

No gloomy riders on Reggie Wilson's Metro bus

By Christine Clarridge Seattle Times staff reporter

It almost seems like there's something wrong with the people on Metro Bus Route 48. They look like normal grown-ups. They're wearing regular work clothes and suits. They're clutching briefcases, laptops and backpacks.

But they're smiling, singing "The Sunshine Song" and clapping their hands in unison. They're sharing the little packets of cheese and crackers that their driver, Reggie Wilson, has tucked under a handful of seats.

"What do we do with cheese?" Wilson asked brightly over the bus's microphone. "We share," answered the riders in unison. "That's right!" said Wilson, 38. "Cheese is wonderful. Cheese is great. And we do not eat cheese all by ourselves. We share our cheese!"

And all this is happening at 7:45 in the morning, on a weekday in Seattle, on a route that winds from Rainier Valley, through the University District, Green Lake and Loyal Heights. Wilson, who worked his last day on the route yesterday and will start a new one that serves South Seattle next week, has been called the funniest, wackiest and most wonderful bus driver in the world by some of his fans. And he's got more than 180 commendations from riders to prove it.

He entertains his passengers with jokes, stories and spontaneous poems in the bus, which he's decorated with smiley faces. He hides candies and snacks under the bus seats on special occasions, and he has a cache of stuffed animals for crying kids. He leads sing-a-longs featuring bus and work-themed songs: "If You're Happy That It's Friday, Say Uh-huh" and "Ride, Ride, Ride the Bus Gently Down the Street." And he's not afraid to coax participation from the cranky and the reluctant at the rear of the bus.

"I can't *hear* you in the back," he said. "Come on now. Don't *make* me drive slow. I'll make you late for work." First-time riders are often astonished. But his regulars come to depend on his antics.

"The first time I rode his bus I was totally amazed. I couldn't believe it," said Claudia Nelson. "I'd hardly ever heard any of the other drivers speak. But he makes the trip faster and funner, and now I always try to catch his bus."

"He's like this all the time," said regular rider Mesha McCloud. "He's hilarious, and you always end up with a smile. It makes your day." Wilson said he's been doing his sit-down routine since he started driving for Metro more than 16 years ago.

"When I first started, I said I want to give Seattle something they've never seen before. I wanted to change people's attitudes," he said. "And I think I've done that. People always say, 'Thanks. That was different.'"

There was a time when Wilson considered giving up his shtick. People who wanted to doze sometimes complained and his bosses thought he wasn't taking the job seriously. "But then one day a lady got on the bus and she said to me, 'Yesterday I rode your bus. I had just found out that I had terminal cancer and you made me laugh. So, please, don't ever stop.'" He didn't — and he's not sure whether he could have even if he'd wanted.

"I can't help it. It's who I am. The corny jokes and clowning just comes out of me," he said. Wilson, who would have gone into the ministry if he hadn't gone to Metro, considers his job almost a spiritual mission.

"I love being a bus driver. Do you know how great it is to see a busload of smiling people? When I see that I feel like I've found my glory." As folks board Wilson's bus, many greet him like old friends. And yesterday they said goodbye with warm wishes and gifts, including a commemorative Scooby-Doo coin.

"Gosh," one woman told him yesterday. "There are a whole bunch of people out here waiting around to catch your bus." "Aw, shucks," he said. "You're just saying that because it's true. Now, are you ready to sing?"

Christine Clarridge can be reached at 206-464-8983 or cclarridge@seattletimes.com.