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## Well Traveled: Strong relationships and unique challenges are revealed in “Driving Richmond: Stories and Portraits of GRTC Bus Drivers”

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# Well Traveled

Strong relationships and unique challenges are revealed in “Driving Richmond: Stories and Portraits of GRTC Bus Drivers.”

BY [LAURA BROWDER](#)



- To Go: “Driving Richmond: Stories and Portraits of GRTC Bus Drivers,” a photography, oral history and sound collaboration among Laura Browder, Michael Lease and Benjamin Thorp, can be seen at the Richmond Street Art Festival at the old GRTC bus depot at 101 S. Davis Ave., along West Cary Street. The show runs Sept. 11–15.

Here’s a well-kept secret: The regional GRTC Transit System is among the most progressive organizations in Richmond. The nonprofit plays a major role in reducing pollution, easing traffic congestion and connecting people to jobs. Its reform-minded leadership is eager to play a larger role. Its unionized bus drivers, which included some of the first waves of black and female drivers, help hold it all together.

And those drivers love their jobs — to a degree unusual for workers in any profession. That’s what I learned through interviews with 16 current and former drivers this summer for an exhibition at the Richmond Street Art Festival, which opens today. Bruce Korusek, who has an amazing collection of GRTC photos and ephemera, took his first bus picture at age 5. Leslie Zink used to pretend as a child to be a bus driver picking up passengers on her bike. “I love to drive,” KaSandra Ellis says. “So, this job was perfect for me. Because I’ll drive from here to Timbuktu.”

And nearly all the drivers I interviewed talked about the relationships they’ve formed with their passengers through the years. “Once I settled into my route, it was wonderful,” driver Deborah Hopkins says. “I got to

know people. And they were like family.” Some passengers are so nice, Carl Brown says, “that when it’s hot, they’ll stand at the bus stop with ice cold water and hand out water to the drivers.”

Marcia Schmiegelow formed such tight bonds with her passengers on the Petersburg express that one of them, Derek Mountford, became her campaign manager when she ran for the position of financial secretary of the union.

Union? In a right-to-work state like Virginia? The transit workers of Richmond have been unionized since 1888, and the unionized workers at the GRTC have an extraordinary relationship with management, in large part because of their most unusual chief executive, Eldridge Coles.

Coles is a legendary figure at GRTC. He started working there in 1967 and is retiring in October — after 46 years on the job. “I worked every job here at GRTC from sweeping the floor to CEO,” he says. “I used to always say, ‘From the back of the bus to the head of the corporation.’”

“... Last year, we negotiated a three-year contract. We didn’t call anyone from the outside to work with my staff and the union board and we settled a three-year contract, which is very unusual, without bringing in lawyers. We did it among ourselves. And we did it in a week’s time. I’m very proud of that.”

While the GRTC has changed with the times, the Richmond region hasn’t always kept pace. Korusek showed me a picture of the GRTC class of 1965: all white men, with the exception of one white woman and two black men. Marshall Avent, hired in 1973, says: “I’m told that when African-Americans first started driving the buses that white folks used to call the police on them. Said they stole the bus.”

The women’s movement opened up jobs for people like Jennie Bullock. Still, as she recalls, “Some people didn’t want to ride with the women. When you’d pull in, they would say, ‘Go ahead, I’ll wait for the next bus.’ They’d think that you couldn’t drive.”

Of course, nobody in Richmond today is surprised by the sight of a black or female bus driver. And despite ongoing struggles over funding and proposed route changes, the city government has enacted some of GRTC’s progressive reforms, including the twice-monthly grocery store run for city residents who live in so-called food deserts and lack access to fresh fruits and vegetables. One of the most successful new routes is the Kings Dominion bus. In addition to ferrying fun-loving city residents out for a day of thrills, it carries roughly 100 Richmond young people to summer jobs at the amusement park.

Yet even this innocuous-sounding service has run into resistance from the counties. When GRTC first began the service, Coles recounts, “I received a call from a certain county wanting to know, ‘How did you

get permission to come through our county without talking to us?' I thought that 95 was an interstate highway. Anybody can go up and down it."

The counties' resistance to allowing the GRTC and its passengers to move beyond Richmond city boundaries has serious consequences for the region.

"I sit there and watch people get off the Broad Street Six at Willow Lawn, and walk a mile and a half, two miles up Broad Street," Coles says. "In the wintertime. In the summer. In the heat. There are jobs available that people can't get to. A lot of them are good jobs, and people would work them if they could get the transportation to get there. They can't.

"That breaks my heart."

*Laura Browder is a writer, documentary producer and the Tyler and Alice Haynes professor of American studies at the University of Richmond.*

*Opinions expressed on the Back Page are those of the writer and not necessarily those of Style Weekly.*