

JAMAICA PLAIN

Door-to-door, they take folks for an inexpensive ride

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From the sidewalk, you wouldn't notice anything aside from a muffler shop. But tucked away at the rear of 3377 Washington St. is a tiny office where an operator answers a busy phone in Spanish.

"When do you want us to come get you?" she asks, quickly entering an address into the computer.

This is the main Boston office of Gerardo's Transportation, running a daily door-to-door transportation service between the Boston and New York areas for over 18 years.

For as little as \$30, drivers pick passengers up at their homes and take them by minivan to their destinations in the Big Apple.

"They pick you up at your doorstep. It fits my needs," says Lourdes Ruiz of Queens, on her way to Lynn to visit her younger sister. The two lived together in the Dominican Republic until they moved to separate cities in the United States.

Dominican Gerardo Valerio started the Jamaica Plain company, which has grown to a fleet of 50 vans, when he saw a need for cheap transport between Latino communities in the two cities. Gerardo's does some radio advertising, but most customers hear about the service through friends and use it regularly to visit relatives. "I know 50 percent of the passengers," says driver Luis Gonzalez, popping in a tape of Puerto Rican salsa handed from the rear of the van by a traveler.

Even if they don't know each other when they board, the intimacy of the van lends itself to making connections. Within 20 minutes of leaving

the company's Bronx office on a Saturday afternoon, passengers show each other pictures of their children and begin debates ranging from religion to media coverage of the crash of Dominican-bound Flight 587.

"I'm no psychologist, I'm no therapist, but I could see you weren't feeling well," says passenger Jesus Pichardo of Dorchester to a young woman sitting beside him in a fur coat.

"It's a long ride. In four hours a lot can happen," says driver P. Tineo, who says that passengers have met boyfriends and girlfriends during the trip. "They get on at differ-

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ent houses and don't know each other. The next time you see them, they're riding the bus together."

A couple who met three months ago during one of Tineo's drives recently got engaged.

In spite of growth, Gerardo's Transportation continues to be a family-run business. Valerio still chauffeurs a weekly roundtrip drive from Boston, and his nephew, Os-

car Dominguez, manages New York operations.

But the company has witnessed changes. "Our services started for Spanish people, but we have made a crossover to African Americans and whites," says Dominguez. Service has also expanded to Philadelphia and Washington.

Dominguez says his company's door-to-door service has created competition for Greyhound. He outlines how vans arrive in Boston and meet with Gerardo's local transport to take passengers home, comparing the service to an airline connection. "It's like when you go to the Dominican Republic and make a connection in Puerto Rico."