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DCA-08-MR-009

Head-on Collision Between

Metrolink Commuter Train No. 111
&
Union Pacific Freight Train No. LOF65-12

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGES

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In the matter of:

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METROLINK TRAIN NO. 111

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COLLISION WITH UNION PACIFIC

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RAILROAD LEESDALE LOCAL,

* Docket No.: DCA-08-MR-009

September 12, 2008,

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Los Angeles, California

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Interview of: ROBERT HELDENBRAND

National Transportation Safety Board
Courtroom
1515 West 190th Street
Gardenia, California

Thursday,
September 25, 2008

The above-entitled matter came on for interview
pursuant to notice.

BEFORE: TED TURPIN

APPEARANCES:

TED T. TURPIN
National Transportation Safety Board

DAVE WATSON, Senior Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

STEPHEN T. DAWSON, Safety Coordinator
United Transportation Union

JAY J. ELLIS, Operating Practices Inspector
State of California
Public Utilities Commission
Rail Operations Safety Branch

W.R. (BILL) DESKIN, Operating Practices Inspector
Federal Railroad Administration

TED FRITZ, Transportation Manager
Connex/Metrolink

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INTERVIEW OF ROBERT HELDENBRAND

BY MR. TURPIN:

Q. If you would please, state and spell your name.

A. Robert Heldenbrand, last name H-e-l-d-e-n-b-r-a-n-d.

Q. And your employer?

A. Connex/Metrolink.

Q. Okay. And the title of your job?

A. Conductor.

Q. First, we'll just start with just a general explanation of what happened on the day of the accident in Chatsworth.

A. We departed Northridge, stopped at Chatsworth; opened the doors, made my announcements; closed the doors, departed Chatsworth. And I closed my crew door then returned my desk, that little standing desk to mark down on my delay report arrival and departure times. And I was standing at my departure -- or at my desk after departure as we were heading west toward Simi Valley, and that's when the collision occurred at that time.

Q. Okay. I know we had discussed some of this earlier. There was something about a person that was in a wheelchair you had to deal with. Do you want to explain that?

A. In the cab car, we have an area for wheelchairs. We had picked up a mom and her daughter. I believe the daughter

1 has MS. She was in a wheelchair and they were on their way to
2 Moorpark.

3 As we departed Chatsworth, I was in the process --
4 the wheelchair and her mom were actually -- mom was sitting in
5 little seat and the gal was in her wheelchair at that point.
6 And they were -- they were right there as we were departing
7 Chatsworth. They were traveling on up to Simi to go to
8 Moorpark.

9 Q. Okay. Where did she get on the train?

10 A. Los Angeles.

11 Q. At Los Angeles? Did -- is there a security device
12 for the wheelchairs on the wall?

13 A. Yes.

14 Q. Was that secured?

15 A. I think so, yes.

16 Q. Okay. We have -- we have a recording that the
17 engineer announced a flashing yellow signal at -- was it CP
18 Burnson? Did you recall hearing him say that?

19 A. No.

20 Q. Did you recall hearing him announce any signals?

21 A. No. The last signals I recall hearing on the radio
22 were green signals departing Northridge on our way to
23 Chatsworth.

24 Q. Okay. Had he called most of the signals during the
25 day or --

1 A. Oh, yes.

2 Q. -- all signals?

3 A. Yes.

4 Q. Yeah.

5 A. He was very good at calling signals.

6 Q. Okay. What could've distracted you when you went by
7 the flashing yellow that you didn't -- didn't hear it if he had
8 called it?

9 A. Probably at the time heading into Northridge -- or
10 leaving Northridge, I should say, I remember starting my walk
11 through the train. There's about a six-minute running time
12 from Northridge to Chatsworth and we have a clicker that we
13 keep track of the total number of passengers on the train. And
14 I -- as I recall, I was on my way to go from the third car to
15 the second car to get another count. Or in this case, it'd be
16 my final count.

17 Q. Okay. Did you make it all the way to the first car?

18 A. Yes.

19 Q. And then?

20 A. Came back.

21 Q. Returned? So when you reached Chatsworth Station,
22 which car were you in?

23 A. The No. 3 car.

24 Q. Okay. And can you describe when you open the doors
25 and stepped onto the platform basically what happened at

1 Chatsworth?

2 A. When we open the doors at Chatsworth, we are to step
3 down and make our announcement. This is Chatsworth, please
4 watch your step, use the handhold stepping down from the train.
5 And then look down the train on both sides from the crew door
6 to make sure the passengers are stepping down and stepping up,
7 no one's falling, slipping, tripping; keeping an eye out for
8 folks putting their bicycles on and then waiting to make sure
9 that everyone is finished either stepping down or stepping
10 up --

11 Q. Okay.

12 A. -- before departure time.

13 Q. Do you step onto the train before you close the doors
14 or do you reach in and close the door?

15 A. I normally would step back up to at least the first
16 step, make my final announcement, press the buttons, and then
17 keep my crew door open so that I can look down the train like
18 this and this.

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. And the reason for that is mainly to make sure that
21 there isn't some last minute person running for the train
22 that's going to try to dive through the doors because once
23 you -- once you start the sequence button to close the doors,
24 it's about ten seconds until the doors close with the audio
25 beeper that's warning folks that the doors are closing.

1 Q. Okay. So were you standing with your back towards
2 the train or away from the train?

3 A. At the time, I was standing with my back toward the
4 train looking out to the north and to the south.

5 Q. Okay. When you looked up to the north with just the
6 crew door open, do you recall seeing the signal at CP Topanga?

7 A. Yes.

8 Q. And that signal was what?

9 A. Green.

10 Q. Okay. Did you communicate then with the engineer?

11 A. At the time, I called to the engineer and Metrolink
12 111 highball.

13 Q. Okay. Did you make any reference to any signal
14 indications with that communication?

15 A. No.

16 Q. And what response did you get?

17 A. As I recall, there was no response. I don't recall
18 any response on the radio except that the train was starting to
19 move.

20 Q. Okay. It didn't give a short whistle or anything or
21 do you recall?

22 A. I think there was probably at least a short whistle.
23 He was very good at honking the horn, as far as I know
24 departing Chatsworth.

25 Q. Okay.

1 (Pause.)

2 Q. Since you didn't hear the engineer call the -- CP
3 Burnson and there's another intermediate signal. Did you hear
4 him call that --

5 A. No.

6 Q. -- intermediate? What would -- what would your
7 responsibility as a conductor be since he didn't call those
8 signals?

9 A. The responsibility of a conductor would be to call on
10 the radio and repeat the signal. And at the time, I think that
11 I was probably walking through -- walking back through the --
12 walking back through the train because I remember leaving my
13 work station at Northridge to make my circuit. And I remember
14 listening to him call out the signals departing Northridge.

15 But yeah, I guess the answer would be to clarify
16 previous signal call.

17 Q. Okay. Did -- on that day, did it -- do you remember
18 it actually registering that he quit calling the signals, or he
19 failed to call the last two?

20 A. No.

21 Q. Okay. Could you explain the guidelines for the use
22 of cell phones for operating crews?

23 A. Metrolink has a policy that for the operator of the
24 locomotive or cab car that the cell phone is not to be used
25 while the train is in motion. In other words, operating the

1 controls of the locomotive or cab car, the engineer is not to
2 use the cell phone.

3 The conductor may use a cell phone because he's in
4 the body of the train. We carry a company cell phone that is
5 issued to each conductor.

6 Q. Okay. Had you ever seen this engineer use his cell
7 phone?

8 A. One time when we were at Moorpark and the train was
9 stationary. We were getting ready to leave Moorpark and he was
10 using his cell phone.

11 Q. And that would've been in the cab car?

12 A. Cab car.

13 Q. And what did you do?

14 A. I mentioned it to him. I had also mentioned it later
15 on to Rick Dahl who talked to him a couple of days later.

16 Q. Had you ever seen him using the text message system
17 on his cell phone or was it verbal?

18 A. Every call is verbal.

19 Q. How long had you been working with this engineer?

20 A. Since April 15th. Every six months, a job comes up
21 for bid.

22 Q. Um-hum.

23 A. October and April. And I had bid on this job. I
24 think Rob either bid on this job or was bumped. I think he bid
25 on this job so we've been working each day since April 15th, I

1 think. April 15th, April 16th.

2 Q. Had you worked with him before that?

3 A. Um-hum, yes. Worked with him before about a year --
4 maybe a year, year and a half ago on a similar job, the job
5 that's the middle job.

6 Q. Um-hum.

7 A. CMPKNB2.

8 Q. And had that been for a prolonged period of time?

9 A. Six months.

10 Q. Six months.

11 A. Um-hum.

12 Q. So you're pretty familiar with his operating trains
13 as an engineer?

14 A. Yes.

15 Q. And you're comfortable with him as an engineer?

16 A. Yes. In fact, whenever there was a Form B or Form A
17 speed limit coming up, Form B for construction zone. Let's say
18 it was between Glendale and Los Angeles, he would actually be
19 the first to remind me even though the rule would say call
20 after the last station for two miles after departing station or
21 two miles before the restriction.

22 Rob was very conscientious about putting his Form B's
23 and stuff on the dashboard so that he would even call me, say,
24 at Burbank. In fact, a little -- if you were -- if you will,
25 premature, but it was a way to remind both of us that we had

1 this item coming up even if it was a couple, three miles ahead
2 of the gate so as not to forget we're coming up to Form B or
3 Form A.

4 Q. Along those lines and when the bids came out and you
5 found out that it was this engineer that got the bid for the --
6 for the crew, how did you feel about that?

7 A. I felt good. I felt good because I worked with him
8 before.

9 Q. Uh-huh. And it is normal practice for calling
10 signals, you said?

11 A. Absolutely. He'd call out everything.

12 Q. What if you didn't respond?

13 A. Then I would -- most times I would call him on the
14 radio and call back and say, can you repeat please?

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. Or he would -- or especially like if we were changing
17 channels, say at CP Armistan, changing channels to -- say from
18 channel 47 to 29 for the Valley Sub, then he would repeat the
19 signal again and he was very good about that. Whenever we'd
20 change channels, then he would also repeat that signal on that
21 channel too.

22 Q. Okay. What if you, you know, were busy with the
23 passengers and failed to repeat a yellow? Would he start
24 bugging you?

25 A. No, I wouldn't say that he would bug me. He would,

1 upon departure, say we came into -- say we came into Northridge
2 on a yellow, for example, then he would call on the radio and
3 say, Metrolink 111 on a yellow.

4 Q. And on the day of the accident, he never said
5 anything at Chatsworth?

6 A. No, I do not recall hearing anything at Chatsworth.

7 Q. Do you recall -- you've been working this since April
8 where you normally encountered the Leesdale Local, the UP
9 local?

10 A. Yes, normally, nine times out of ten, we would meet
11 the -- meet the Leesdale Local probably between CP Santa Susana
12 and CP Davis. Sometimes we would meet them between Santa
13 Susana and CP Madera. If it was a day where they had been out
14 working quite late, the dispatcher, upon arriving Moorpark,
15 would hold us there and then let us go first. And they would
16 wait back toward CP Los Posas and Moorpark Avenue then let us
17 go first as the scheduled train and then let them follow us.

18 I would say nine times out of ten, we would meet the
19 Leesdale at CP Davis --

20 Q. Okay.

21 A. -- in the afternoons. That was kind of a normal
22 thing.

23 Q. When you -- when you met them?

24 A. Yeah.

25 Q. Do you recall where you met it on Thursday?

1 A. No.

2 Q. And if you didn't see the Leesdale Local, where would
3 you assume that --

4 A. I'd figure they were out and about, still coming down
5 from Oxnard.

6 Q. And yet, this train doesn't go that far?

7 A. No. We go to Moorpark, arriving 4:40, departing
8 4:57. So we would be there roughly, say, 15-20 minutes at the
9 max; change ends, do an air test, depart 118.

10 Q. Okay. Before I start through the rest and duty cycle
11 of previous days, I think I'll just -- I'll walk around the
12 room and see if anyone has any questions.

13 BY MR. FRITZ:

14 Q. Ted Fritz. Why does Metrolink issue the conductors a
15 phone?

16 A. I think the reason that they originally -- it's my
17 understanding it was in order to be able to contact the
18 conductor for anything that was coming up, either from MOC or
19 the dispatcher. Also, if the conductor would need to contact
20 MOC, as far as operations or the dispatcher or perhaps the
21 chief, regarding an incident, some sort of delay. Probably
22 mainly for delay of train to keep them apprised of any delays.

23 Q. So there -- are there specific times you're required
24 to call MOC?

25 A. No.

1 Q. Do you receive a lot of calls from MOC?

2 A. Not usually. They would usually -- the only time I
3 get calls -- every once in awhile, I get a call from the
4 dispatcher, sometimes Phil, sometimes Jim, regarding an
5 upcoming thing. They would call us on the -- on the phone just
6 to give us a heads up about an upcoming meet or something.
7 Most times they would call us on the radio and advise the
8 engineer, you're going to -- you're going wait at, say, Raymer
9 for Amtrak 784.

10 Q. And did the dispatcher have any conversations with
11 you that day about any of your meets?

12 A. No.

13 MR. FRITZ: I have no further questions.

14 BY MR. DESKIN:

15 Q. I'm Bill Deskin. When you went back on duty after
16 your release period, did your engineer seem any way out of
17 sorts or different than normal?

18 A. No.

19 Q. Did he have a good sense of humor?

20 A. Yes. Very dry, very -- I guess what the word is --
21 yeah, very dry sense of humor. Sort of a humorous way to look
22 at various situations.

23 Q. We discussed something earlier about an incident that
24 occurred a couple of weeks before this accident where someone
25 was struck by your train. I don't know if --

1 A. Yes, sir.

2 Q. -- you were on board. Did Mr. Sanchez seek help
3 after that?

4 A. Yes.

5 Q. And was he given time off?

6 A. Yes, he was. I -- that incident was, I believe,
7 Wednesday, July 18th, which was between Van Nuys and Burbank.
8 It was on our 106 train coming in in the morning. I had
9 happened that morning after we left Van Nuys to go and remind
10 Rob that we had a wheelchair in the cab car. I happened to be
11 standing, just looking forward through the door as we were
12 coming on Bellair Avenue.

13 Rob was in his -- in control compartment running from
14 the cab car, and as we were traveling -- we were roughly
15 halfway between Van Nuys and Burbank Airport, so it was almost
16 on the dot, 8:00. I observed a man step right in front of us.
17 Both of us saw it. Rob said, oh, my God, and that was it. Rob
18 stopped the train, and I immediately made an announcement and
19 started walking.

20 Q. Did you seek help?

21 A. No. I was contacted by the gentleman from the EAP
22 Division. We talked on the phone. I talked with him on the
23 phone but I did not seek help at the time.

24 MR. DESKIN: That's all I have.

25 BY MR. ELLIS:

1 Q. Jay Ellis, PUC. You guys met 784 that day. Where'd
2 you guys meet them at?

3 A. At CP Raymer.

4 Q. And was there any -- did you talk to the crew or had
5 you guys been sitting there or was it --

6 A. We were there for seven minutes.

7 Q. Okay. So --

8 A. We were right on time at 4:02 at Van Nuys. We came
9 in on a red or a yellow, we departed. We got a flashing red at
10 CP Elicor, stopped at CP Raymer, waited for Amtrak 784. And I
11 remember that it was seven minutes even.

12 Q. Okay. Did you hear anything on the radio? Did Rob
13 talk to them or did their engineer talk to you guys or --

14 A. I don't think so. If anything at all, I don't recall
15 having a conversation with the crew. Rob may've, you know,
16 given them a roll-by or said, have a good evening, Bob, or
17 something like that.

18 Q. Okay.

19 A. As far as I know.

20 Q. All right. That's --

21 A. That's a pretty standard meet right there.

22 Q. Okay.

23 A. Some days they will be there -- if they're right on
24 the money, we don't even have to wait for them and it's a
25 straight shot right up to Northridge. Other days we'll, you

1 know, take a wait, maybe seven to ten minutes. It just depends
2 on where they are.

3 MR. ELLIS: Okay. I think that's all I have.

4 BY MR. DAWSON:

5 Q. Steve Dawson, UTU. You stated that you had -- you
6 had reported the cell phone incident to your supervisor?

7 A. Yes, sir.

8 Q. And who is that?

9 A. Rick Dahl.

10 Q. It was?

11 A. Yes.

12 MR. DAWSON: That's all I have.

13 BY MR. TURPIN:

14 Q. Ted Turpin. Do you know the dispatcher?

15 A. Pretty well, yes. I mean, as far as -- I've only
16 met, I think, one of them in person and that was Jim. When --
17 this has probably been more than a year ago or so. They sent
18 the dispatchers out on the trains to let them ride around and
19 be familiar with the territory.

20 And so, I remember meeting Jim. The rest of them, I
21 have just literally talked to them on the radio or talked to
22 them on the phone. I'm familiar with their initials and the
23 sound of their voice.

24 Q. Okay. And this was the regular train dispatcher?

25 A. Yes.

1 Q. Do you always feel comfortable with the way they
2 dispatch trains?

3 A. Yes.

4 Q. Okay. Just in general, you know, every time we go to
5 different railroads, we always get a feeling about the
6 employees and the supervision, you know. And sometimes it's --
7 it's whatever it is. So, would you -- could you characterize
8 the relationship you have with the supervisors at Connex?

9 A. I think I have a good relationship with them.

10 Q. Okay.

11 A. And the reason for that is I -- my parents have
12 instilled a work ethic in me to be on time, to come to work,
13 and to do my job. And I -- in fact, I would say that I even
14 take a little ribbing from some of my colleagues even as to the
15 seriousness that I approach my job.

16 Q. Okay. So that feeling you have may not be
17 characteristic of everybody's feeling?

18 A. No. I would say that -- I cannot speak for my
19 colleagues as far as on a scale of, say, one to ten, ten being
20 best, what kind of a relationship -- whether -- you know, as
21 far as a working relationship they would have.

22 Q. Okay. How did Engineer Sanchez feel about you
23 reporting his cell phone to Rick Dahl?

24 A. He didn't say anything to me. I'm sure that at some
25 point it probably bothered him. I know that -- I'm -- I think

1 part of it would probably be sort of the snitch factor, I guess
2 if you want to call it that.

3 Q. Okay.

4 A. But there was never an issue -- there was never an
5 issue or a discussion between Rob and myself regarding it.

6 Q. All right.

7 A. I think -- according to Rick, when he mentioned it to
8 Rob, it was like, yeah, I know and that was pretty much the end
9 of the discussion.

10 Q. Okay. So it didn't create a rift between you and --

11 A. No.

12 Q. -- in your working relationship?

13 A. No.

14 Q. Okay. Let me change gears a little bit and go to
15 employment history. When did you start working for a railroad?

16 A. September 18th, 1995, I signed on with Amtrak
17 Peninsula Commute Service, maintenance of way.

18 Q. Okay. And if you just walk through your railroad
19 career?

20 A. I worked in maintenance of way out of Sunnyvale and
21 South San Francisco from September 1995 until March of '96. I
22 was accepted into the AC Program at San Jose. They took twelve
23 people altogether, six for the Peninsula Commute Service and
24 six for the Amtrak Overland Service out of Oakland.

25 I worked the Peninsula another six months. At that

1 time, I had a house in Glendale, I was sharing an apartment in
2 Sunnyvale and it was very difficult financially to keep both of
3 them going. I moved back to Glendale in August of 1996, and in
4 the spring of '97, I was promoted to conductor. I worked
5 conductor on the San Diegans and the Santa Barbara trains, San
6 Luis Obispo trains mostly.

7 Between 1997 and 2001, November 2001, I went over to
8 Metrolink. I transferred over mainly because I was seeking
9 more hours of employment and I've been at Metrolink since
10 November of 2001. I transferred to San Bernardino, was at San
11 Bernardino for roughly six months, November to April of 2002.
12 And I've been working out of Moorpark/Montalvo from April 2002
13 to the present.

14 Q. Very good. The peninsula job, maintenance of way,
15 was that Amtrak?

16 A. Amtrak.

17 Q. Amtrak was doing the maintenance?

18 A. Yeah, Amtrak had the, had the contract for both
19 maintenance of way and conductors and engineers.

20 Q. Okay. And when you went to AC, did you work the
21 commuters there or --

22 A. Yes.

23 Q. -- did you start working --

24 A. I worked six months on the commuter line.

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. In fact, Mr. Konstanzer, who is now with us, was I
2 think third in command up there on the Peninsula Commute
3 Service.

4 Q. Um-hum.

5 A. So I worked under those guys.

6 Q. Okay. And then transferred to Los Angeles to work --

7 A. San Diegans.

8 Q. San Diegans. Ever do any of the intercity?

9 A. Occasionally. I only made two trips, I think, on the
10 Sunset. I made two trips total on the Las Vegas train, the
11 Desert Wind, until it was removed. And occasionally, once in
12 every two or three did I ever go to Kingman and back on 3 and
13 4. Most of those are held by high seniority -- high seniority
14 positions.

15 Q. Okay. So you've done -- you've been almost seven
16 years steady now at Metrolink, in the Metrolink system?

17 A. Yes.

18 Q. Okay, all right. All right, let's try to back
19 through the -- we'll start with -- there's two ways to go. We
20 can back away from the accident or we can start early in the
21 week.

22 The first day of the week that you worked was Monday,
23 correct?

24 A. Yes.

25 Q. All right. Why don't we start with Monday and start

1 with your work shift Monday, whatever you can recall, that's
2 fine.

3 A. Okay. Monday morning, arise 3:00 a.m., shower,
4 shave, breakfast, depart 4:00 a.m. from Santa Barbara. It
5 takes me about 30 minutes to get to Montalvo. Ever since I
6 started working Moorpark/Montalvo when I was living in
7 Glendale, I would always give myself an extra 30 minutes or so
8 on the freeway, not knowing if there was going to be a pileup
9 at certain points, which over the course of five or six years,
10 there have been several where there would've been a delay to my
11 sign on time.

12 I prefer to get to the office a little early. That
13 way, I can either go to 7-Eleven and grab a cup of coffee or
14 just take a little nap in the parking lot. The reason being is
15 that I figure I'm in the parking lot, if I doze off, I'm not on
16 duty yet. Someone can come and knock on the door and say, hey,
17 it's time to go on duty here.

18 Normally what I would do is set my alarm clock for a
19 few minutes before 5:54, which is the on duty time for this
20 job. And I put on my tie, grab my stuff out of the car, and
21 walk into the office and start going through my track warrants.

22 Q. Okay.

23 A. Then we walk out, set over the train to the Montalvo
24 Depot; depart 6:44, go into Los Angeles, get in about 8:30;
25 take the train over to CMF, drop off the train, and then go in

1 and finish my paperwork. And on that particular job, it is off
2 duty between 9:26 and 2:00 p.m.

3 Normally what I would do is on that -- as I recall on
4 Monday, I think I went upstairs, took a nap for a while in the
5 quiet room. And that was pretty much my MO, unless I had a
6 couple of quick errands to run or something.

7 Q. Okay. And that's right in the CMF, the quiet room?

8 A. Upstairs, um-hum.

9 Q. Okay.

10 A. Yeah, there's a quiet room, a lounge room, a
11 cafeteria. The quiet room is basically filled -- about this
12 size, filled up with La-Z-Boy chairs. So, I take a nap.

13 Q. Okay. And then back on duty at 2:00 p.m.?

14 A. Back on duty at 2:00 p.m. At 3:05, we would take the
15 Metrolink 111 equipment over to Union Station, depart at 3:35
16 arriving Moorpark at about 4:40; departing 4:57 as a return --
17 as a return leg on Metrolink train 118, arriving Los Angeles
18 6:15 to 6:20; and then stepping from track 4 to track 5 to get
19 out final set of equipment, which is another three-car set,
20 which comes in from Orange County.

21 And then we take that three-car set at 6:40,
22 departing as Metrolink train 119, service to Montalvo; arrive
23 Montalvo, unload, and then park the train for the night. And
24 off duty at 9:05.

25 Q. Okay. And what do you do after 9:05?

1 A. Go straight home and go to bed.

2 Q. And that's back to Santa Barbara?

3 A. Yes, sir.

4 Q. And that's usually about --

5 A. 30 -- 30-minute drive.

6 Q. Okay. All right.

7 A. Normally, that train, depending on our meets with
8 Union Pacific, if Amtrak -- or on Union Pacific. If Amtrak 11
9 and Amtrak 796 are way late, we would have a straight shot.
10 Our arrival time is scheduled for 8:35 or we can be in as early
11 as 8:10 to 8:15.

12 Q. Okay. And if you came in early, how would you
13 conduct yourself? Would you still --

14 A. I would go ahead -- as soon as we finish unloading
15 the passengers, walk the train, make sure no one fell asleep or
16 are still in the cars, back the train up, park it as No. 3
17 train at the west end of the siding.

18 Q. Um-hum.

19 A. And then proceed to the office, fax in my delay
20 report, get in the car, drive home, go to bed.

21 Q. All right, so that was Monday. Tuesday same routine,
22 as you recall, in this week?

23 A. Tuesday and Wednesday, I was off.

24 Q. Oh, okay. What'd you do on Tuesday and Wednesday?

25 A. I marked off sick. I stayed home.

1 Q. Okay.

2 A. I had had a -- the last week of July I had had a
3 twisted intestine. I was in the hospital. I come in on the
4 morning on the 30th of July, which was a Wednesday, and I
5 hadn't been feeling good that morning was burping a lot. And I
6 drove myself to the emergency room at Glendale Adventist
7 Hospital. And they took me immediately in, one of my
8 intestines had flipped over and was -- and had basically cut
9 off the pipes, so to speak. I spent Wednesday and Thursday
10 night at Glendale Adventist Hospital, and they warned me that
11 this could happen again at anytime.

12 Q. And that's the feelings you were having on Wednesday
13 and Thursday?

14 A. Yeah, so I stayed home. I marked off sick on Tuesday
15 and Thursday -- or Tuesday and Wednesday.

16 Q. All right.

17 A. Marked back up Wednesday night.

18 Q. While you were off, basically you were resting the
19 whole time? Okay.

20 A. Then I marked back up Wednesday night to go to work
21 Thursday and Friday.

22 Q. Okay. Do you remember what time you went to bed
23 Wednesday night?

24 A. Probably about 8:00.

25 Q. Okay. Okay, and then --

1 A. On an evening where I know I have to get up early --

2 Q. Um-hum.

3 A. -- I would -- I would normally try to get to bed
4 early and that way I could get -- try to get as much sleep in
5 as I could before going on duty.

6 Q. Okay.

7 A. Even though we have this break time on this job.

8 Q. Right. So Thursday morning, you started off?

9 A. Same time, 3:00 a.m.

10 Q. About 3:00 a.m. Anything unusual Thursday that
11 would've been different from Monday?

12 A. No.

13 Q. Did you stay up late watching TV at all on Thursday
14 night or --

15 A. No. By the nature of these jobs, because they start
16 early, my understanding is that because of the nature of these
17 jobs, as the week progresses, you know, you pretty much just
18 want to go straight home. I mean, even bypassing going to
19 grocery stores, for example, by the very nature of this job, I
20 pretty much go straight home.

21 Q. Okay.

22 A. Try to stop, do my -- try to do my errands and stock
23 the refrigerator during the weekend so that it doesn't affect
24 my travel time or my late time as far as getting home and going
25 to bed.

1 Q. Okay. Okay, that's Thursday at 3:00 a.m. We finish
2 the shift Thursday 9:05 or thereabouts, do you recall?

3 A. Yes.

4 Q. And --

5 A. I don't recall any events and anything out of the
6 ordinary for Thursday.

7 Q. Okay. Your primary residence is Santa Barbara?

8 A. Yes. I had moved up there in January. The house I
9 lived in in Glendale for 17 years was sold in January and I
10 was -- I moved up there in January. I was actually baby-
11 sitting my friend's mobile home. It turned out to be pretty
12 good because I cut my commute time in half and my drive
13 distance in half from Glendale to Montalvo to Santa Barbara to
14 Montalvo --

15 Q. Right.

16 A. -- which is basically 60 to 30 miles.

17 Q. And quite a bit less traffic.

18 A. Absolutely, no traffic.

19 Q. I was -- actually, I was interested, where do you get
20 your personal time on a shift like this? If you work the full
21 week, Monday through Friday, where is your personal time?

22 A. Saturday and Sunday.

23 Q. I see that. All right. Has anything happened in
24 your personal life in the last, say, month or two of any
25 significance, a death in family or so on?

1 A. No, just for me, as I mentioned before, I was
2 hospitalized for a couple nights in July.

3 Q. Um-hum.

4 A. That was kind of a fluke as far as I'm concerned.
5 It's very odd because I consider myself to be pretty healthy as
6 far as being able to show up for work and be on time and put in
7 a full day.

8 Q. Okay. Just to hit real quickly on the accident with
9 the pedestrian/trespasser. But you were contacted by EPA and
10 you talked with them for awhile, and you didn't feel that you
11 needed anything other than --

12 A. No. I worked in a hospital for almost 16 years prior
13 to my railroad experience.

14 Q. Um-hum.

15 A. And so I think this is my seventh or eighth fatality
16 since I've been a conductor.

17 Q. Okay.

18 A. And so -- and that's not to discount any of those
19 particular incidents in any way, shape, or form. But I think
20 that my hospital experience may have sort of impaired me
21 somewhat.

22 Q. Okay, all right. And to clarify because I know -- I
23 understood what you were saying that that -- the pedestrian was
24 struck with the cab car forward.

25 A. Yes, sir.

1 Q. It's visually -- the window's right there for the
2 engineer. Was the engineer's door open?

3 A. I don't think so. I think it was closed. I just
4 remember standing there looking out the front window, and I was
5 on my way up there to talk to Rob and remind him of the
6 wheelchair.

7 Q. Um-hum.

8 A. And the next thing I heard him say was -- he was
9 looking out front as we were coming across -- and I remember
10 looking forward, and I remember hearing him say, oh, my God,
11 and that was it. And then he stopped the train.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. And I started working.

14 Q. All right, that was a little detour for a moment.
15 Your -- how do you feel of your physical condition other than
16 the issue in July?

17 A. Good.

18 Q. Okay. Do you have any physical activity, gym time or
19 jogging or anything?

20 A. Mostly riding my bike.

21 Q. Bike riding, okay. Your vision, is it -- do you wear
22 glasses?

23 A. Corrective hard contact lenses.

24 Q. Um-hum.

25 A. Corrected to 20/20.

1 Q. And you wear them while you're at work?

2 A. Yes, sir.

3 Q. Hearing?

4 A. Hearing, very good.

5 Q. Okay. Alcohol, do you drink on the weekends?

6 A. No. I couldn't tell you the last time that I had --
7 I even had a beer or something because I just don't do it.

8 Q. Okay.

9 A. I think part of it is the work ethic during the week.

10 Q. All right. Tobacco, do you smoke?

11 A. No.

12 Q. Any medications?

13 A. I have medications that I take for asthma. I was
14 diagnosed at -- about a year and a half ago, adult onset
15 asthma.

16 Q. Um-hum.

17 A. So I do have an Advair inhaler I use once a day and
18 also Singulair, which is a once a day tablet for asthma. What
19 was happening was, according to my physician, the air
20 conditioning units on the train circulate all the time. And
21 depending on how fast they change out the filters, that air
22 conditioning is about 85 percent circulated. And that was
23 causing an asthma-like symptom. When I would try to make
24 announcements, I would cough. So I would say, ladies and
25 gentlemen (cough), this is Metrolink train (cough, cough)

1 number (cough) 111.

2 And so I reported that to my physician who -- who put
3 me on those -- those meds. And it has completely disappeared.

4 Q. Okay. Those are two. Any other medications,
5 prescription?

6 A. The other prescription medication I have is
7 fluoxetine and bupropreon (ph.), which is an antidepressant.

8 Q. Okay. Anything over the counter you take on a
9 regular basis?

10 A. No. No, most of the -- most of the symptoms I've had
11 has mostly been the asthma, just coughing.

12 Q. Um-hum. Okay. You feel you get enough sleep?

13 A. Um-hum.

14 Q. You feel rested at 3:00 a.m. and while on duty?

15 A. Sometimes I wake up like a half an hour before the
16 alarm clock goes off, which baffles me because I figure by the
17 time I get home and get right to bed, you know, I'm ready to
18 hit the sack. And it's very interesting that I would wake up,
19 say, 15 or 20 minutes almost before the alarm clock goes off.

20 Q. What happens Saturday and Sunday? When do you wake
21 up then?

22 A. Sleep in until -- well, actually for me it's a long
23 time. I'll sleep in until 7:00 or 8:00.

24 Q. Both days?

25 A. Um-hum. I find it very hard to sleep in, quite

1 honestly because once you're on one of these jobs for a couple
2 of weeks, your body starts getting its own rhythm and you --
3 you are literally aware -- in fact, I could wake up on a
4 Saturday or Sunday morning at 3:00 a.m. and then roll over and
5 say, oh, it's Saturday -- or it Saturday or Sunday, I can go
6 back to sleep for a couple of hours.

7 Q. Okay.

8 A. But I'm not one -- I would not be able to sleep
9 until, say, 12:00 noon. I would be awake by 7:00 or 8:00.

10 Q. And then Sunday night, you already mentioned earlier
11 that knowing you're getting up at 3:00, you try to go to bed by
12 8:00 --

13 A. Yes.

14 Q. -- Sundays.

15 (Pause.)

16 BY MR. TURPIN:

17 Q. Do you take any exception to the train dispatcher
18 bringing the local past CP Davis? Did you think that was kind
19 of odd that he brought it over to Chatsworth?

20 A. I did because, like I said before -- as stated
21 before, nine times out of ten, we would meet them up on the
22 other side. And we normally had -- assuming that we met Amtrak
23 796 in a timely fashion, we normally had pretty much a straight
24 shot between Burbank Junction all the way to Simi Valley. And
25 then from then on, it's just a straight shot to Moorpark, turn

1 right around and come back.

2 I think that meeting them there at Chatsworth was --
3 to me, was out of the ordinary. In fact -- I mean, I think on
4 a regular basis you can almost count on them -- on seeing them
5 at CP Davis, CP Santa Susana because that's a very long siding
6 there and they can fit in a freight train there easy.

7 The problem -- the only problem I would have with
8 them meeting at Moorpark is that depending on whether or not
9 they let freight train roll would be to protect the crossings
10 because there's double track at Moorpark Station.

11 And meeting up with them at, say, CP Davis eliminates
12 any, you know, pedestrian problems.

13 Q. Okay. Just as a general, how much freight activity
14 do you actually encounter during this -- even both shifts?

15 A. On this particular job, pretty much no freight coming
16 in on 106 because we're part of the morning commutes coming in.

17 Q. Right.

18 A. I would say probably once -- maybe once a day on
19 train 111. Coming back on 118 in the afternoon, possibly one.
20 They might be out working around Van Nuys and you can usually
21 hear them poking around.

22 Some -- occasionally in the morning on 106, as we
23 come into Van Nuys, there would be a freight working the yard,
24 but he's over there doing his thing. He's not, you know,
25 hanging out of the main.

1 And then coming home on 119, the two trains we
2 normally meet would be Amtrak 11, the Starlight, and Amtrak
3 796. And coming home, maybe an occasional freight train.

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. And I think what they try to do is they know that
6 train 113, 115, 119 are all heading west in the evening time.
7 And then they've got Amtrak 98, 96, and 11 heading east. So
8 there's six passenger trains that are passing within several
9 hours of each other. I think that they normally would try to
10 hold, for example, maybe stick a freight train in the siding a
11 Camarillo because, again, it's a long siding.

12 Q. Um-hum. It's pretty busy with passengers.

13 A. Yes.

14 Q. Bottom line.

15 A. Yes.

16 MR. TURPIN: Okay. All right. That's just about it
17 for me.

18 MR. FRITZ: I don't have anything else.

19 BY MR. TURPIN:

20 Q. All right. We always finish with at least one last
21 input. Is there any suggestions you might have to improve the
22 safety, either specific to the accident or just as a general
23 statement?

24 A. I think maybe in terms of, say, my pack set, maybe
25 having a little more powerful pack set.

1 Q. Um-hum.

2 A. I know, of course, the radio in the locomotive and
3 the cab car have a much longer range because of the antenna
4 that's set up. And I realize of course carrying a pack set
5 it's -- it's not designed for, you know, long-range reception.
6 But perhaps maybe a little more powerful transmitter or
7 receiver or antenna, something that would be able to -- and the
8 reason I say this is because there's times when I could hear
9 bits and pieces on my pack set as I'm in the train. Whereas
10 the engineer could hear, say, the dispatcher advising him that
11 we're going to meet Amtrak 798.

12 Sometimes we call back on the radio and say,
13 conductor did you copy, and say, no, can you repeat it? And
14 they'd say, okay, we're going to meet 798 here at Raymer. I
15 think that would be one thing that might be helpful, maybe a
16 little more powerful receiver or transmitter.

17 Q. Um-hum. Having said that, one question and answer
18 always prompts more. The dispatcher giving information about
19 meets, is that -- do they do that often?

20 A. Well, I would say that they're pretty good at it. In
21 fact, they will call ahead of time and say, Metrolink, Ventura
22 Sub, Metrolink 111, you're going to be held there at CP Raymer
23 for a few minutes waiting for 784.

24 Q. Okay.

25 A. It kind of gives us a heads up.

1 Q. Um-hum.

2 A. It gives me a chance also to see what's going on and
3 perhaps make an announcement. Say, ladies and gentlemen, we're
4 going to be paused here for a minutes waiting for Amtrak 784.
5 As soon as that train clears, we'll be on our way to Chatsworth
6 or Northridge or what have you.

7 Q. And you see it as good information because you're
8 going to be delayed. Your passengers probably want to know
9 what's going on?

10 A. Yes, because otherwise, then, by giving a heads up
11 like that, I think it's good because otherwise, he would say
12 come up on a red signal and then the engineer would call the
13 dispatcher and say, hey, Phil, what do you got going here? Oh,
14 yeah, you got a -- you know, you guys are waiting for 84.
15 They're just coming out of CP Raymer or whatever or they're
16 just taking a switch at ABC.

17 Q. Does he ever get the information soon enough to
18 actually slow down and kind of lay back a little bit?

19 A. Oh, absolutely. In the evening time on train 119, we
20 normally would meet Amtrak 798 somewhere between Van Nuys and
21 Burbank Airport. And so that allowed us just to kind of cruise
22 along because we knew they were coming down from Van Nuys.
23 Then we would cruise along instead of -- instead of, you know,
24 just going up there and waiting when we just cruise along about
25 20 mph.

1 That way, it keeps the train moving and then wait for
2 798 to finish their station work. And then they take off to
3 work Burbank Airport and then we get a red over green and then
4 we're good to go all the way to Moorpark.

5 MR. TURPIN: Okay. All right. Thank you. Anybody
6 have any questions?

7 (No response.)

8 MR. TURPIN: I think that concludes it. I thank you
9 very much.

10 THE WITNESS: Thank you.

11 MR. TURPIN: Very good. Thank you.

12 (Whereupon, the interview in the above-entitled
13 matter was concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: METROLINK TRAIN NO. 111
COLLISION WITH UNION PACIFIC
RAILROAD LEESDALE LOCAL,
September 12, 2008,
Los Angeles, California
Interview of Robert Heldenbrand

DOCKET NUMBER: DCA-08-MR-009

PLACE: Gardena, California

DATE: September 25, 2008

was held in accordance with the record, and that this is the
original, true and accurate transcript which has been compared
to the recording accomplished at the interviews.

John Sullivan
Court Reporter