

LIVING your best LIFE

Driven to assist

Donald Jensen provides rides for fellow senior citizens through ITN

by Mark Jahne
Editor

Donald Jensen enjoys driving. He also enjoys helping people. Put those two together and you've got someone who gladly provides folks with needed mobility.

The Old Wethersfield resident is one of the busiest drivers with ITN Central Connecticut, an affiliate of ITNAmerica. It's an independent transportation network 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.

ITN Central Connecticut is based in West Hartford and covers the Hartford region and beyond. Jensen, 78, uses special software to handle the invoicing.

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," he said.

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 will 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. But they do not lift people for safety reasons.

"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 will give that



Photo by Lisa Brisson

Donald Jensen stands alongside his car in the driveway of his Old Wethersfield home. He is a volunteer driver for ITN Central Connecticut.

person a ride.

"We know ahead of time who has walkers, who has wheelchairs," he said.

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."

Jensen was born and raised in

town, then lived in Rocky Hill and Newington for a while before settling on Garden Street with his wife Linda more than 40 years ago.

A graduate of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, he worked as a metallurgical engineer at Pratt & Whitney Aircraft prior to retirement. The company paid for his college education. He also earned a master's degree from RPI.

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His goal when he stopped working was not to retire from doing something, but to do something new. Driving is not his only passion. Children are another commitment he shares with his wife.

"We were foster parents for many years," Jensen said. "We asked God for ministries."

The couple estimates that between foster care and raising their own offspring, their home hosted more than 60 children.

They are active in the Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church and refer to the community service they perform as ministry. When he was young Donald Jensen used to spend his summers working at the local Jensen Machine Co., owned and operated by extended family.

He first became an ITN driver in February 2009 after town social services staff visited local houses of worship to recruit people to help fellow residents who have disabilities.

Linda Jensen assisted with the town's Friendly Shopper program.

She also occasionally offers rides outside of the ITN program.

"There's a loneliness out there with the elderly," she said.

"I wanted to [help with] transportation but the town didn't want to provide transportation," her husband said. "We're [ITN] providing a very useful and needed service. I like to drive and we like to help people."

So he signed on with ITN Central Connecticut, one of 12 states served by the Maine-based organization.

Jensen said the local board members work well together and have formed friendships.

He said ITN volunteer drivers are responsible for their own auto insurance and the nonprofit provides additional insurance support. They

will take members anywhere within the 15 cities and towns they serve as well as to adjacent towns and Bradley International Airport.

Jensen is the second most active of all the volunteer drivers.

"I've done over 3,200 rides. I probably average nine or 10 a week. Some weeks it could be 15," he said.

"I'm an early riser so I'll do early morning rides. I don't care where they send me. I'm available, I'm retired; I love doing it; my wife lets me do it."

When he's not busy giving rides for ITN Jensen's community service, past and present, includes serving his church as a deacon, treasurer, Sunday School superintendent and board member, among other duties. His wife also volunteers at church.

"ITN Central Connecticut has been around since 2009. Don has been around for most of that time. He is absolutely our number-one driver by far," Executive Director Kevin Farmer said.

He added that Jensen provides 10 or more rides most weeks and also serves on the nonprofit agency's board of directors.

"Beyond that, he is our finance guy. He does all the billing ... he manages the database. Don is a superhero among superheroes," Farmer said.

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 a dozen to 15 are active, according to Jensen. More are needed, call 860-521-3600 or visit itncentralct.org to learn more or to become a member. **NL**

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- Donald Jensen



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