of the Trailways system, which allows its members to 'pool' its motorcoach resources, I can rely on Adirondack or any other carrier within our system to provide me with an accessible coach, and vice versa. And the cost of providing that vehicle cannot, by law, be passed along directly to a customer with a disability, so all we ask is that

we be notified as far in advance as possible so that we can schedule the appropriate equipment.”

As involved as he is in his profession, you would think that LeBron's own plans would've involved launching his own motorcoach charter company from an early age, but it really came about as part of his working experience before and after college. “When I was still in high school I worked with a couple who eventually founded a company called Coach USA,” he says. “Once school was out in the afternoons I would go down to the Port Authority and get the schedules out for the evening passengers and help with compliance issues. Then, after college, I spent some time driving theatrical groups around the country, but it was tough being on the road 250 nights out of the year, so I joined the White Bus Company, working in sales. That's where I met Lauren, who was working for a group travel provider, and we developed a vision of starting a company that really focused on excellent customer service, and that's how Paradise came to be. We joined the Trailways network in 2001, which has really been great for us.”

His affiliation with the United Motorcoach Association (UMA) has not only allowed him to make a contribution to the field but to also keep Paradise Trailways up to date on the latest regulations and concerns of the motorcoach charter industry. On the board since 1997, LeBron is current-

ly chairman, and he is particularly proud of the UMA's outreach efforts to organizations supporting those with physical disabilities.

“While we don't have a national charity foundation, we have worked in conjunction with the March of Dimes and Easter Seals, providing driver and customer service training modules to those who work directly with passengers who use assistive devices,” he says. “And I would also like to see the UMA working more closely with entities such as the Open Doors Organization (ODO), conducting driver training sessions on how to assist people in wheelchairs and reaching out to potential passengers to let them know about the advances we're constantly making.”

LeBron is already involved in expanding the training he describes, in fact, having recently conducted a session—along with Laurel Van Horn of the ODO—for Escot Bus Lines in

south Florida. “Not only is this important for new drivers,” he says, “but it's also a good idea for any driver to have a refresher course occasionally since they might not be working with passengers in wheelchairs on a daily basis, and you don't want them to get rusty.”

What it boils down to, however, is that LeBron doesn't see the difference between constantly developing new rider amenities—such as onboard video entertainment equipment, 110-volt plugs for personal DVD players and laptops, and perhaps even WiFi at some point—and at the same time ensuring that motorcoach design reflects the needs of its passengers with disabilities.

“We intend to be inclusive,” he says. “People are people, after all, so we need to give accessible design the same weight as any other improvement we would consider making for our passengers.”



Lauren LeBron and Godfrey LeBron, top left, and a new lift-equipped coach, above. Photos courtesy of Paradise Trailways.