

COMMENTARY

In my family, I stand alone in my love for a clean car

BY LORI BORGMAN
Tribune News Service

I love a clean car - no trash on the floor, no empty plastic water bottles rolling around, no fossilized fries smashed into floor mats. A clean car makes me happy.

Sometimes, if the car is clean on the inside and the outside, I'm so happy I throw it in park at red lights and car dance like crazy.

Not really. But I'm car dancing on the inside.

You see advertisements during gift-giving holidays with women gazing doe-eyed at expensive jewelry and wrapping themselves in designer clothing. I volunteer to be

the woman in the ad nuzzling the booklet of car wash tickets.

In the greater scheme of family, I stand somewhat alone in my fanatical love for a clean car.

Not to name names, but our son and his family drive a minivan that's basically a Walmart on wheels. There's fruit, snacks, drinks and coffee cups in the grocery section; stray socks, mud boots, work boots and hoodies in clothing; power tools, fishing gear and a large medical emergency kit (because with five kids you just never know) in general merchandise; and a violin, mandolin, banjo and guitar are crammed in the rear storage area in the event of a

spontaneous bluegrass jam.

If you need it, they've got it.

Self-checkout is in the front passenger seat.

Our youngest, who teaches preschool three days a week, drives a vehicle that is a craft and entertainment center on wheels. She could raise the tailgate and do pop-up craft centers. What'll it be? Glitter glue or popsicle sticks?

She never leaves home without an array of card stock, safety scissors, pipe cleaners, and wide assortment of sing-along-CDs and books on tape. Oh, and educational flashcards: presidents, states, animals, vegetables and minerals. I'm pretty sure



VICTORASS88 Dreamstime/TNS

Trash on the floor of a car does not sit well with columnist Lori Borgman.

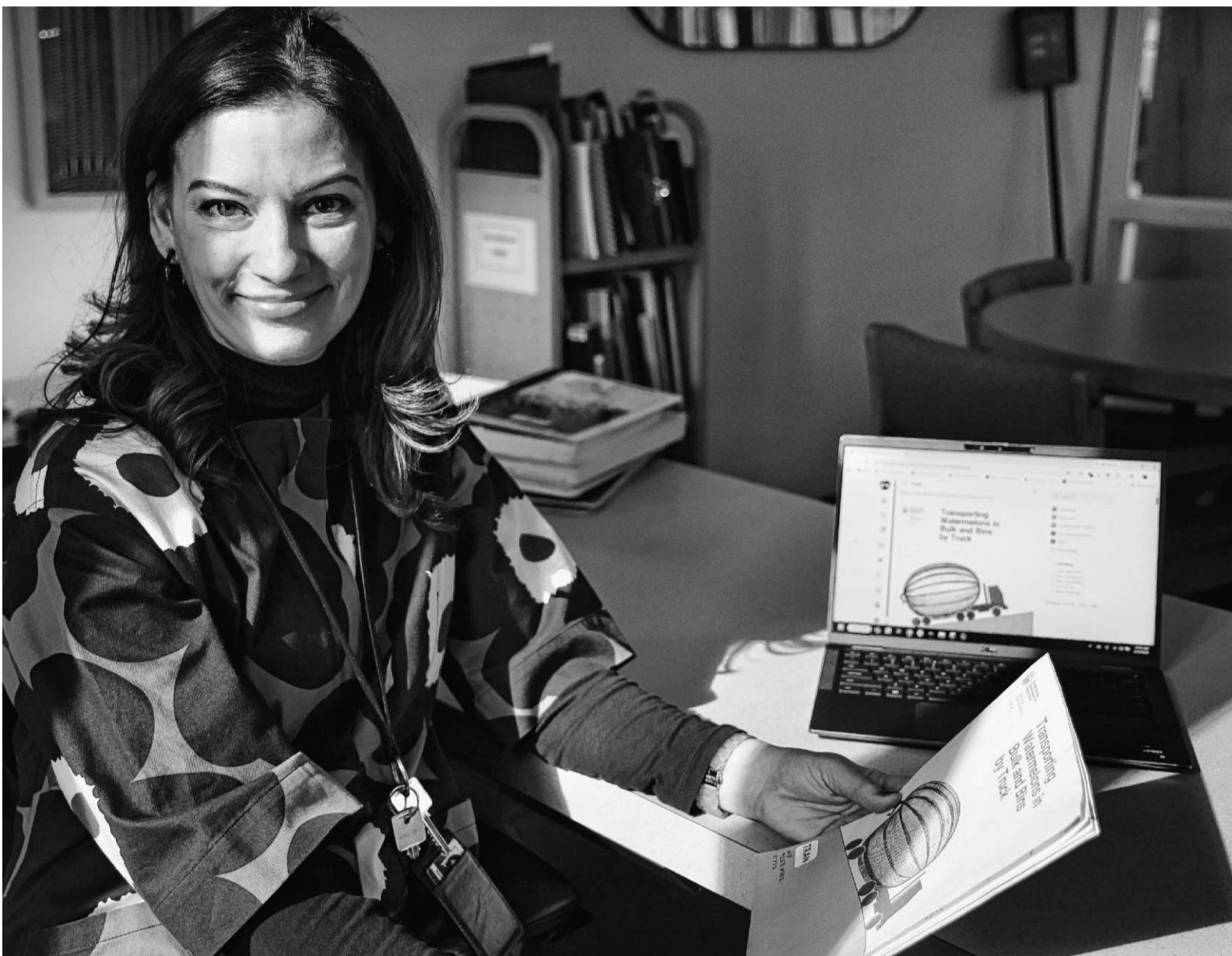
she keeps a laminator and paper cutter in the back storage area.

As for medical emergencies, she's equipped for anything from motion sickness to small cuts requiring bandages with cute woodland animal pictures on them.

Because she hauls huge piles of teaching supplies in the front passenger seat, if she picks you up to go somewhere, it's always a question of, "Do you sit on all the stuff or does all the stuff sit on you?"

Overcome with a renewed commitment to

keeping a cleaner car, she recently gave it a thorough cleaning. One of her nieces came over that same day and ran into the house yelling and screaming, "The door to your van is open and there's nothing inside! I think you were ROBBED!"



ANTONIO PEREZ Chicago Tribune/TNS

Rachel Cole, curator at the Northwestern University Transportation Library, with a whimsical cover from a 1982 Department of Agriculture report at the Northwestern University Library in Evanston, Illinois.

Once upon a time, government report covers were works of art

BY NINA METZ
Chicago Tribune

CHICAGO

Government reports tend to make for less-than-scintillating reading. That's the nature of the beast. Data can be dry.

But for the better part of the 20th century, the covers of these reports were works of art.

"Transporting Watermelons in Bulk and Bins by Truck," a 1982 report for the Department of Agriculture, features an illustration of a semi-truck. But instead of hauling a trailer, the cargo is one gigantic watermelon, with an adorable tail on the end.

A 1964 annual report for the Missouri State Highway Commission titled "A Report of Highway Death in Missouri" appears to be inspired by the minimalist, geometric poster designs created by Saul Bass in the '50s and '60s. Against a black background, the red lettering of the title is all but crushing a prone human form. The title may be clinical and detached; the image on its cover is anything but.

Rachel Cole is the curator at the Northwestern University Transportation Library and she has been scanning these report covers and then posting them in an ever-expanding Bluesky thread as a way to interest the general public in the library's catalog.

At one time, it wasn't uncommon for universities to have a dedicated library focused on all things transportation. That's no longer the case.

There's one at the University of California, Berkeley, but "they don't have a physical collection like they did in the past," Cole says. "The University of Michigan still maintains its transportation collection, but doesn't have a dedicated library or librarian overseeing it. We're really the only one of our kind, with over 500,000 volumes related to all modes of transportation: Car, boat, train, aviation, bicycle, pedestrian. We say if it moves people or goods, we collect in that area."

Founded in 1958, the transportation library is located within Northwestern's main library on the fifth floor and it is open to

the public. "We're tied to the transportation center here on campus," says Cole, "so things like engineering, but also how that impacts the environment and the economy, as well as social impacts."

Her work often requires going into the stacks for research materials, and she inevitably comes across these old reports. "They're just such fun images and I wanted to share them with someone."

She maintains an Instagram account for the library that's focused on transportation ephemera - "airline menus, timetables, photograph albums, that sort of thing" - but the report covers have a "different aesthetic and different perspective about transportation, so that's why I thought I'd share them on BlueSky instead. They're really interesting for the visual aspect. A lot of thought and care was put into these covers on topics that might be considered mundane. But I'm also interested in what they tell you about transportation history throughout the 20th century."

A 1976 report for the

Department of Transportation is titled "Problems of the Carless" and it features an illustration of a man with a cane and a bag of groceries, alone at a desolate bus stop.

A 1974 report for the Department of Transportation titled "Bikeways - State of the Art" has an illustration drawn in the style of MAD Magazine's Mort Zucker of a besuited man standing next to a highway, chipping a bicycle from a mound of concrete. He's attacking the job with gusto!

And a report from 1977 titled "Low-Fare, Fare-Free Transit: some recent applications by U.S. transit systems" features a triptych on its cover. The first panel shows a man waiting for public transit and it's labeled "fare 50 cents." In the second, it's a man and two women waiting, "fare 25 cents." The third shows an entire crowd that's labeled "fare free." The drawings have a sense of whimsy, yes, but are also very clearly telling a story.

"What's so striking about these reports is that they are half a century old, and yet we're still talking

about the same issues and still haven't figured this stuff out satisfactorily," Cole says.

It's fascinating to consider that, at one time, government agencies dedicated money and energy to the messaging conveyed by this cover art.

Not much is known about the individual artists behind these covers. Some might have worked in-house. "I know that decades ago, many of these departments of transportation or ports had their own in-house design teams," Cole says. But it was more common that outside firms would be commissioned on a project-by-project basis.

A shift began around 2012, Cole says, when instead of being printed as hard copies, reports started being disseminated as PDFs. A confluence of factors is at work: Budgets are tighter, and fast and cheap is the expectation. Enter: Clip art, stock photos and generative AI. Suddenly, you don't need to hire a graphic designer for your report; you can just ask Fred down the hall to slap together something and call it a day.

"There's maybe this idea that you don't need great graphic design because people are going to read it on their computer or their phone and scroll right by the title page anyway," says Guy Villa, a graphic designer who is co-owner of the studio Sharon and Guy with his wife and fellow artist Sharon Oiga. He is also a professor at Columbia College Chicago who teaches graphic design.

Sometimes these old report titles were creative, as well. One report on parking issues is called "The Big Squeeze." Another is titled "Parking Pickle."

But the visuals dominate.

Villa was impressed with a 1979 report for the Department of Energy with the title "The Charge of the Future: An Introduction to Electric and Hybrid Vehicles."

"How do you visualize an electric car? Because if you look at any electric car today, it looks like a regular car. So what they did was cut up these images of cars and then put them back together, but slightly off. It's deconstruct-reconstruct, and that kind of 'electrifies' the image. I thought that was a really cool idea."

Another is from 1977 for the Department of Transportation with a title that could easily make the reader's eyes glaze over: "The National Maximum Speed Limit: A Summary of Three Regional Workshops." But the cover art looks like it could be a movie poster for a paperwork thriller. There's a sense of drama that's conveyed by its stylized image of men hunched around a table with placards identifying them: "governor's rep," "state patrol" and so on. A large sign looms in the background: Speed limit 55.

Contrast that to the more generic report covers of today, which tend to follow a forgettable template. The 2025 report for the federal government on transportation statistics features some photos (a steering wheel, a plane, a ferry, etc.) that are framed into triangular shapes for no particular reason, other than to jazz up what are otherwise incredibly dull images.

"You want to make a report memorable, inviting and easy to understand," says Villa. "And when you look at this, you know there was no graphic designer involved. Someone in-house was probably told: We need you to put this together."

But something gets lost when we strip artists from the process.

The world is more interesting - more engaging - but also more wondrous - when thought and care for aesthetics is built into even the most mundane tasks and objects.