

Living your Best LIFE

Driven to assist

Volunteers provide rides for fellow senior citizens through ITN

by Mark Jahne and Lynn Woike
LIFE staff

Photo by Lisa Brisson

"I TN has been my salvation," said Emily Leonard of West Hartford. "It's the most reliable, least expensive transportation for the elderly and infirmed."

She began using the service in 2012 to take her to and from evening classes at Trinity College where she was working on getting a second master's degree while in her 80s.

"Trinity, over the last six years, has been having massive construction and the access roads keep moving. It's very hard to find your way around the campus, especially at night," Leonard said.

Waiting for a cab to find you could take a long time, and "it's not the place you want to be at 90 years old, in the cold and dark on a February night," she said.

"I've had the same five or six drivers over the years. They have been so supportive. They were my cheering squad."



Donald Jensen is a volunteer driver for ITN Central Connecticut.

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They still are as she continues attending Trinity to work on her dissertation.

"I haven't missed a term," she said.

ITN Central Connecticut, an affiliate of ITNAmerica formed in 2009. The independent transportation network is one of 12 states served by the Maine-based organization whose stated mission is to provide lifelong mobility for senior citizens 60 and older as well as adults of any age who are blind or whose vision impairment does not enable them to drive.

The service is based in room 216 of West Hartford Town Hall and covers the Hartford region and beyond.

Senior citizens and people with limited or no vision can join the local chapter for a \$40 annual membership fee. They also pay \$1.50 fee per mile plus a \$3 pickup charge, which he said is approximately half as much as it would cost to rent a taxi.

The benefits are that rides can be scheduled for any day, any

location and any reason within a reasonable distance.

"The money we get from our riders covers half of our costs," said Donald Jensen, an Old Wethersfield resident who's one of the busiest drivers with ITN Central Connecticut.

Those costs include the affiliate fee to the national organization, insurance, telephone service, mailings and the salary of a part-time executive director.

Volunteer drivers using their own vehicles take people wherever they want to go and either stay with them or come back to pick them up for the return trip. They will assist with shopping if asked, help carry the groceries and perform other tasks. For safety reasons, they do not lift individuals.

"We try to be as helpful as we can," Jensen said.

If someone can transfer from a wheelchair into the car and back without assistance, they can get a ride. Close friendships often form and Jensen finds that extremely

rewarding.

"My pay is their appreciation.

It's fun. I really enjoy it," he said.

"It's a friendly organization. We're providing a very useful and needed service. I like to drive and we like to help people."

Jensen said ITN volunteer drivers are responsible for their own auto insurance and the nonprofit provides additional insurance support. Volunteers will take members anywhere within the 15 cities and towns they serve as well as to adjacent towns and Bradley International Airport.

A dispatcher in the ITN office at West Hartford Town Hall coordinates all of the

ride requests for the following week. Riders must book a driver in advance. Jensen said the drivers don't question where the person wants to go or why.

The local affiliate has approximately 20 people registered as drivers but only 12-15 are active, according to Jensen.

More are needed. Call 860-521-3600 or visit itn-centralct.org to learn more or to become a member.

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Emily Leonard is thankful for ITN Central Connecticut Executive Director Kevin Farmer at the transportation source that allows her to attend night classes at Trinity College.



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