



# Elmhurst Express Finds Its Voice

By Shannon Kwit

**D**riving through the streets of suburban Elmhurst, Ill., you get used to the variety of cars, trucks, motorcycles and occasional taxi. But a new addition to the roads might have you double checking your rearview mirror. With its old-fashioned charm and vibrant green and yellow paint, the Elmhurst Express is back for another summer of trolley tours through the city's south side and downtown area.

The idea for a trolley program started back in 2014, according to Kassondra Schref, communications manager for the City of Elmhurst. By the following year, City staff completed a detailed plan for a summer pilot program; the plan was approved soon after by City Council. The Elmhurst Express ran for an initial eight weeks. Feedback from riders was immensely positive, with many asking if the trolley would be available the entire summer. After evaluating the program's inaugural year, the City decided to double the trolley's run. Riders this year will be able to experience the Elmhurst Express from June 3–September 18.

The trolley service is part of the City's Explore Elmhurst campaign. "The mission of Explore Elmhurst," says Schref, is "to drive economic growth and quality of life to residents through tourism and destination marketing. Explore Elmhurst represents an all-access city guide, where anyone of interest, including visitors and residents, can discover what there is to see and do in Elmhurst." The trolley is a perfect addition to the initiative. Rides are free of charge, so passengers are welcome to take full advantage of nearby shops and parks by hopping on and off as they please. There are a total of six stops on the route, all with public parking nearby. The trolley

has three stops in Elmhurst's downtown, and additional stops by the Elmhurst Art Museum, the Spring Rd. shopping area, and the corner near York and Vallette.

The Elmhurst Express attracts riders of all ages, although many are young families. Children scramble to wooden benches, pressing their noses against the windows in amazement while parents look on. The trolley, which can hold around 40 passengers, looks like it came straight from the 19th century. There's a whimsical feel to the



Banners (left) and signs indicating trolley stops (right), are located around Elmhurst to inform passers-by. Photos courtesy of Shannon Kwit

experience, and aside from the vehicle's design, much of the credit can be attributed to Mimi Black, the trolley's narrator.

Black is a professional voice-over artist and longtime resident of Elmhurst. Her nearly 25-year voice-over career had an unconventional beginning. After earning her doctorate in psychology from Brandeis University, Black was asked by colleagues to do a studio recording for a memory experiment. Upon hearing the recording, Black recalls, the producer turned to her and said, "Lady, you're in the wrong business." Black took the comment to heart and hasn't looked back.

The jump from psychology to narration is more of a hop than a leap. At Brandeis, Black's studies focused on human motivation and creativity. As a voice-over artist, she explains, her job is to embody a new identity, convey that to a select audience and persuade them to action. It also helped that as a child Black dreamed of being on Sesame Street. "I'm an edu-tainer by nature," she says. Black considers the voices she performs to be unmistakably separate characters with

different personalities, even referring to the trolley voice as "she." This perspective comes through in her narration. Sitting on the trolley, it's hard to pinpoint Black's voice as distinctly herself. The narrator is bubbly and informative, enthusiastic without becoming overwhelming—perfect for the 30-minute ride.

This is the first year the trolley was given a voice. After a recording was attempted in-house, an Elmhurst Public Library staff member asked Schref if she knew Black. Black was honored to contribute to the venture. "This was special because it was for my town that I care a lot about," she says. She considers it a privilege "to be able to be a cheerleader for the town." Finding the right tone became a collaborative process between the two women. Narration is not an easy task. In the case of the trolley, the challenge comes in simultaneously pleasing two audiences: the wide-eyed child and the adult. Black excels in enrapturing both.

Her hope is that riders, both Elmhurst residents and visitors alike, gain an appreciation for how far the town has come and

its plans for the future. Schref desires a similar outcome. "Ultimately we hope that visitors and residents are enjoying the trolley ride and learning more about the city," she says, "while also hopping off the trolley and experiencing the many shops, restaurants and events in town this summer." Comments from riders continue to pour in, and plans for expanding the trolley's route to the north side of town will be reviewed later this year.

For more information on the Elmhurst Express, visit [www.explorelmhurst.com/193/Elmhurst-Express-Trolley](http://www.explorelmhurst.com/193/Elmhurst-Express-Trolley).

You can learn more about Mimi Black and her work at [www.letmimisayit.com](http://www.letmimisayit.com).



Mimi Black, narrator of the Elmhurst Express, takes her first ride on the trolley. Photo courtesy of Shannon Kwit