

The Boston Globe

In a race against the clock — and gas gauge — Amazon driver brings you your packages



Pat Greenhouse/Globe Staff

Arielle McCain worked off an Amazon app, picking up packages in Everett and then delivering them in Cambridge.

By [Janelle Nanos](#) | GLOBE STAFF December 22, 2018

Arielle McCain is parked in a stranger's driveway on Calvin Street in Somerville, her hazard lights flashing bright in the dimming December afternoon. It's a week before Christmas, and she's digging through three-dozen Amazon packages in her car, searching her back seat for the one she must deliver to this address.

McCain, a 24-year-old single mother of two, is a contract driver for Amazon Flex, delivering packages for the e-commerce giant after she finishes her classes at a nearby technical school.

To get today's job, she started checking the app on her phone at 8:45 a.m. for potential shifts. When one finally appeared, she claimed it before another driver could. She

hurried to the warehouse, collected 44 packages, scanned them with her phone, piled them in her red Hyundai Elantra, and headed out into traffic and a maze of streets.

Time was of the essence; she'd be paid \$69 whether it took her an hour to deliver the packages or it took five.

"Come on, come on," she mutters under her breath, going into her trunk for the second time. Finally, she grabs the envelope in question and dashes across the street in her company-issued yellow safety vest, the thump of her steel-tipped Redwing boots echoing across the pavement. She snaps a picture of the packages piled on the doorstep — proof of delivery — and rings all four doorbells on the house before sprinting back to her car.

It's the seventh house she's delivered to on this block today.

Americans have already broken records for online shopping this year, spending \$110.6 billion on orders this holiday season, according to Adobe's holiday retail survey, a 17 percent increase over last year. One-click ordering and free delivery are driving the bulk of those purchases, and customers are also increasingly using their mobile phones, according to retail analysts at NPD Group, which has dubbed the trend "hands-free" shopping.

But delivering these precious packages is very hands-on for drivers like McCain, who are increasingly doing so-called last mile deliveries for companies like Amazon.

"Amazon had traditionally used various companies to deliver their packages, like UPS and the post office and other smaller package delivery companies," said Boston labor attorney Shannon Liss-Riordan. "Then they came up with the idea that if they could contract with the drivers and cut out the middleman they could save even more money."

As of August, there were over 8,000 Flex drivers in Massachusetts. Collectively, they have driven more than 9 million miles for the company since December 2016. That's the month that Liss-Riordan filed suit against Amazon in Massachusetts for unfair labor practices (she's filed another federal case that is also pending).

Liss-Riordan argues that by labeling Flex drivers independent contractors — like Uber, Lyft, and other delivery services — and failing to compensate them for gas, insurance, and phone plans, Amazon is violating labor laws.

In response to the suit, Amazon said, “Feedback from Flex drivers has been very positive — they really enjoy being their own boss.”

Its website sets even more lofty ambitions: “[H]ave more time to pursue your dreams and goals,” the company advertises. “Join us and put the power of Amazon behind you.”

McCain has both dreams and goals. But after getting pregnant at 18, while still a senior in high school in Rhode Island, she had to recalibrate.

Her sales jobs were hard to juggle, without reliable child care after her son was born. Working became nearly impossible when her daughter followed 16 months later. After breaking up with her abusive partner, McCain said, she went homeless for a time and a family member became her children’s legal guardian.

“There was no way I was going to bring them down with me,” she said.

Last year, McCain enrolled in auto mechanic courses at Universal Technical Institute, and now works part time at Goodyear. Pay from her Amazon Flex job will help her get her kids back next summer.

“Life is hard, life is very hard,” she says matter-of-factly. “But I finally have a clear path.”

That path started behind the wheel. McCain began driving for Uber and Lyft 2½ years ago and moved to Massachusetts to be closer to Boston’s density of students. But this summer, the ride-hailing services restructured their rates, paying far less per ride. That led many drivers like her to flood into the open arms of Amazon, which offered rates starting at \$18 a hour.

Liss-Riordan said companies like Amazon “bank on the fact that the workers are looking at that big number” but not deductions for equipment, insurance, and fees.

“They’re banking on the fact that people aren’t going to do that math,” she said.

McCain has run the numbers. It’s still more lucrative to take an Amazon shift if it pays well enough and she’s fast enough to complete it in time. But the job is much harder.

Unlike Uber and Lyft, which allow drivers to turn on their apps at will and start picking up passengers, Amazon releases Flex shifts in “blocks” of three, four, or five hours, at a predetermined time and rate. Drivers must refresh the app repeatedly to see blocks as they become available, and tap quickly to snag them.

For McCain, it’s a careful calculus: Can she get to one of the nearby Amazon facilities in Dedham, Milford, Everett, or Nashua in time, or risk being deactivated for showing up late? Even once she selects a block, she will have no idea if it’s an easy suburban stretch or a chaotic downtown shift during rush hour. Often, she’ll wait hours for a high-paying block to become available. As more drivers join the platform, those are becoming increasingly hard to find. And that has her feeling increasingly anxious. She’s had tremors and trouble sleeping.

“The apps, they’ve become a really big thing in my life, and I’m just hoping I can scrape by for the next couple of months,” she said.

Once she finishes her coursework this month, McCain plans to head to Arizona for a Volvo training course. She hopes to land a steady job when she returns, then find an apartment for herself and her kids.

On the Tuesday before Christmas, McCain grabs a \$69 three-hour block in Everett, knowing she’ll make a minimum of \$23 an hour. Driving north from Westwood, she picks up an Uber passenger for a trip to Logan airport; a \$28 ride with a \$10 tip. Next, she pulls up to the Everett processing facility seven minutes before the start of her 2:15 p.m. shift. Amid the sea of warehouses, the Boston skyline is silhouetted against the bright winter sun.

“Welcome to the land of fulfillment centers,” she says, her car bouncing over potholes.

She's feeling good. McCain tries to make at least \$150 a day, and is already past the \$100 mark.

Inside the Amazon facility, an employee scans her ID while another worker brings over her rack of packages. She checks the address on one, and her spirits dampen.

"Cambridge, this should be fun," she groans.



Pat Greenhouse/Globe Staff

Arielle McCain, 24, delivered packages from the Amazon Fulfillment center in Everett to homes in Cambridge.

From there she is on her own. McCain scans and stuffs packages into her car: midsized boxes in the trunk, big ones in the back seat, envelopes in the footwell. After 15 minutes of sorting, the Amazon algorithms kick in on her app and map the most efficient delivery route. It's only then that she learns where exactly she's headed.

The sun is blinding as she steers the car over the Gilmore Bridge, and she's worried about gas. "I've got 26 miles in my tank, and that means I technically have 15 because of city driving," she says.

At 3 p.m., she finally arrives at her first delivery stop. Now, the hard part: Finding the package.

For the next hour and a half, McCain is in go-mode, creeping her way down the labyrinthine one-way streets. She double-parks, stalling traffic at times and swearing at the GPS as it sends her in circles. Without a hat, gloves, or heavy coat in freezing weather, she sweats amid sprints up and down stairs, and pulls out a stick of deodorant to reapply. Soon, the dial drops lower on her gas gauge, detouring her from her route to put \$15 of gas in her tank.

As the number of packages dwindles, McCain breathes easier. She's hungry and knows a cheap Brazilian food spot she'll hit when she's done.

At 4:35 p.m. she rings the doorbell of a house on Marie Avenue, drops off a package. A woman opens the door, her young daughter standing behind her in the entryway.

McCain doesn't stop to chat. She's already at the house across the street, leaving the final package on the porch. It's 4:37 when she taps the app — letting Amazon know that's she's finished. She's thrilled to be done 38 minutes early.

But the app doesn't celebrate. It just offers her another shift.



PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

After picking up packages from the Amazon Fulfillment center in Everett, Amazon Flex driver Arielle McCain, 24, delivered them in Cambridge.

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