

GRTC

Interview: Frank Tunstall

Laura Browder: ... image in the buses?

Frank Tunstall: Mm hmm.

LB: Ok. We're good.

FT: I mean--you know, I mean-- [laughs].

LB: Yeah. I know, you're gonna say yes, but--

FT: Ok, alright, what's you got there.

LB: Ok. So, what I want you to do is start off by introducing yourself, telling me your full name, and then I'd love you to start telling me something about how you grew up.

FT: Ok. Ready?

LB: I'm ready.

FT: Ok. My name is Frank Tunstall the third. I'm, uh, president of ATU union, that represent the workers at GRTC. I was born in New York but my family left New York and came to Richmond. I was raised by my grandmother. And, uh, I--very lucky to be raised by a grandmother who was very wise, uh, in all things. So I consider myself old-school. Rather than new-school. Because I still have a lot of the old values, uh, that were so dominant back, uh, during that time. Uh, you don't see too many men, uh, hold the door open for ladies or the car door or anything like that. And I do those sorts of things. I grew up in Richmond. I grew up in a small neighborhood they call Washington Park over in Northside. And, you know, some people say rather [that's your?] district and a neighborhood -- grew up in a neighborhood. The difference between a neighborhood is that everybody knows everybody or either their relatives or whatever. Uh, you know, you couldn't misbehave down the street without getting a whooping before you got home. And one was waiting for you at home. So basically, uh, and I, uh--my high school, which I'm very proud of, uh--I attended John Marshall High School. I was in during the--the integration which I thought was a very good thing. And I think, uh, uh... [?] had a lot of value. Had a lot of value there, I credit it from, uh, being introduced to the education back at that time. Uh, so... basically, that's my--my [old?] childhood. I always had a entrepreneur spirit because, uh, when I was seven years old, I had a little red wagon. And on, uh, Saturdays I used to go to the dump. And, uh, just find things on the dump and go back in the neighborhood and sell 'em.

LB: [Laughs.]

FT: Um... I met my wife when I was about, uh... twelve years old. And she was ten years old. And I told her I was gonna marry her. And I did. And we got married in 1969 so we been married over about forty-three years now.

LB: Wow.

FT: Yeah. [Laughs.] So...[laughs].

LB: So you must've graduated Marshall right around, like, '68?

FT: '68. '68.

LB: Yeah.

FT: Graduate in 1968. At John Marshall High.

LB: And those were some exciting years then.

FT: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, oh definite, definite, definite. Um... it--it was a--a blending--I call it the blending of the cultures. You know, where everybody had to get to know everybody. Uh, and I think it was very beneficial to--to everyone involved. Mm hmm.

LB: I've been interviewing a lot of people recently who were involved in that integration era, you know, growing up in civil rights Richmond, so I've been hearing a lot about Marshall.

FT: Yeah.

LB: And you had a great principal then right?

FT: Uh... Dr. Dixon (?) at the time. He was, uh, Dr. Dixon was there. We--and I was in the--in the, uh, cadet corp. And--which I played in the cadet band and I--the military, [laughing] I tell you. Um... it was something new. But it was the--right in line with the discipline that, uh... I received from my--my grandmother. That--and a lot of the things that she told me then I could see coming to light as I went to school. Uh... and, uh, I wouldn't trade that, uh, time in the cadet corp for anything at all.

LB: What was your instrument?

FT: Uh, drums. Yeah. Drum--I played drums in--in, uh... in high school. In high school band, also, I played base guitar, so... and I... played music in, you know, a few different bands and all. [Around in?] the city, so that [laughs]--that was hay time (?), too, you know. [Laughing] That was a good time, too.

LB: I'll bet.

FT: And... yeah, and a--as I... you know, as I move along, I, uh, worked for the, uh, [old?] Bank of Virginia. That--you know how people said, 'my first *real* job?' Well, that was the first real job I ever had, was, uh, at the Bank of Virginia. Had a lot of part-time jobs... and I worked at--uh, the data services, but I was in transportation. And eventually as the services grew, um... I ended

up being in charge, um... that--those particular services for the Bank of Virginia. In fact, I was the, uh, Assistant General Services Officer... [in there?]. And I've--after... what happened, what--outsources (?) came during that time? You know, a lot of work got outsources so that's why I lost my job. And I ended up at, uh, Reynolds Metal. Which is a very good company. And that's where I got introduced to the union. At Reynolds Metal.

LB: Tell me more about that.

FT: Well... when--I had heard of unions and contracts and all, after I got in, uh, got the job, and, uh, they gave me a contract. And after I read the contract, I got--it--got more interested in, uh... the idea of workers having some say... on their destiny. You know, in other words, hey, you can sit down with the company, you can negotiate. If they say that you did something, that's a grievance procedure. You had--you have procedures to go through. So that intrigued me and I read--and I wanted to get involved in the union so I read the contract for two years.... Just related (?)--read it back and forth and my first, uh... job with the union was, uh, shop steward. With the shop steward and I wanted to be the best shop steward... uh, that they had. And it--over the period of years, I went from shop steward... uh, to head shop steward, uh, recording secretary, wage evaluator, vice president, and [?] I... became president of that union. Was a steel workers' local 400 union. I stayed president of the union till they shut the plants down which at the time, they were Alcoa plants. Uh, they shut the plants down in 2010. I had always--I came to GRTC... in, um... 1991. And the reason why I came to GRTC because the job that I was used to dealing with people. The job I was working, I was working a machine. Doing some of the union work, I wasn't getting enough exposure to people? And you know... even if I talked to my machine, it wouldn't answer me. So, uh, saw an ad in the paper one day that they were the--advertising for, uh, drivers. So I applied. And, uh, started working part-time. And I worked part-time for prob--twenty--twenty, twenty-one years. Just part-time, the reason because I had a full-time job, but... it wasn't a job--the GRTC job--that was my outlet. In other words, you know how some people go fishing? Some people play golf. Everybody has something they do... to get away from it all. Well, driving a bus was my way because it always was a pleasure. Never was a job, never was a burden. It just was a pleasure. You know, to drive the bus. And I met a lot of, uh, nice people. Uh, GRTC is a good company, it's a growing company. I don't think, uh... a lot of people realize the significance in how important it is to have public transportation. And for public transportation [to row?] because, you know, people depend on that. Those of us who have cars, we never think about the day that, let's say if the car wasn't there. You know. How would I get to work. How would I get the children to school. How--you know, how would I get to the doctor, how would I get to the grocery store. And we have a lot of people that just up--depend on GRTC to do that. So it's--it's been a, um... a good experience for GRTC. And, um... when I... uh, when I left the plant, as we, uh, took early retirement, I... uh, lotta the, uh, operators asked me to ask for president over at the union, over here, GRTC [laughing], and I did. So I [got?] back in it then, but still I'm a--I'm a driver... at heart. I drove, uh... the Petersburg one. Express run. I--I love the express run. Love the express run, they're the coach buses. And, uh... I drove--drove it for probably about three-and-half to four years. Right before I got the position as, uh, union president. Very nice people. Very pleasant, um... couldn't ask for anything greater. And, uh... they, uh... had a couple of--of gatherings, meetings... uh, picnics-like, you know. For the people on the 95. And they invited all the drivers and all so it... it's a--it's a family-type atmosphere... here, you know. Even though all of us wear different hats. And people like to say, you know,

that, uh... you know, we're on a difference side of the fence. But far as I'm concerned, we're all in the same barnyard, you know [laughs]. We just wear different hats in the barnyard. Uh, since I became, uh, president of the union here, I've tried to establish a working relationship with the company. And in doing that, trying to understand its problems. So therefore, if I can help to be a part of the solution, rather than creating more problems. My [old? ultimate?] responsibility is to, you know, defend the language of the contract and the peoples' rights. Which I do that. But you gotta have knowledge that--you know... I always say that, you--you have to put yourself... in the other... individual's shoes. To kinda see where from they sit--they're [share?], they're not... I do the same thing. And, uh, since I've become president, we've had a good working relationship. Uh, a lot of things, uh... when I stepped in, it had been two years... before we got a contract. Uh, we went in... with no outside help because normally, you send international reps and you send... reps from, uh, at the time I think it was Viola... Was. (?) But... we negotiate our contract here and we had a contract in a week. Of our contract that was acceptable to the people and acceptable to the company. Because when you negotiate a contract, uh... you have to negotiate the contract so it's viable, so it's livable, so it--it'll be there for you. You can't put ultimate (?) strains on the company. Because... indirectly, when you do that, you put it on the customers. And the customers is key, so whenever we do anything, in our minds, it's customer-oriented, and... a fact that you may think, well, it's just a union. But it--but it's all about the customers. Getting things right here, uh, so that customers will get the best possible services there is. And safe service. Cuz safety is number one. Uh, when the individuals are training... and right out from training, before they release them, I have an opportunity to speak to them about the union. But not only do I speak to them about the union, I speak them about the job itself. And safety is number one. And dependability. You come to work, come to work prepared. So you can be safe. And transfer the passengers back and forth. So, so far it's been a--it's been a great run.

LB: So I was so intrigued to learn that GRTC had been unionized since the very beginning.

FT: Yeah.

LB: Cuz that seems, again, so unusual in Virginia. I mean, I come from New England originally where--

FT: Mm hmm.

LB: ...of course, unions are a lot more common and a lot more powerful--

FT: Right.

LB: ... than they are here.

FT: That's right.

LB: And it was a big culture shock to me to move down to Richmond, and suddenly--

FT: Yeah--

LB: ...you know, I used to work at VCU -- no unions.

FT: Yeah. Yeah.

LB: [Laughs.]

FT: Right to work stayed--I think... what this came of value--little education, I had to read up on it myself. Is that... back when... the local services and all were private entities, and then they couldn't make it because the economics... they already had unions. And when the city and the--when the city took it over, and like in most areas, that--that was an agreement that the union would stay. Because you find out that no... we're not really city workers, we work for Old Dominion Transit. But everybody sees us as city workers, service. You'll find out we're the only ones that do have a union. And they call it '13 C' (?). That's a name for it.

LB: Say that again.

FT: Called '13 C.'

LB: Ok.

FT: Yeah. It's just a part... uh, you know, it's a part of the transportation bill. So that's why we--we do have a union. And, um... you know, people have the--the--the pros, and cons about unions. But basically... we just want a fair piece of the pie, that's it.

LB: I didn't know that Reynolds was unionized either, that--

FT: Yeah.

LB: ... amazed me to hear you say that.

FT: Yeah, all--all of Reynolds. All of--at the time, Reynolds Metal, all of Reynolds was unionized and all. And, speaking of Reynolds, I have had the opportunity to meet some of the top... Reynolds family people. You know, uh... Sis Alcoa (?)

LB: Mm hmm.

FT: ...bought them out of whatever. And I was in a conversation with, uh... uh, Randolph Reynolds, they call him Randy Reynolds. And he was telling me, he said, 'Frank,' he said, 'you know... [one of our?] greatest moments... in our history of this company--' Now I'm thinking this guy gonna tell me when they made their first million. You know what he told me? He said when we could afford healthcare for our employees. At Reynolds... they paid the total cost of healthcare. For the employees. So that--that really impressed me. Like I say, I was waiting for him to tell 'em, we made--we made a million or ten million dollars or--or something like that? But that wasn't it. You know. When they could afford, uh, healthcare for their employees. And they were one of the very few, not too many companies... back during that time, paid for healthcare for their employees. You know, here, it's a shared burden. Which is good. Because,

you know, uh, the cost of healthcare now. Individuals couldn't afford it by theirself.

LB: Mm hmm.

FT: Mmkay.

LB: So let me back you up again.

FT: Back me up.

LB: ...And ask you about... the kind of training you got when you first came to the GRTC and what you remember of your days at work.

FT: Ok, the, uh--when I first came to GRTC, naturally--classroom training. They didn't have the simulators and things like they have now. But you had--you had classroom training, we had a trainer. And after classroom trainer, then they actually put you on the bus, take you out and... uh, you had to go through the bus, to look--engine, whatever. You had to know everything... about the bus that you could possibly know. And w--where the old training ground was Byrd Park. And that's where you actually learn to drive the bus. You know--leave over GRTC and go through Bryd Park and drive through Byrd Park. And, um... [laughing] it was really exciting to take the big bus out. Because if you--you know you--I--I'd driven a school bus before. And you know, like, people say, well, once you can drive bus, you can drive a bus. Now all buses are not the same. You know, the--the, uh... the--the GRTC bus is a little bit different from the school buses and such. But... their training--it's intense training on driving. It's all day, eight hours... whatever, and... you go, you going, and--and, uh... the... the trainers are very detailed so I--I had no problem with my trainer or anything. Uh, how I was trained and whatever. So when I did, uh, graduate, I--I felt that, you know, I had the best. You know, and I strive to be the best. Um... the... what--what I--I remember... I remember the people. And--and--you know, like--like my first day, you're a little bit nervous. I--but I've always spoke to everybody and you know and you--good morning, how you doing, somebody said good morning. But every now and then, you'll get, you know, smart-ass (?) say 'what--what's good about it?' And you--you kinda stop... said, 'Well, I woke up this morning and you woke up this morning, too, so -- it's a good day for us.' Yeah, you find little things to say to, uh, make it delightful. And all--and... I had a knack--I wanted to steal express runs cuz I--I liked express runs because they--they move fast. Um... I was working a full-time job, so I had limited hours that I could work. And the express runs were the runs that was [?] day that you worked. You know. But, um, and we have... you know, you--you--you have... characters, different people, everywhere you go. But, uh, I--I never met anyone at GRTC that I would say was a mean or bad person or anything. I mean, ev--everybody's basically good at heart. You know. If you get along with--with most people. Some people... you know... everybody had their problems and have their days, you know. But basically it's a pretty good set-up. Any more questions--I know you got some more questions, I can look at the--

LB: I've got many more questions [laughs].

FT: Ok [laughs].

LB: So generally speaking, as an operator, what were the best and worst parts of your job?

FT: There's no worst parts. It--not for me, because, like I said... it wasn't basically a job, it was a outlet, that's the way I enjoyed myself. You know, and--and the best thing bout it is, uh... you get to serve people. You get to serve people. Uh... just take for instance, uh... I was, uh... at--at Robinson and Broad. And I was going to Lakeside. And there was a--a lady... blind lady... cross the street. Ok, she's standing there, standing there, bus go by. But when I came back... she still was at the corner! And... I just had to ask her, I said, "Ma'am, are you trying to cross the street -- cross the r--" She, "Yeah, I'm gonna cross it." So, what I did, I secured my bus, told the passengers, I said... "We're running on time, you guys give me a minute." And I walked her across the street. You get to good--do good things for people. You know, in this position because you meet a lot of people. Um... everyone have bad moments... something, I mean... one guy wanted to attack me but still I wouldn't say that's the worst moment. Because... that happens. That's life. That--that... that's part of the job.

LB: So why'd he want to attack you?

FT: Oh, because he wanted to get off at a stop that was not a bus stop.

LB: [Laughs.]

FT: You know, he wanted to get off at a certain place, but it's not a bus stop, you cannot... let people off. [Anywhere?] there's no bus sign. So... but... it worked out.

LB: How'd you work that one out.

FT: Told him I couldn't pick him up--couldn't drop him off, I'll drop him off at the next bus stop. And, uh... he got mad, he said... some bad words or what--but... just didn't buy into it. Once I said what I had to say, I just cut off, shut my mouth. Because if you keep talking, it escalates. And when it got where I could put him off, he... got off the bus, said a few bad words, and I said, "Thank you very much." Went about my business. Gotta keep it cool.

LB: How many hours a week were you working part-time on top of your full-time job?

FT: Uh, I was just working, basic--[clears throat]--'bout fifteen, three hours a day.

LB: Wow. So you'd finish your eight hours, or whatever at Reynolds--

FT: Yeah. I had a--I had a routine because, uh, I worked nightshift. Ok, and I would get off, like, seven in the morning. Then I would have, uh, the day to sleep, and I had to be to work by three o'clock. So I had rest before I got to work. So it--it worked out real well. Because I was fresh when I got on the bus.

LB: Yeah.

FT: I wouldn't work that at the end when I wasn't fresh. So you would have to be fresh.

LB: So... what have been your most challenging moments operating the bus?

FT: Mmm... you know, it--it's hard to say challenging moments, because, you know, [laughing] you like to feel you got control over everything. And there's nothing that's--

LB: Well, we all have challenges, right?

FT: ... that's a challenge. Uh... I--I--I just can't remember... a... well... coming down 95... uh... I, uh, there was a accident... on 95, a guy--[read about it later? something about a lady?]-but anyway, she lost control of the car. And when she finished, she was headed right for the bus. So I think it was a... a--a moment a challenge, a moment for me to maneuver the bus, get it stopped and all--where--that--averted an accident, which we did. But, uh... it's [all...?], a--a--a great challenge just to be out there driving because you have so much you have to look out for. So it--it's--it's a common challenge. But I can't think of... any moments where, you know, hey, this is a... you know... and I--let me back up a minute. I tell you one thing. The coach bus. When I pull--when, you know, we have run-pull. When I pull the Petersburg run.... they didn't have, um... coach buses on it. Ok.... After I pull a run, I found out they're gonna put a coach bus on it for the next run-pull. So I had a--learn how to drive a coach bus.

LB: And what's the difference in driving?

FT: Uh... the coach bus is--is a much bigger bus. The, uh--have, like, fifty-six, fifty-seven passengers whereby...uh, your local buses, uh, range anywhere from thirty-two to maybe... about forty-two, forty-four passengers--forty-three passengers. But it's a much bigger bus. It's a different... build of bus. It's a higher bus.... You know, susceptible to wind change and all that. And you just have so many more things on it. The wheelchair lifts are much more, uh... extravagant and difficult to operate than on a regular bus. And... but--but the challenge is just getting comfortable. You know, you look at the--[for instance?] the seat--high--the buses, the seat sets down, rather than sit--setting level. So I had to go through training for that, and, uh, that was a challenge because I'd never... uh, drove coach bus before.

LB: What have been some of your most memorable experiences operating the bus?

FT: Operating the bus?

LB: Yeah. Or, you know, just during your years as a--as an operator.

FT: Well... some of the, uh... uh, let me see. Once there, uh... I was driving the Lakeside Express. And once you express, you couldn't let people off. So there was a couple that wanted to get off and they got unruly. And the passengers were the one that calmed them down and straightened them out. And I thought that was really great. I didn't have to do that. They explain--in other words, to protected me... uh, from having to do that while I was driving. So that's--that's a memorable, uh... experience. And then I had a, um... a lady that I used to pick up. And one day she told me, she said she was gonna have a seizure.... Cuz she remembers that she didn't didn't take her medication. And she instructed me as to what was gonna happen. And she took

the [?]-have a seizure, and I pulled the bus over. And she had the seizure. And because of what she told me to do, we made it through that. Um, then she was ok.

LB: Cuz I know the epilepsy foundation does that training in a lot of cities for bus operators, but not in Richmond, huh?

FT: Yeah. I don't think--they... we don't do a lot of training as far as taking care of people, because I think it's because of the liability... that there is.

LB: Oh, that's interesting.

FT: Yeah. Yeah, and may--you know, when something happens... you call in. You do what you can, but you're not authorized to be a doctor, or be a EMT or anything like that. And that's probably something to be debated. You know, uh, because you couldn't just stand there and watch something bad happen. And not try to do anything about it. Yeah.

LB: And I would think, given that there are a lot of people riding the bus who are riding the bus cuz they can't drive because of health issues.

FT: That's true.

LB: ... that would be something that would come up a lot.

FT: Yeah. Yeah. It's true. Uh... especially with specialized transit, so you--you know... uh, lotta people there, they have special needs and whatever. But, uh, like I say, my experience has been... pretty good. Pretty good. Really good.

LB: Well, memorable doesn't have to mean bad [laughs].

FT: [Laughs] yeah.

LB: I mean, Dave Edmonds was just in here before you--

FT: Uh huh.

LB: ...talking about his most memorable experience was meeting his wife on the bus! Cuz she was a passenger.

FT: Yeah, well that's great!

LB: Yeah.

FT: But I already had my wife.

LB: I know you had your wife already [laughs].

FT: Yeah, I had--got... told my wife when she was ten years old. You heard that old saying? Pick the apple from the tree, never let it fall on the ground, because what happens when they start f--when they hit the ground? Starts to rot.

LB: [Laughs.]

FT: Never heard that one.

LB: No.

FT: Think about it! Always pick the apple from the tree. Not on the ground.

LB: So you had it completely figured out by twelve.

FT: There eyou go.

LB: [Laughs.]

FT: [Laughs.] I told you I was raised by a wise old lady.

LB: It sounds like it. You were... like... were you seven when you moved here? Or earlier than that?

FT: Six months.

LB: So really a baby.

FT: Yeah.

LB: Yeah.

FT: So I--so I'm--re--I just as well say that I'm, you know, I'm a Rich--Richmond boy. Cuz I never lived in New York.

LB: No. No.

FT: Yeah.... I was six months.

LB: Wow. So... give me an example, then... of good leadership that you've experienced, and it can be on any level -- it can be within the GRTC, it could be passengers, it could be leadership in the city of Richmond... it could be a president--I mean, take it wherever you want it to go.

FT: Example of good leadership.

LB: That you experienced during your time as an operator.

FT: That would be with the GRTC, uh?

LB: No, like I just said, can be... anything that--that had an impact on you... as a GRTC operator, citizen of Richmond, however you wanna take it.

FT: Well, I--I--I think right now we're in the best leadership as far as our presidents concerned. And the things that he's said for--he's trying to do for the American people. And that really had moved me to get involved more, um, I don't wanna say in politics but campaigning and all. The unions are very strong. And, uh, support of certain candidates and all. And, uh... that had an effect on me cuz I, uh... back before the last election, I was out in Cleveland... campaigning and I was down on Broad Street campaigning and all that. So that--that type of leadership for the country--it does make a difference. Uh... the... the local leadership, um... I don't pay too much attention to that because it's very frustrating. You know, it's very frustrating. Um... I try to concentrate on--on... just what I'm here to do. To make a difference. To make a difference. I do think GRTC have taken a... a positive turn since Mr. Coles became the CEO. Not taking anything from anybody else, but I--I do feel that the company has taken a positive turn.

LB: Tell me about that.

FT: Um... well... not having a contract for two years, that would tell you something the relationship between the company and the union.

LB: So...

FT: So...

LB: Did he come in after that two years? Or--

FT: He came in--he--

LB: ... what--what was the timing on all that?

FT: He--he came in... right after the two years. Cuz see, he was the, um... Chief Operating Officer (?). And after the CEO left, he stepped right in. And this was in... sometime in, I think... the first part of '11 if I'm not... ver... '11. But I think 2011. That, uh, he took over. It could've been maybe at the end of '10. But I know, uh... he hadn't been in--when we went to negotiate, he hadn't been in a year. I know he hadn't been in a year.

LB: Because, wow, two years. That's such a long time to be without a contract.

FT: Yeah. [Really? but...?] not much of a contract. They... constantly going back and forth to the table and that sort of thing. And I think, uh, when Mr. Coles, uh... took over, he said, hey, you know.... He took a different look at things. And--and I think the company's outlook of how to deal with the unions changed, you know? And then, uh... when I came into, uh... the presidency--see, I was trained by the steel workers. And we always had what we call--we try to get a partnership agreement. And in that partnership agreement, it holds the company leadership

and the union leadership accountable. Accountable. For achieving certain things. You know, for doing certain thing--you just can't go along and... it be it. We don't have a contract. You know, uh, there's ramifications. To that. So, working on the... the--in our mind a partnership agreement, you know... I agree to give you my best, you agree to give me your best. And somewhere we're gonna meet halfway. That happens.

LB: So what was the big holdup during the two years--I mean, what was the GRTC... balking about? Or what was the union... not wanting to accept from the company?

FT: Well, there's... money. You know. Cuz it's bad economic times.

LB: Yeah.

FT: And you look at money and see--thing about GRTC, they have to wait on somebody else to get the money. You know, there's not a tax... or anything where, uh, to find money where GRTC would get. So, you know, this--the blessing (?) of the city would give so much, they give so much, federal gives so much. And you have to operate within those limitations. And sometime it's very difficult... to do that, and maintain a high level of service. Um... certain time you have to cut service back. But see the bad thing, you don't want to cut the quality of the service. Even if you have to cut back far as, uh... quantity. But you don't want to cut that quality. And I think, uh... it--it, uh, dollars and cents. And that's coming to the table and being reasonable--both sides being reasonable and understandable, you know. It--this is what we can do. You know. Alright? ...Can you do 100% more, but if you can't do 100% more, maybe we have to settle for 110 rather than 200%. So, it--it's a matter of--of knowing the numbers, knowing the figures. Uh, because, um... whenever you're in situations like that, it's always a great deal of--distrust. Distrust. And, uh... I think one of the advantages that... we had is that Mr. Coles used to be an operator himself. One day. And he understood outside, and we had to learn understood the business point of it... also.

LB: Yeah, that's been one of the things that's interested me most about the GRTC is Mr. Coles starting out as an operator.

FT: Mm hmm.

LB: And moving into such a different role.

FT: Yeah. Well, just think, I'm--I started as a operator and I moved in to be the union president.

LB: I know, but you were already--right? High up in the union with the steel workers.

FT: Oh yeah. Yeah.

LB: So, to me, that seems like less of a stretch in a way. Cuz it seemed like you were... a high union official moonlighting as an operator.

FT: Yeah. Yeah, right. And I was prepared for the job, too.

LB: Yeah.

FT: Yeah, prepar--pared for the job. And--and it makes a difference, when you deal with somebody that do have at least a... acceptable level of understanding.

LB: ...Rather than someone who's coming at it from... an MBA perspective, maybe.

FT: Right. Right.

LB: Now... tell me... what some of the biggest moments of change have been in the job for you. I mean you just told me about a huge one. Right? Um, but tell me about some more--what have been the big moments of change for you at the GRTC?

FT: Well... I think the--basically changing the--the, operation itself, the buses. The type of buses we use, the clever devices, the communications. And getting rid of those hand-torn transfers. And, uh, [laughing] coming to a more--better system. Than we have as far as transfers. The--now, the, uh... the, uh--I call it the meter, but the firebox, issues the transfers. You don't have to issue the transfers. And I think it's the technolog--the technical changes that we go through--those are the--teh biggest things to adapt to. And it just take time.

LB: I know, you came in after the big change to power steering, so--

FT: [Laughs.] Yeah. Yeah.

LB: So, transfers are one. What are some others?

FT: I--I just think that, uh... the communication system that we use. The clever device--what they call clever device... where...where... at one time you only just call on the radio. Now you can send messages by hitting a button that can communicate with you. The buses can be monit--monitored, uh... both visually, and--and, uh, verbally can hear--can hear you all, so... those type of changes, I think they're positive changes. And--and I--I enjoy that myself.

LB: See, I'm just laughing because the last communications change I just heard about was going from haven to stop the bus and get out at a pay phone [laughs]...

FT: [Laughs.] Yeah.

LB: ...to getting the radios, so...

FT: Yeah. Yeah.

LB: So it's evolved a lot since then, it's sounds like.... Now... how has the bus ridership changed over time?

FT: I--I think the... over the years, I think that even with the people that ride the bus... they don't have a true feel--not everybody, but... back then, um... people... felt there was a privilege to

ride the bus--

LB: You mean back in the early 90s or--or before--yeah.

FT: Yeah. Yeah, when I started. You know, this is just my--

LB: Yeah, yeah.

FT: ...swing on it. Seemed like back then that people... thought it was a privilege to ride the bus. Now people feel that it's a right to ride the bus. And with that type of attitude, we do have problems. Create problems on the bus, far as the way people conduct themselves. And that's not--that's not everybody.

LB: No.

FT: You know, that's not everybody. Um... with--with the buses... back then when--when I first started, you had less confusion and less problems. With passengers. Behavior type problems.

LB: So what kind of behavior type problems and what kind of confusion do you get now?

FT: [Laughs] Well... eh, you get people [arguing?] on the bus. People never being satisfied--that type of thing, no matter what. But they feel--they believe this is not a private service, this is a public service. That's the type of thing we get. The--the operators have to deal with a lot out of there. *A lot* in personality. Everybody have a different personalities. So you go thirty-five people on the bus, you got thirty-five different personalities that you have to deal with at an--any given time.

LB: What's the craziest situation you've ever had to deal with?

FT: That I had to deal with?

LB: Yeah.

FT: Uh... I think the... where... individuals got to fighting on the bus.

LB: What kind of fighting?

FT: Just... fist!

LB: Like, young kids or...?

FT: No, grown people.

LB: Grown people, wow. Did they know each other before hand or was it--?

FT: I think they did. Cuz after they fought, they went on about their business.

LB: [Laughs.]

FT: [Laughs.]

LB: Did you have to kick them off the bus?

FT: No, I... to do that. I figure once they got tired, they're finished, they'll go ahead and... get off the bus.

LB: So you just kept driving the bus while they're back there--?

FT: No, I... you know [laughs]--stop. You had to--you have to stop, no, I stop, pull over. Just call, you know, let [them know] you got a problem, and... by time, uh, I made the phone call, the few [licks?] that they passed that--it's ok. And they [kick them off the bus?]

LB: Sounds a little nutty.

FT: It is! Well you need that. But like I say, all in all... base (?) bus driver, they're--base operat-- I mean, customers. They're very good people. They're very good people. And I try not to let the few bad ones ruin it for the--for the good ones.

LB: So how do you think that Richmonders who don't ride the bus view the GRTC?

FT: I think the ones that don't... ride the bus, all they th--all they think is that, 'there are those big buses, coming down, hogging the road...' and that sort of thing. It--it really don't phase them. It really don't phase them. Because they do not have to ride the bus or deal with the bus. They look at it as just a menace as something on the road.

LB: Cuz it does seem like in Richmond, that's the big divide, right, between people who--

FT: Mm hmm.

LB: ...never ever ride a bus and then people who... usually do.

FT: Right. Right. And--and you know... you have some people that understand and depend on the bus.

LB: Yeah.

FT: It--it--then other people don't. It--it--I don't think it really phase them that much. The people that drive in the cars every day. And then if they lose their car, then they still say, 'I'm not gonna catch the bus.'

LB: What's the hangup with catching the bus in Richmond-- cuz you know, I used to live in Boston, I used to live in Providence and there, it seemed like everyone was on public

transportation all the time. Right?

FT: Yeah.

LB: I mean, they'd take their car sometimes, they take the bus sometimes, they take the subway some other times and it was just not a big thing--

FT: Well, I--I think it's--it's--its'--it's--it's just a thing that people feel that bus service is for the lower people, the, uh, lower-income people, things like that. But they fail to realize that, you know, we have upper-income people riding the express buses. I just think it's just... just a connotation that--you know, what they believe. You know, and--and... if you're not educated in the thing, then you're gonna believe anything people tell you.

LB: So do you think that's changing over time, one way or another? Like, people getting more ignorant or less ignorant about--

FT: I think they're getting more ignorant. That's what I feel.

LB: Yeah.... That's interesting.

FT: And--and--and... I don't know... maybe that's from the fact of not being... educated to the point. But it--to me, it's that... if you don't have to ride the bus, it just don't phase them, they never really think about it.

LB: Yeah.

FT: And I think that's probably [?].

LB: Yeah.

FT: They never really think about it because they have so many other things to deal with in life.

LB: Yeah, that would make sense. Um... can you talk some more about what kind of changes you've seen in the GRTC and in your job? Since you started?

FT: Well... as far as the--the... changes that I've seen... you know, changes in the equipment that we use. Uh, changes in--in procedures. Safety. You know, uh, the safety aspect of--of what we--what we do. Uh, now that we do schedules, we try to keep safety in mind. Where are operators are--

LB: What do you--what do you mean, 'now that you do schedules'?

FT: Uh... the union was not involved in any schedule with GRTC. Now the union is. We're not deeply in the scheduling but we do... have a scheduling committee where we do discuss... different problems with schedules.

LB: Is that something that came out of the 2011...

FT: Yeah.

LB: ...talks?

FT: Yeah. Yeah. And, um... what happens now is that... we look at where we put out operators. You know, where they get off the bus and that sort of thing. And it's still not perfect. But we working towards their safety as well as the passengers' safety.

LB: Does that have to do with the number of hours they're working in a row, or with the kind of routes they're on, or--?

FT: Uh, the computer... I'd tell you the computer just fixed the routes and match them all up. Uh... it has to do with the routes. You know, whether you're working a--like a split. A full day, whatever it may be, cuz you know, we have... all sorts of--all sorts of routes. Uh, it's very few straight eight-hour runs. Very few.

LB: So what would a split route look like?

FT: A spit route would be--you could come to work in the morning, uh, three hours in the morning, five in the evening. Five in the morning and three. You--you can--two in the morning, six in the evening.

LB: Wow.

FT: Whatever. You know. That's what a split would look like.

LB: So--so why did that... come to be rather than a more kinda... typical, normal... eight-hour work day.

FT: Because you--because [our ideas?]-you know, you servicing almost, like, twenty-two hours a day.

LB: Yeah.

FT: You know.... And it's hard to make a schedule. Like that. And it comes from the demand of the particular routes, because, you know, where some routes may demand a heavy in the morning, light in the midday, heavy in the evening. That's... basically the passenger [demand?]-you have to put the buses where the passengers are.

LB: But it wouldn't be something like you'd be on one route... and then you'd... you know, cover that for six hours, and then get off at the GRTC... building and get onto a different bus and take on a different route. You--you have that break in the middle of the day.

FT: Yeah. Yeah. That could happen. And that--most of them are like that. Because, see, you

could do express in the morning, and then end up coming, doing a local in the afternoon.

LB: What was your favorite route besides the express?

FT: ...All my favorite routes was the express.

LB: [Laughs.]

FT: I--I had the, uh, first route was Fair Oaks Express. I [?] Petersburg Express. And because they--you know, I like the moving on the highway.

LB: Yeah. So not so much the locals... every two hour--two block stopping.

FT: Yeah.

LB: Yeah...

FT: Once I--once I... pick them up in the city, I was gone.

LB: [Laughs.]

FT: And that was a--that was the best thing for me because, like I said, I was a part-time operator.

LB: Yeah.

FT: You know. Part-time operator, I--and--and I knew what I had to do, did the same thing every day so that was no problem.

LB: But then you were--you were full-time for the three or four years, right?

FT: No, I never--

LB: No.

FT: ...I've never full-time.

LB: Ok, so you went right from being part-time to being... union president.

FT: Yeah, that's correct.

LB: That's interesting. How... so you have full participation in then union. How active is the union here?

FT: Very active. Very active. We stick our nose into everything [laughs].

LB: Tell me more [laughs]!

FT: No, we, uh... the union, we try to get involved in--the biggest thing is safety. And, um... how to, you know, pretty much how we do things. What's the best way. You know, we believe that rather than have the company do something, and the union object to it, let's sit down and talk about it beforehand. So if there's anything we can do to help enhance it to make it better, then we do it... as a joint venture.

LB: So give me an example of a safety issue where the union... has kind of intervened proactively.

FT: Uh... mmm, now let's see, I gotta--gotta tell you... being union president, you know, you have to [laughs]... lotta things. Well, safety issues, uh... that as far as, you know, things like... will be looked at. You know, bathroom breaks. Uh, we're trying to find more places to use--use the restroom. That are safety. Uh, we're on the--we have created a safety committee. That's gonna become active. And, actually, uh, with that safety committee, to get more and more into training, uh, we asked for more line instructors. Line instructors are people who've been trained, so when new people come in... you know, when new people do come in, we can train them. And, uh... the--as our overall safety program is having the--the membership in the union to participate in that. Uh, we have a accident classification and review board. Uh, where the union is active in that also.

LB: Cuz I imagine living in a state where our worker's comp laws are the weakest of anywhere except for North Carolina, right?

FT: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

LB: You kind of have your [laughs]--your work cut out for you.

FT: Yeah. Yeah. We do. We stay busy.

LB: Yeah. I bet.

FT: Yeah, we stay busy.

LB: Um... how do you feel the perceptions about riding the bus have changed over your years of working for the--the GRTC? You know, both for riders and non-riders.

FT: I think people... the peop--basic rider understands that the... the importance of having that bus there. Um... and having it on time. And that's one of the things we've been working towards to make, uh... schedules more operator- and customer-friendly. Where you have enough time to get from point A to point B. And when you don't b--only time you'll run late is there's some kind of contingency, something happened to cause the late. It's not that the bus is just... normally late. All the time, you know. Uh, the... I--I think that... people--maybe slowly realizing that we need more transportation. We need more investment in transportation. We definitely need more investment in transportation. Now when the, um... gasoline went up? Ridership goes up. I mean,

it really goes up when gasoline--you know, if gasoline started traveling again, then our ridership would go back up. And, but--I think there's a comfort in some people that even though they don't ride the bus, knowing it's there if they do need it in the future.

LB: Have you noticed any... difference--I mean, I know lots of people who ride the bus for environment reasons cuz they don't wanna add to the pollution--have you--

FT: Mm.

LB: ...have you noticed any change since people became... concerned about, like global warming, pollution, things like that or--or not so much.

FT: No, not so much. Only time which I've noticed change is when, uh, the gasoline goes up.

LB: Yeah.

FT: Yeah, the--then--

LB: So it's kind of more of a pocketbook issue.

FT: Yeah. It's a pocketbook issue. But, uh... that happened [?].

LB: How do you like to spend your time when you're not working?

FT: With my family. My wife and my grandchildren and all. That's what I do. I don't play golf. Don't play ball. I play family.

LB: [Laughs.] How old are your grandchildren?

FT: Oh boy... I go--I've got six, uh--

LB: Wow.

FT: Uh, starting--starting from the bottom, uh... 9 months... uh, six years old, six years old... fourteen and fourteen, and I think Zaire is seventeen.

LB: So the cousins must be very tight, having--you know, being in those pairs like that.

FT: [Laughing] Yeah.

LB: Were they twins?

FT: Well, I've got, uh... uh, no. I've got four children. My oldest--my oldest son has three. Uh, the son under him has... one. Right? And... then one more... then my daughter has one. Somebody missing. Frank--it's--that's six, yeah. That's six. Frank got the, uh... the oldest--the oldest one. He's got three. Yeah. Three, one, one, and one.

LB: Wow. [Laughs.] And are they all in Richmond?

FT: Yeah.

LB: That's perfect.

FT: Yeah. Yeah. They're all in Richmond.

LB: So what changes have you seen in Richmond... during your time here?

FT: [Chuckles.]

LB: I mean, I would imagine... a lot, considering... where and when you went to high school and... everything that's happened since then. And being in such a public position as you are.

FT: Yeah. I--I--I think that, uh... I've seen Richmond slowly coming out of the dark ages. And, uh... but we've got a long ways to go.

LB: Tell me more -- about both ends.

FT: Well, when I say coming out the dark ages, uh... here... people still have memories. And it's hard to let memories go. And to look towards the future for better change.

LB: Memories of...

FT: Those days when I--uh, was integrated. Things like that. Uh, we--we still have... we keep--some things its hard for people to let go. And people need to let go and just move towards the future. Change is gonna come whether you like it or not. And the only thing it is, rather than fight change, just--if you can't help it, stand by and let it come. So it's--it's--it's gr--it's slowly changing. Uh, in the city. And I see more and more cooperation from the, you know, all different groups and all different facets of the city.

LB: Seems like, uh, the change is kind of accelerated a lot in recent years.

FT: Mm hmm. It has. It has. Uh, you know, it--it, now, you know they're talking about rapid transit, rail and things of that sort. And, um... years back, you wouldn't even heard the talk. You know, but now they're talking about it and looking at trying to--how to finance it and what to do. And I think that... as we go along, you're gonna find that the surrounding areas and all, they're gonna realize this is better if we work together, the resources [?]-rather than independently.

LB: Why do you think there was such resistance for so long... to think like, you know, expanding rapid transit?

FT: Mm... I think it's fear.

LB: Of what?

FT: I think it's fear of what might happen or what could be, cuz it--it's almost like a unknown. And you can't put your finger on what fear is, but just like anything that--that's unknown, you always have some, uh, apprehension... about how it's gonna effect your particular area, you know, um.... As for what's gonna happen if we put rail in, uh, the rapid transit, uh... that's... shouldn't be a whole lot of problem as far as changing structures or anything like--except with Broad Street cuz it's a main street. But I just it's a--it's a--it's a... just not knowing. You know, venturing in... uh, and, uh, if they could see, say, ok, we did it. See, it's alright -- that might help the situation.

LB: So how's your job as an operator changed your view of Richmond as a city? If you know what I mean.

FT: Repeat that again?

LB: How has--how has your job--your perspective as an operator... changed your view of the city?

FT: I don't think it has. I don't think it has. Being an operator, I don't think it's made a difference as far as my view--

LB: Yeah.

FT: ... you know, the city, you know. I always wanted to hear the cities and the counties be able to work in a--a collective bargaining atmosphere. And, which it--that hasn't happened yet, but it's moving towards that. Little by little.

LB: Do you think it'll ever get to the point--or, I should rephrase that.... I don't even know how to rephrase it. It seems so unusual here... the--the way the counties... behave towards public transportation in Richmond -- do you see that? Changing?

FT: Yeah. I can--you--you can tell that. You can tell that. I think that... it will change one day. But it have to be something that would be a major threat to all.

LB: [Laughs.]

FT: I don't know what that is. But it--it would have to be... something that's gonna [put a?] threat to all, when we all say, hey, you know, let's--let's come together... and work as a cohesive party.

LB: Yeah, cuz... didn't that start with annexation?

FT: Yeah.

LB: And that was, what? Forty years ago.

FT: Yeah. Yeah. Well, see--you know, back then, during that time, you know, every move and everything was racial back then. And--and--and that's still... you know, has it's... drippings (?)... as it is now. It's still--it dribbles. But I think, uh, Mama used to say that Father Time would take care of all. And I think... time... will make the difference. You know, I think time would make the difference. It'll die out. It'll have to die out. It'll change. But it takes a lot of time. Forty years seemed like a long time. But when you're dealing with things like that--it's only a day or two. But it takes time.

LB: Certainly does here. Um... so now I'm gonna ask you what you think the hardest thing about your job is, and what you think the best thing about your job is.... As an operator.

FT: As an operator, nothing was hard. Nothing was hard. Best thing I like about it is that being able to service the customers. Making a difference in their lives. Being there for them. I think that's the key.

LB: It sounds like it. What would you tell someone who is about to start a career as a bus operator in Richmond?

FT: [Chuckles.] I would say, uh... be safe. Always think safety. Be patient. And understanding. You have to be in this job. If you can't be those three things, you need to think about another career.

LB: I could imagine it would take a lot of patience and understanding.

FT: It is! It does. It does. You know, dealing with the public.

LB: Cuz the public's a kinda motley crew.

FT: [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs.]

FT: Yeah, but it's always gonna be... that one--what I call sweet time... that makes the difference. And it all--make it all worthwhile.

LB: What was your sweetest time?

FT: My sweetest time? But as an operator?

LB: Mm hmm.

FT: ...Mmm.... I... I had so many little sweet times, I--I can't say which was my sweetest--

LB: Well, you don't have to rank the top one, then just tell me about some of them.

FT: I... I t--I think it's--a--just as people thank you. For making a difference in their lives. You

know. They thank you for being there. You know, just person step up on the bus and say, you know, I really appreciate the bus service, and you're a good bus driver. And when they get to the point of a holiday, they give you a small gift. That let's you know that they really appreciate it. It don't have to be a monetary gift. I mean, it could be just a--a little toy egg or something.

LB: [Laughs.]

FT: When they--they do that.

LB: That's nice.

FT: It makes a difference. Just saying 'thank you.' Those are the sweet moments.

LB: Is there anything that I didn't ask you about that you would like to talk about?

FT: Yes.... I think... the... if you look at my life, there was two ladies in my life that made a difference, that's my grandma and my wife. And just from talking to me, you probably could tell me, [laughs] it take a heck of a good wife to put up with me.

LB: [Laughs.]

FT: Yep. Been a long time, yeah. And I really appreciate her and all my work and everything that... I've done, she's always been there for me.

LB: That's great.

FT: She's always been there for me.

LB: Ah, you're a lucky man.

FT: I am! Yeah.

LB: Well, thank you so much for the interview, I really appreciate it.

FT: Ok.

LB: I have to tell you, even the lawyers, they always look at this but then they sign it. You are--I probably interviewed... close to a hundred people? And I think... you were the first one who got up and started walking out after seeing the form. But as we talked, I kept thinking... union president--you're used to working with contracts all the time.

FT: Yeah. I am.

LB: It makes sense to me.

FT: Yeah. Like I said, I wasn't trying to be nasty or anything, you know--

LB: No! I didn't take it that way.

FT: ... Yep. Just don't put me on the internet upside down, ok? [Laughs.]

LB: Never! [Laughs.] Nothing crazy like that. Now, I mean, really, the whole point of this project is just to really... educate the public about the GRTC cuz I always think, you know, buses... bus drivers... are on the forefront... of the changes that are taking place in the city. Right?

FT: Mm hmm.

LB: I mean, buses have been so pivotal in the civil rights movement? Right?

FT: Right.

LB: And changes in the city.... And people don't think about them as much as they should.

FT: Yeah, I would just like to say--to somebody, just say, hey, you guys... and ladies... let's put away all the toys. All the past. And let's sit down. Let's get us a regional system. [Let's work the ___ out? --or-- That's worth the ___?] You know. I think it--it would make a heck of a difference.

LB: It's so amazing that we don't have it.

FT: Mm hmm. Yeah, I know.

LB: Still.

FT: You still taping?

Benjamin: I... can stop it...

FT: Ok. Stop it a [bit/minute?]....