

Living Out His Dreams Behind The Wheel

Have you ever taken your childhood dreams and rolled them smack dab into the middle of your adult life? That's what Rich Schlieper did. He has been mesmerized by buses since he was a kid and now, presto, he is a bus driver.

Rich and Eileen Schlieper (pronounced Shleeper) have a husband-wife business which they work part time. Rich drives the bus and Eileen escorts the tours for the Alamance County based Schlieper Bus Tours & Cruises. Their first tour, in 1998, was a Christmas trip to Washington, D.C., with many of the nurses Eileen works with on board. Now the couple's tour business has expanded to approximately ten tours a year, including two cruises which pull in air and sea connections. The cruises are as varied as a river cruise down the Rhine and Danube Rivers in Europe and ocean cruises to New England and Canada.

Every year, the Schliepers put together different tours. You have to step lively to keep abreast of Schlieper creativity. All tours begin and end in Alamance County and are organized around a theme such as special shopping, a historical area, a play, Christmas lights and so on. Eileen says that Rich "smiles from ear to ear when he is behind the wheel" of the bus. And why not? Rich is living his childhood dream.

Eileen and Rich both grew up in the environs of New York City: Eileen on Long Island (her accent lives on) and Rich in Ridgewood, Queens. They got married in 1976 and moved to Alamance County in 1978. In their other lives (in jobs they have had since 1978 to "pay the bills" and live on), Eileen is a registered nurse at ARMC and Rich is now retired from the reinsurance industry. The Schliepers have two sons, Richard (Rick) and Bryan, now ages 25 and 23.

Rich's love of buses began in his childhood. He grew up riding the buses of the New York City transit system. He sat in the front seat of the bus opposite the driver and "watched." As Rich reminisces now about those buses, his arms widen to turn a bus steering wheel and his hands flick back and forth like the wipers on a huge windshield. Rich fell in love with the steering wheels, the wipers, the big foot pedals, and the coin box beside the driver that is used for transfer fares.

At home, Rich played "bus" with his parents. He turned his mother's big washbasin upside down and steered all over their apartment with it. He dragged chairs into the kitchen and lined them up behind each other. His mother sat in the back chair and was a passenger, getting off and on the bus when Rich stopped it. When he was a little older, Rich bought a coin changer for his belt, like the ones used by "hot dog vendors at a baseball game."



Evidence of Rich's love of buses percolated into his adult life. When Rich and Eileen took their own young boys to Disney World, Eileen remembers joking that they could get jobs there. Rich could "drive the bus" and Eileen, with her jet-black hair, "could play Minnie Mouse." There is a collection of miniature buses parked on Rich's bookshelf. The Schliepers adopted two greyhound dogs (as in bus?). And when their son Rick visited Europe, he knew enough to take time to talk to the bus drivers there and relay their conversations back to his Dad.

Eileen shines in organizational skills. When her boys attended school at Blessed Sacrament, Eileen was in demand as a room mother and resource person. She always came up with fun ideas for field trips and activities and easily managed the multiplicity of details. I asked her whether she had ever taken a trip without planning it out first. "Only once," she admitted, when she and Rich decided the family would just "wing" a family trip and let things happen. It drove her "crazy" and before the first day was up, Eileen was figuring out stopping places and hotels so they were able to relax and enjoy the trip. Eileen says that because she is a nurse, she is good at making people comfortable and very used to asking, "What can I do to help you?"

Rich first drove buses for a year as a substitute driver. He was trained by a Greensboro motorcoach company in 1997. For his first bus-driving lesson, the instructor took him to an empty parking lot off Randleman Road in Greensboro, expecting to have to spend some time training him. Rich was "very excited." After all the years of dreaming, he would finally be behind the wheel of a bus. The instructor was amazed at how "comfortable" Rich was with buses and didn't believe it was the first time Rich had ever driven one. Rich told the man he had "watched" a lot and "studied" it. After the lesson, the man told Rich he was good enough to drive the bus through Greensboro, back to its garage.

One of the most popular tours the Schliepers now offer is their "mystery" tour. The passengers book the tour, having no idea where they are going. This time, they are winging it, not the Schliepers. They all try to guess the destination (last year no one guessed it) and as the bus heads either North or South on I 85, half of them have to guess again. Eileen gives them clues as they travel. Even when they get to their destination, they have no idea what the entertainment agenda is.

The Schliepers also plan tours for private groups, such as Twin Lakes and various church groups. They charter late model luxury motorcoaches from Southern Coach Company in Durham which takes care of bus maintenance and insurance. Unlike most other tours, theirs includes most dinners, touring and entertainment. Schlieper Bus Tours & Cruises has a lot of repeat customers. Perhaps this is because Eileen and Rich love the "work" so much.

For more information on their tours visit www.BusToursAndCruises.com or call Eileen and Rich at (336) 229-7996.