

Out-of-work school bus employees bring a smile to special-needs teen

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Here Pioneer Transportation general manager Owen Reiter gifts a mini bus to a smiling Gregory Brown, a special needs high school student from Bishop Ahern HS, at his house in Randall Manor. With them was his mother, Carol Brown. (Staten Island Advance/ Jan Somma-Hammel)

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Before the pandemic, school bus drive Armand DelGiudice and matron Donna Whalen would see 19-year-old Randall Manor resident Gregory Brown almost everyday to take him to Bishop Ahern High School.

Now, in the era of coronavirus, DelGiudice and Whalen are out of work, and Gregory, a non-verbal special needs teen, has lost a consistent part of his daily routine. That's why the pair and their employer Pioneer Transport decided they wanted to do something for Gregory on Thursday.

After spending so much time with Gregory, they knew his favorite pizza -- a veggie pie with no cheese, due to Gregory's lactose intolerance, from Pronto Pizza -- so they brought him one.

The teen's mom, Carol Brown, said she and Gregory appreciated the gesture, and that it showed her son is in good hands when he's being taken to school.

Pioneer Transportation matron Donna Whalen and driver Armand DelGiudice delivered a pizza to Gregory Brown to his house in Randall Manor. Gregory's favorite no-cheese/veggie pizza from Pronto Pizza to cheered him up. (Staten Island Advance/Jan Somma-Hammel)

"Knowing that, when you're not with him, he's with people who care about him -- that's huge," Brown, a teacher at the Notre Dame Academy elementary school, said. "Just knowing that there are people watching out for him when I can't be there to watch out for him and there are people that care that much. You can't put words to that."

Carolyn Daly, a spokeswoman for Pioneer, said the organization plans to do similar deliveries for other students they serve when school is in session.

With education taking place at home, many of the bus company's employees have been out of work. Pioneer still has to pay overhead costs like insurance and space rental, but hasn't been bringing any money in.

"(Students) have bonds with these drivers and matrons," Daly said.

Rep. Max Rose (D-Staten Island/South Brooklyn) and Assemblyman Michael Reilly have pushed for the city and state to consider proposals that would help yellow school bus drivers amid the pandemic.

In an April 30 letter to Mayor Bill de Blasio and Gov. Andrew Cuomo, Rose and Reilly said "putting these workers out of a jobs would take away their health care and leave them reliant on unemployment insurance, two systems that have already been sorely stretched by the public health emergency."

They proposed that both the city and state coordinate emergency funding through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to repurpose the buses for commuters no longer able to use the transit system at night, therefore keeping those 16,000 workers employed.

"The powerful bond Gregory has with his bus driver Armand was so evident in the way his face lit up when we arrived. School bus drivers don't just transport our kids, they are a huge part of their lives," Rose said. "We need to watch out for those who watch out for our kids. We provided federal money to fix situations like this—the city must act."