



# Ride: A long haul, for the education he wants

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wet, brown paper towel.

About 15 minutes later Miro joins a group of classmates at the door. Like ants following a trail of honey, they wend through the hallways and out the door single-file.

Bus 314 waits straight ahead.

Driver Marcy Baart pulls the lever, opening the door. Miro clambers aboard.

"I usually sit in the same place, right in the middle," Miro says. He's often first on the bus and the last off, so he gets his pick. "It's in the center of the card games," he says.

On that day, it was five-card draw. "We're not gambling," he says in a phone call from the bus. (School officials wouldn't allow a reporter or photographer to ride along.)

Miro also carries a portable CD player and has been listening to The Beatles. He recently added a new group to his repertoire.

"There's this band my mom told me about, the Talking Heads. Have you heard of them?"

**Old Donation Center** is a squat, brick building tucked into a quiet patch near the bustle of Haygood Road and Independence Boulevard.

Miro's home, where he lives with his parents, sister and two dogs, is on a sliver of Knotts Island that belongs to Virginia Beach. The peninsula is surrounded by marshes, water and North Carolina.

His mother, Genez, says Miro was 4 when the family moved there from near Glenwood Elementary.

"We could afford to have



CHRIS TYREE/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

**Miro Malebranche skips off the curb at the Old Donation Center in Virginia Beach for bus 314. His sister, Chantal, 12, also rides that bus, to Princess Anne Middle School.**

privacy and waterfront, and still have the Virginia Beach schools, which we love. The idea of him going to Old Donation Center hadn't crossed our minds."

Leaving Old Donation at 3:13 p.m., Miro's bus rumbles past a condo development, out onto Witchduck Road and around the corner to Kemps Landing Magnet School, the division's school for gifted middle-schoolers. The front of the bus releases some students; 10 others get on.

The bus heads south on Independence Boulevard, past clanking construction equipment near Town Center.

Many days, Miro brings his Game Boy Advance. His favorite game is "Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories," which features Disney characters including Peter Pan, Mickey Mouse and Winnie-the-Pooh. Although he plays it only on the bus, he's beaten the game.

Occasionally, he does homework. "If I read for an hour

nonstop, I get sick."

A few students are dropped off in their neighborhoods; then the bus comes to Princess Anne Middle School. There they pick up Miro's 12-year-

old sister, Chantal, who is waiting on a grassy patch by the roadside.

Together, they make up half of the four Virginia Beach public schoolers who live on Knotts Island.

Chantal says she sometimes gets tired during the 50 minutes she spends on the bus.

"The ride doesn't make me tired - school does."

Their mother says her main concern is making sure the children have enough to eat. Chantal says she finds it hard to hold on to her extra snack all day.

"I eat it at lunch anyway."

South of the school, commercial development falls away. The kids pass fruit stands and places like Blue Pete's Seafood Restaurant. Signs advertise "Firewood for sale. \$75/cord" and "Fresh Eggs."

From a front yard, a dog howls like its alone in the world. The bus has the road nearly to itself.

With all the other students

dropped off, they cross into North Carolina at 4:31 p.m. Trailer parks are on both sides of the road. A North Carolina school bus passes, headed the other way.

Soon, they reach Miro's favorite part of the ride, the Marsh Causeway. It's the one time he looks out the bus windows. Sometimes he slides up front to talk to Baart.

"Big white snow geese, turtles, gray herons, white egrets - he knows everything," Baart says. "He knows more than I do." Once they watched the flames of a marsh burn-off right next to the road.

At 4:39 p.m., the three cross back into Virginia. The white fence of the horse farm where Genez Malebranche works is on the right. Their long ride has come to an end.

The siblings hop out of the bus, greeted by their mother and Midnight, their golden retriever/black lab mix.

Miro, Chantal and Genez get into the family minivan for the one-third-mile trip down their driveway. Midnight runs alongside.

With such a long afternoon, there's little time for after-school activities. "Their time on the bus is their free time," their mother says.

But Miro likes his house where it is.

"I don't like living in a neighborhood."

The children climb the stairs, headed for the fridge.

Miro shuts the door behind him.

It's 5 p.m.

■ Reach Lauren Roth at (757) 222-5133 or [lauren.roth@pilotonline.com](mailto:lauren.roth@pilotonline.com).