

EATONTOWN

Navy veteran walked to work in the rain and snow. Then came a helping hand

[Olivia Liu](#) Asbury Park Press

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EATONTOWN - Amelica Cajou did not own a car. So, she walked, rode the bus, and used Uber gift cards to get to work in Tinton Falls.

If she walked, the nearly seven miles in one direction could take about two hours. If she took the bus, she had to transfer to a second line in Asbury Park.

Cajou, a Navy veteran, is a few years short of 60, the age when she can start receiving her military pension.

“When I (had) \$5 or \$20, I wouldn’t even spend (it) because I need to feed my son,” Cajou said. “I’ll walk if I can keep the money for him.”

In early October, Cajou was given a 2004 Ford Escort by Paul Sansone Jr. of Sansone Jr.'s 66 Automall in Neptune.

The connection was made by Lunch Break, a Red Bank nonprofit, which had been furnishing Cajou with the gift cards. Sansone is the force behind Hope for a Ride program, which gives away cars to special residents in Monmouth County.

Lunch Break also serves free hot meals to anyone who walks in their doors on Drs. James Parker Boulevard. Its Life Skills program provides career mentorship to participants like Cajou.

Sansone said he works with nonprofits and churches because “they really know the people.”

“We’re not giving away new cars,” Sansone said. “Cars that had a life, that we’re refurbishing, making them safe and reliable.”

Sansone said he has given away about 50 cars to people who need a helping hand and are willing to work.

“Everybody’s (complaining) about people not wanting to work and there’s a woman right there that works. That walks to get to work,” Sansone said.

“Transportation is a major issue for the working poor,” Jan Marie Oberdick, a mentor at Lunch Break’s Life Skills program, said. “If you are on the bus line or the rail line, it just goes north and south. ... If you live somewhere off that route, it’s very difficult for the working poor to find any kind of transportation that’s reasonable if they don’t have a car.”

Oberdick was paired with Cajou in early 2020, shortly after Cajou moved to Eatontown with her son, 16. Cajou needed a job and had reached out to Lunch Break for help with her resume.

“If I were to describe her in a few words, it would be sweet, kind, determined and tiny,” Oberdick said. “She’s only like 5 feet tall.”

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Back in New Mexico where Cajou’s husband and daughter are still living, Cajou’s son, who has autism, was struggling to learn. Cajou moved to New Jersey so her son could attend a specialized program in the Tinton Falls school district.

When Cajou first arrived in Eatontown, she was living in a motel with her son and had six months of savings. Her goal was to enroll her son in school, find a permanent place to live and get a job.

When the pandemic hit, money ran low, employment opportunities dried up and Cajou knew no one. Through the help of a number of nonprofits, Cajou managed to get hired working nightshift security five days a week at Seabrook Senior Living in Tinton Falls. But there was a problem.

“I need to pay my rent and feed my son, so good thing I had a job,” Cajou said. “(But) I have to find my way to get there.”

Cajou walked in the sun, rain and snow.

“My worst one, in the wintertime, when it was snowing, I walked and I fell down. So, then I walked again all wet. It (was) cold,” She laughed. “I’m poor. So that’s what poor people do. So, it wasn’t a bother for me at all. That’s why God gave us two feet — so we can use them.”

A few months later, a woman told her about a bus stop about a 20-minute walk from her workplace.

It would take two buses to go from Eatontown to Asbury Park to a Walmart on the outskirts of Tinton Falls.

“And it’s not even consistent,” Cajou said. Her first time waiting for the bus, she left extra early to catch the bus that comes once an hour. After the second hour passed, a man informed her that the buses weren't running. So, she began to walk. “I was so disappointed.”

“I wasn’t born with a silver spoon,” Cajou said. “I’ve always been struggling to live.”

Cajou was born in Haiti in the 1960s. She said she came to the U.S. as a teenager and spent time in foster care and was homeless for a period of time. She said she finished college living in the basement of a generous woman’s home.

After college, she joined the Navy, serving 10 years in active duty and 12 years in reserve.

After offering resume help over the phone and the internet, Oberdick of Lunch Break met Cajou for the first time in person when Cajou knew no one and needed a ride to and from the doctor's office for glaucoma surgery.

“I always found her to be an amazingly strong person,” Oberdick said. “She moved here to do what was best for her son ... then COVID hit and that’s a setback. ... Then she found out she had to have the surgery, so that’s even more setbacks. And then her husband’s hours — he was a bus driver — (were) cut back, so that was a third setback.”

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The Ford Escort Sansone given to Cajou turned out to have a problem. Cajou is currently driving a rented car Sansone is loaning her. Since Sansone said his company backs all the cars that they give away for six months, he said his company is taking care of the repairs.

“You read all these stories, it’s unbelievable,” Sansone said. “Obviously there’s buses that go to and from wherever, but to really be accommodating, to get to work opportunities, I think transportation in New Jersey, in this area, is sorely needed. So, it’s a challenge for many people.”

After Cajou was given a car, Oberdick spoke with her. Oberdick asked if she needed anything.

"She said, “No, no, no. We will be fine now. Everything’s fine,”" Oberdick said.

With a car, Cajou said it takes 10 minutes to get to work.

“It’s easier now to go to get around,” Cajou said.

Lunch Break

Location: 121 Drs. James Parker Boulevard, Red Bank, NJ 07701

Phone: (732) 747-8577

Email: info@lunchbreak.org

Website: <https://lunchbreak.org>

Olivia Liu is a reporter covering transportation, Red Bank and western Monmouth County. She can be reached at oliu@gannett.com.