

**Title:** Charging Through San Antonio's Streets

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The clock struck **9 p.m.** and the chargers came out. They clocked in, ready to work.

In the spring of 2018, companies like Bird and Lime brought their nests of motorized scooters to San Antonio streets. Since then, tourists and locals alike have been zipping in and out of hotspots all around town. The batteries on these electric scooters don't last forever, and when they die, someone comes quickly to nurture and bring them back to life. Such people are called chargers.

The Lime scooter service stays open all night to give patrons a chance for late-night rides, but Bird shuts down their scooter service at 9 p.m. The magic hour for charging is 9 p.m., and that's when you'll see a flurry of roaming, Bird-seeking chargers on the streets in and around downtown. Most chargers juggle a tricky night-owl-like sleep schedule, and they charge all hours of the night.

Angel Chavez, a 41-year-old charger for Bird scooters, waited in his black pickup in Southtown at approximately 8:30 p.m. in front of a "nest." Chargers call a group of Bird scooters parked on the street a nest. He's been a charger for three months along with his wife, Teresa Chavez, also 41. She drives the truck so he can get out and pick up scooters faster. Angel Chavez said he likes it, it's exciting, and he and his wife help each other out.

Chavez is self-employed and works in air conditioning as a service tech. He said he started charging to pay off some debt. He and his wife mostly pick up "Birds" because they're easier and lightweight.

"I'll try to stay up all night, I hardly sleep during the night," Chavez said. "I'm taking care of these scooters and switching them out. I only have so much time."

Chavez said it gets competitive, but he likes it because he can get paid and also be his own boss.

"You have your money every day, it's there in your bank account at 7:15 a.m., boom, whatever you turned in before seven," Chavez said. "It's like being a waiter, valet, or taxi driver, it's there every day."

Companies like Lime, which is based in San Francisco with a worldwide presence in more than 16 countries, and Bird, a Santa Monica-based company with 100 plus cities worldwide, chose

San Antonio as a hub for their pack of electro-charged scooters. These scooters are helping people venture farther off the beaten path of the River Walk and downtown.

Mandy Villanueva, a 39-year-old charger, has held the position for just a few months. Her kids are grown, and she works during the day for a couple of hours as a caretaker, but charging is her full-time job. Villanueva goes out from 45 minutes to two hours every night of the week scanning her phone for scooters to pick up.

Villanueva said there are people who don't play by the rules and they hoard small fleets of scooters to try and keep anyone else from getting the payout. She says this is a real problem and makes it difficult to make money. She said it's frustrating at times since she's counting on the income to supplement her bills.

"It's harder for ones playing by the rules," Villanueva said. "Hopefully, we can weed them out, though, by flagging them in the app."

Villanueva lives on the city's south side and makes sure to stay away from downtown because it's flooded with traffic, and parking is an issue. She said it's competitive near hotspots like Southtown and the River Walk, so she goes to the Eastside instead. She'll go towards the Alamodome, the Hays Street Bridge, and then she circles back to the Beacon Hill area by San Antonio College.

"You have to hustle," Villanueva said. "I'm always looking on the map, and I'm always looking on the app."

Anthony Garcia, a 20-year-old graduate from Lanier High School, doesn't have plans to go to college just yet and is currently unemployed, so he's been a charger for three months. For Garcia, the most important thing is to get out early and claim a good spot.

Garcia said a good spot is an area where he can find about eight or more scooters on the street, and he can sort of camp out and wait for the clock to hit 9 p.m. He usually travels the same route every night close to Frio, Cesar Chavez, and Commerce streets downtown. Within a four-day span, he is able to make approximately \$250 and be home by 11 p.m. each night.

"The best thing about it is driving around, cruising, and looking for them," Garcia said. "I do it for the thrill, getting in the car, finding them, hunting them down on the app. It's a thrill."

Antonio Lee, a 31-year-old charger, works for both Bird and Lime and earns approximately \$100 per night. He normally just works weekends and used to go out at 9 p.m. to look for scooters, but has changed his schedule.

"Friday, Saturday, Sunday, I'm going all in," Lee said. "I have an inverter, so sometimes I'm charging as I'm down here riding around. The quicker I can get them in, the quicker I can get them out."

Lee said he first heard about Lime and Bird charging on Facebook through an ad to ride scooters. He didn't think much of it, but kept scrolling and found out about the "Charger" Facebook group page. He said it's a place where other chargers are helping each other out, telling each other what good spots to go to.

Lee moved to San Antonio five months ago from Memphis, Tennessee, for a job producing music. Lee found out San Antonio has a lot of side gigs, and he can make more money so he wouldn't have to move back to Memphis.

Lee said producing music is his real passion, and he would love to just make music all day, but he needs to work. Lee said the one thing that keeps him on the streets pulling all-nighters is the money, nothing but the money.

"I could be tired like I am now, and I have to be up early in the morning, but it's easy guaranteed money," Lee said. "It's so easy, there's no reason not to do it."