

GRTC

Interview: George Barrett

Laura Browder: Alright... Mr. Barrett, can we--can we start off by you telling me something about where and how you grew up and just... telling me something about growing up?

George Barrett: I grew up in the city of Richmond. In the Church Hill part of town.

LB: That's where we both live.

GB: Yeah. I went to Armstrong High School. I graduated in 1967. Um, I graduated from Armstrong High School in 1967 and I joined the United States Army. Um, went into the Vietnam crisis in 1968, '69... came back from the Vietnam crisis, I went to Europe with NATO and the Czechoslovakia crisis, eh... ETS (?) out of the military in 1970. I work for Medical College of Virginia. Um, taking medicine up, and I fill out an application at the VTC (?) company at that time. And I was hired here... in 1971, I believe in... January. And... I worked here until I retired in 2004. And then I started to work part-time from 2004 up until today.

LB: Can I take you way back again, um, I'd love to hear more about growing up in Church Hill, what Church Hill was like when you were growing up. And you graduated Armstrong right when things were really changing a lot!

GB: Yeah. Yeah. At the time, when I was living in Church Hill, it was a mostly, uh, segregated community. Um... uh... blacks, and um... I don't know--I sure had a good time [laughs].

LB: [Laughs.]

GB: And, uh... what else you need to know about Church Hill?

LB: Anything you wanna tell me, and... Armstrong? I mean, that's when you had the--did you come from an Armstrong family then? Had your parents both gone to Armstrong?

GB: Yeah, my mother... went to Armstrong High School. Uh, she did not graduate, I don't believe. My father went to Armstrong, but they were up on Leigh Street...

LB: Mm hmm.

GB: ...there over Armstrong, then we got this new Armstrong over here on 31st Street, ok, and um, it was... it was a good time. Especially during the fall of the year, during Armstrong Walker Classic. And all of this, you know. And, um... Whatever else we did. We played football, [run in the street?], we had part-time jobs [you know what I mean?] and I played in the school band for a while.

LB: What was your instrument?

GB: I played violin and percussion. And, uh... let's see. [?]. . . graduated.

LB: And--and then you went to Vietnam -- what was your MOS?

GB: I was thirteen [outfit?] ten, uh, [I was a?] artillery crew chief. Um... in the Vietnam crisis. Then I went to... Czechoslovakia, on a bigger gun (?), with nuclear power. So I gained nuclear clearance... to do this--to wind up on the czech border. But NATO whenever they needed troops employed... we used to do a thing like see how quickly we could get into Europe from Fort Lewis, Washington. And get our guns there [?] mount up, get on trains and... set up on Czech border. Then I came back... from Europe. That trip, made one more reforge (?) on NATO. Then I ETS out of the army, I... once I got out of there, I joined the 76 aviation [?] helicopter unit there in Sandston. I stayed in that for a while. I worked here... I went to school. And I worked here. [Laughs.]

LB: So tell me about starting off here. What... what led you to decide you wanted to join the GRTC and what was... what was your training like, what were your early days like--just... tell me everything.

GB: Alright. When I first come to GRTC, um, it was one of the highest paying job in the city of Richmond. And, um... what you call it, the civil rights movement, um, allowed us to... apply for jobs at the Greater Richmond Transit Company--oh. The VTC Company.

LB: Right.

GB: Right, back in the day. So our... went--came here, put in an application, I went to the fire department, I went to the post office. I went there where I could to get a high-paying job, cuz I had a family. You know, I mean, while I was working. They come first (?). And, uh, Mr. Woody was the transportation supervisor at the time. He called me in the office.. when I got here, he asked me, he said, um... asked me for some... credentials notes (?), all I had were the papers out of the army. I gave him them. ANd he talked to me and he said, uh... 'Mr. Barrett... if I gave you a quarter and the bus fare is fifteen cent, how much change [would you give?] back.' That was the test [laughs]. I told him ten cents. So he gave me a job. Then I went through training for about three weeks. Back in those day--I think training went three weeks. And I wound up going over to Sears and getting my uniform, you know, I mean... then I... had a job. You know, I mean, so... the post office called me.. after I got hired here. Um... the fire department called. I didn't like... their hours of working cuz I had a wife and kids. And I wanted to be at home. And this job allowed me to do that. then this job allowed me to make... as much money as I wanted. If I wanted to work. You know what I mean, I did a lot of overtime all the time, you know, and um... I don't know. I just had a good time. Back in those days [laughs]. This is a little different than it is now. Things that today are more automated--you know what I mean? YOU really don't have too much to do nowadays because the buses... are so high-tech. You understand, talking about, they--they know everything that's going on. You don't count no money, you don't count no transfers, all you do is drive the bus. And respect our people, and you be alright. That's [?].

LB: It seems very, very different. Because talking to Mr. West, talking to Mr. Edmonds... you know, they were talking about not even having power-steering... and no air conditioning and...

you know, no radios [laughs].

GB: Well, we didn't have power-steering, we didn't have radios, you have to get up and change the signs, you count the transfers, you count the pennies they drop on the little fare [plate?] [laughs].

LB: [Laughs.]

GB: And some people try to get on and drop a whole bunch of pennies in there, no way in the world you can count all those pennies. You know what I mean, um... um, let me see.... No power brakes. No A/C. I don't know, but I just--just thought that's the way it was [laughs].

LB: The idea of a bus with no power brakes sounds terrifying to me. I've gotta say.

GB: No.

LB: No?

GB: No. Not to me, back then, you know, I mean... till I found out what a bus with power brakes and power steering felt like.

LB: Yeah.

GB: You know what I mean? Cuz... back, then, you know what I mean, you just grab that steering wheel and pull it. And sometime it might pull you back [laughs], you know what I mean, but.... It's... it's something you never thought about then because this other stuff didn't exist. Then it came along, then you see what the difference is, you know, I just think a lot of people had [they came up in our times?], driving the bus, couldn't've made it. You know what I mean, cuz we have a lot of safety features on the bus today that they didn't have back then. Mirrors on the right side of the bus, things like that, you know what I mean. Uh, you couldn't get out of the curve lane, for fear somebody coming down that side of the bus and you don't see it, crunch 'em up.

LB: [Laughs.]

GB: They teach you [laughs] to look the antenna [laughing], you know. Stuff like that. You know what I mean, but it was big fun and when you did get a bus with air condition on it, was one of those buses with that big humpback air condition on the back of it, you know--it might cool... you know... [laughs].

LB: [Laughs] maybe yes, maybe no.

GB: Yeah. But, uh, you know what I mean... I--I don't know, I just had--I had big fun back in those days with the transit system.

LB: Tell me about it. Tell me more.

GB: Um... a lot of the people that... came [under? on there?] those times with me with the transit system with the passengers and things like that? They grow up right along with you. Cuz you see them today. Some of them you go to their funerals and things like that, you know what I mean, um.... Oh, I--I met a lot of people. You know what I mean, and um... I did a lot of things, you know what I mean back in those days. And some of those people still with me today, you know what I mean. I've been married all my life. You know, so I have--I didn't do anything but go fishing with my daughters or go hunting or something like that, you know, and I had two girls, you know what I mean? And... that's it. Raised my family... stayed at home. That's about all I did.

LB: Your daughters hunt, too?

GB: Hmm?

LB: Do your daughters hunt, too?

GB: Yeah. They hunt, they fish.

LB: Good for them.

GB: Yeah.

LB: Good for them.

GB: Yeah, that's what they do, yeah. It's all I had. They each--they [went with me?] up until they were teenagers, then the boyfriend came along.

LB: [Laughs.]

GB: Then that was it for me! [Laughs.] You know the way that went.

LB: I know, my daughter's thirteen and I keep waiting for the boy thing to kick in.

GB: [Laughs.] Yeah.

LB: I know I got about five minutes left with her before everything goes crazy.

GB: Yeah [laughs]. Yeah, mine grown and gone, mine... they--two daughters, they both married. They got... homes, they live in Chesterfield County and one live... maybe two blocks from me. And the other one live... maybe two miles from me, you know what I mean--

LB: That's nice.

GB: ...and I got four grandkids.

LB: Oh, that's perfect, so you see them all the time, then.

GB: Yeah, most of the time, they... when they're not in school, they'll drop them off on me. [Laughs] especially boys, you know.

LB: Yes, I know I've got one of those, too.

GB: [Laughs.] Yep.

LB: Mr. Barrett, tell me... tell me, generally speaking, what were the best and worst moments in your job in a typical day? Or typical week or month or whatever.

GB: Well, in this type of work... I mean... your best moment is when you got the bus on time and moving right on along. Your worst moment is when you're sitting down there in traffic, you got people on the bus trying to get somewhere [chuckles]. Ok? The other worse moments is weather conditions. You know what I mean? We dealt with Isabel... the blizzard of '96... and things like that, you know, maybe early...

LB: Were you having to drive ever through, like, Isabel and one of the hurricane or blizzards?

GB: Yeah.--

LB: Tell me about that.

GB: I actually drove the blizzard of '96 from four o'clock in the morning to two o'clock the next day.

LB: That's crazy!

GB: No, that's money [laughs].

LB: It's money, but that was a crazy storm, is what I mean.

GB: Yeah, but...

LB: How did you get through that?

GB: ... It--it.... it was a breeze to me, you know what I mean. [Laughs.] Um, I--I was used to driving in the snow anyway, but at that--that snow was a pretty deep one. You know what I mean and... really the whole city pretty much shut down.

LB: Two weeks the public schools were out, remember?

GB: Yeah. It sure was, and, uh... we took those people out that morning before the blizzard. Right? So I guess they just response--felt res... responsible for getting them people back. You know what I mean, so the buses stayed out, they won't [?] bring them in, you know, and we

always had to think routing (?), we rode, we stayed out there. You know what I mean? At--I'm [certain...?] work.

LB: BUt you say it was a breeze. Every other person in Richmond was inside their house, like... cowering [laughs], afraid to go outside, and you were out there, driving. What--wasn't it... tough, tough conditions?

GB: It--it's... my opinion, it was just a little slow.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Just, everything slowed down. And you understand, talking about--and you had to pick this bus to drive. You [?]. ... what I'm trying to say is, you know what I mean--and, um... during the blizzard, a lot of the traffic left. There wasn't that much traffic out there, you just dealt with the depth of the snow.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Ok, and where to keep the bus at. You know what I mean. I couldn't carry the bus, you know, you kept it in the street, you could move on along. Cuz all you do is pull off, you'd've had a... you come up [?], something like that. Uh, the... caught in the situation where the buses spin around on... you know what I mean. You had to learn how to drive in those type of condition. But... it had its good parts and its bad parts. I made money them days.

LB: And your passengers must've been so grateful to you.

GB: ... those that were there. You know what I mean, that could... you know, we had hold of, and... they had to get back home. And they--problem with that were when the bus is gonna stop (?). YOU know, that kinda bad when you ride the bus. And they shut down on you and you're away from home. But they never shut down, they just kept going, said 'keep rolling.' They didn't have, like, in my case where, [uh, two got a lot there for a long time?] I work the early straight. Ok? And my shift ran from four... to 1:50, so I mean, the evening, then I supposed to get relieved. But the driver couldn't get there. So I called 'em and let 'em know nobody was there so they tell me, 'keep going.' You know, I keep going and I come back around, the driver--still hadn't got a driver, so I just keep going. And... that way... I... they [kinda?] tell me to keep going, they pay me overtime for it, I just kept going around in circles. [Laughs.] The way I saw it, I got paid, you know, I mean... I didn't--weather conditions and things like that, those about the worst thing that goes on out there. You know, other than that... people always talking people, they used to tell me, you got a terrible job, driving a bus. I know people--you [get on there and look?]-could get on your nerves. I don't have that problem... with people. You know what I mean. You know... when you think they gonna get belligerent, just shut 'em up. You know, I mean--be alright. You know what I mean. Cuz they'll eventually settle--sit down, you know what I mean.

LB: So how do you deal with... when a passenger kind of gets up in your face or is getting obnoxious with some of the other passengers, what do you do?

GB: It's... I done had a couple people that get in my face. You know what I mean, um... I just look at them. And I'll push the button, and that--I mean, it's.... I got a rude passengers here, you know what I mean. Long as he don't... make a move to put his hand on me or to snatch at me or grab me, he can... do all that. [Laughs] You know what I mean? It really don't matter, cuz most of the time, they ain't gonna do nothing, noway. It's just a scare tactic. You know, I see. You know what I mean, and it's always been that way. What that done happened to me and when you push that button, you know what I mean, they [mind the?]-go on about their business. You know what I mean, you... but sometimes just pushing that button is the magic thing.

LB: [Laughs.]

GB: To get 'em off of there. You just tell them you're gonna push the button, you're gonna call the man, you know, and don't say nothing, you just... push the button, you know what I mean. And deal with it that way.

LB: How do you deal with it back before you even had radios in the buses where you had to actually pull over and make a phone call if something happened.

GB: Well, I had a incident up in, um, Oregon Hill back in the day. I was driving the Laurel 11, got to the end of the line, I was working a late. Caught a break, you know what I mean, and um... I got off the bus... to use the restroom. I was mobbed that night. Couldn't call nobody. I couldn't get back to the bus. Ok?

LB: And this was--this is back when?

GB: This is around 1973.

LB: So Oregon Hill at that time--

GB: Yeah.

LB: Must've been... pretty intense.

GB: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah. [Laughs.] Yeah. So... once I got myself... in position to get out that mob that I was encircled in, I got back on the bus, drove the bus outta that area, and called in, told dis--dispatch what happened that night. And, um... I just told them, I said, 'well, look man, I ain't going back up there with this bus no more.' [Laughing] You know, and so I--I didn't. Uh, I short--cut that block out and turn around, went back.

LB: I'm sorry, Mr. Barrett, you keep saying things that make me wanna ask you five more questions. Dealing with an Oregon Hill mob in 1973, how in the world did you get out of there... in one piece? Because I've heard people tell me so many stories about Oregon Hill back in the 70s and it just sounds... super... super intense.

GB: Yeah, well, I guess that could... apply to both sides of the fence. You know what I mean. In

that situation, I just... found the weakest part of the mob. That's the way I went. Till I got to the bus, go on, shut the door.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Then they was out throwing bricks at the bus. You know what I mean. Then I was gone [laughs].... But it... that was nothing com...pared to incidence that you being--I [would rather be mobbed than??] the Vietnam crisis... the--during the (?)... that was nothing, I mean--

LB: Well, that's a good way of looking at it, right [laughs].

GB: [Laughs.] Yeah. Them people keep--me playing for death and now this... peanuts here, you know, just... It's something you deal with. You know what I mean, um.... I didn't get... I might've took couple blows (?)... you know, pass a couple blows (?) and made my move, that's it. [Laughs.] I just didn't go back up in there no more. And it weren't too much they could do about it... you know...

LB: Right.... Cuz I've had people tell me about riding the bus down Hull Street, like, in the late 60s, early 1970s and having, like, the Pagans... shooting at the buses--have you heard those stories?

GB: Um... I head of the Pagans motorcycle gang and I've seen--

LB: Yeah, and the Confederate Angels and all those...

GB: Yeah, yeah. But, um... I did--I never had any dealings with the Pagans.

LB: Yeah.

GB: You understand what I'm talking about, but, uh maybe they was... starting to die down... in my time. Ok? I remember the Pagans motorcycle club, they all rode Harleys. Do you--you understand, I remember that. You know what I mean? Wore silver and black jackets and stuff like that.

LB: And you don't remember them shooting at the buses.

GB: No.

LB: Cuz I've had kids who were bused to Wythe High School, back then--I mean, they're not kids--

GB: You had kids do what?

LB: Well, they're not kids anymore. They--students at Wythe High School, George Wythe High School--

GB: Right.

LB: ...back when they were getting bused?

GB: Right.

LB: And they alkyd about having--riding the bus down Hull Street, and having these Pagans shooting at the buses. And so I've been dying to talk to the bus operators to see if anyone remembers that as well because that was such a crazy story.

GB: Well, you--you--you got to remember when... you're first black bus drivers... start to drive, like Mr. Coles.... Alright, he might've started driving in '67 and '68. You know, what I mean, that's--about when... the first black bus drivers came out there.

LB: Well, Bruce Korusek just sent me a picture of 1965 class of trainees for the drivers and... it was all white except two African American men and then there was one white woman. And then everyone else was--

GB: Yeah. I remember her. Did she have white hair?

LB: ... Yeah, kinda curly grayish hair?

GB: Yeah. Yeah, I remember her. Yeah. She died from a incident... uh, a robbery on... getting off from work. Um... on Main Street where she parked. that's what I heard happened to her. She was attacked and robbed on Main Street. And she worked a late... that lady. I remember her.

LB: That's terrible.

GB: Yeah, I remember that lady.

LB: And she died?

GB: Yeah, she died. Yeah. She sure did. I remember her. It weren't but two ladies up here then. Um, there were two white ladies. Then we had two black ladies that was here, back then. I can't think of their names... But they retired, I don't know whether they passed or not, I... I go to right many funerals. You know, I mean, people from those times?

LB: Yeah.

GB: You know, that I knew. And, um... I don't remember... I--I just can't remember, but I remember those two ladies. Yeah, I mean, that you probably got the pictures of.

LB: Well, there was only one in the photo I had.

GB: Yeah, but you didn't see the other one. She's a sort of heavy-set blond-like, blond-haired lady.

LB: Yeah, maybe she just wasn't in that particular photo or something.

GB: Yeah. Yeah, maybe she wasn't in that picture. But it was two of them. Two black ladies and two white ladies. Yeah. Back in those days.

LB: When did they start to be more... more women driving?

GB: More women drivers, I think... golly, had to be about fifteen years later. Once the buses became power-steering, power brake--

LB: Oh, so that's when they all...

GB: ... and all of that--that--that--that might not've been the reason why... you know what I mean, but--

LB: Yeah.

GB: ... I don't--sometime I might feel that the women didn't feel... that was their place. A lot of women didn't... do them kinda things until the women's movement.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Yeah, you know what I mean.... You--you know, the women and a movement, too, that they were out there for--um, equal opportunity, equal rights. Um... wanted the opportunity to be a bus driver. Or to be a police officer. You know what I mean, what might've been a thing where they really didn't hire a lot of women.

LB: I'm sure.

GB: Yeah.

LB: I'm sure Richmond happened a little later [laughs].

GB: [Laughs.] Might've been that thing, you know what I mean, where--reason why we didn't have a lot of women up here. You know what I mean, then... you know, one woman--after the movement with the women, they seen... women coming in, doing the job, you know what I mean. Do it just as good as a man, you know what I mean? Then they started hiring more women. You know what I mean, same thing with then police department, the fire department and anywhere else you go in the United States Army start putting 'em on the front.

LB: I know, I've interviewed a lot of them.

GB: Yeah. I don't think [?? they would've be on the front--??--none of them? (unclear)]. Uh, I think that'd be... kinda hard to bear with that. Yeah, they're watching women drive [laughs]. You know what I mean, in a situation like that, you know what I mean, I... I'll go online, and I look at

the obituaries of the women from Iraq. You know what I mean, uh, one that stood up (?), um... there were a whole lot [with me?] first lieutenant in the pro... division... in Iraq--she got children, one of the apartments up there (?), out on patrol where... her crews sure young--twenty-two years old...

LB: I know. I know.

GB: Those kinda things, you know what I mean, um, where, you know, where in other countries, they be doing that all the time. You know and--

LB: I know and now we've got the combat restrictions lifting so...

GB: Yeah. So, you know, they putting them girls out there. Some girls wanna go now.

LB: I know. I know. I've talked to some--

GB: Some girls don't wanna go. You know.

LB: Yeah. It's true, too.

GB: [Laughs.]

LB: Now... can you please give me some examples of good leadership that you've experienced or different kinds of leadership you've experienced -- and that's, you know--I'm asking these big wide open questions. Sometimes people answer that with... you know, someone at the GRTC. I was talking to Frank Tunstall earlier this week. He came up with President Obama. So, anyway you wanna take that question about leadership during your time as a GRTC operator.

GB: Uh, leadership... of the United States or--?

LB: Or here, or... Richmond, or anywhere you wanna take it.

GB: [Pauses] Uh... with the president of the United States, Obama, I think he's doing a great job, opening up a lot of doors for a lot of people that's out there. That... nobody even thought of, like that lady in... um... this country where we finally got to open the doors to where she'd been under house arrest for thirty years. You know what I mean, I heard... she--that stand out. Good leadership where these people not forgetting [that there are?] smart people out there. You know what I mean? Um... I--I--I hate to put down our leadership because, we're in a strong country. And, um... it's not just run by one person. You know, what I mean... [before?] the president of the united states and everybody else can do something, they, like--we got a board here... You know what I mean--

LB: Yeah.

GB: ...but we got a CEO.

LB: Yeah.

GB: And they might pop a question, you know what I mean and everybody... decide on it. It ain't just no one-person decision, you know what I mean.

LB: And it sounds like the leadership at the GRTC has really changed a lot over the years, up and down and up and down.

GB: Um... wi--with that, what you talking about, the CO--CEO position?

LB: I'm talking about that and, you know, people just telling me different stories about supervisors and the different CEOs and... you know, the relationships between the union and management and... right--that's all kind of... changed over the years

GB: Uh... I been... through the strike--they had a forty-five day strike.

LB: Was that the one in '75 or was--

GB: Yeah.

LB: Yeah.

GB: That was one was forty-five days. And they brought about great changes with Archer Ettings (?) in management, but they had the strike for those changes and now... those changes that it brought about was pretty good. You know what I mean, with the cost of living adjustment, uniform allowance, yeah, all of this, that, and the other. But... we're... we not gonna call [it/up?] management for it... that we lost most of those provisions. It's the people that's the rank and file and union that voted on issue where the management would shoot them a... a figure, like if we'll give you two-hundred and fifty dollars, you know, you take this. They'll go for it. And they'll knock something off of the, um... the list, uh, the stuff that we [didn't?] already strike--went on strike for it, we still--like if we still had the cost of living raise... um, no telling where... um, income would be on a monthly basis or weekly basis or hourly rate--

LB: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

GB: You know what I mean, but... during the contract agreement, we lost that...

LB: During the one in 2011?

GB: Yeah.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Yeah, but that--that was not management that voted that.

LB: Wow.

GB: The rank and file and the union did that. Um... they took the two-hundred-and-fifty dollars to get rid of the cost of living. It weren't but two and three cents. But it, uh... uh, the cost of living, but it went up over the period of time. And you--we could get more out of that... than we could've gotten out of this two-hundred-fifty dollars that they gave them that one time... deal, they took it... back, they taxed it, [the end of/they ended] that. And we got stuck on that... that... um... set fee right there, and we been there for quite some time, you know what I mean. The--the union had it, um... member, president and that. You don't work [?] but got everything done, but I'm retired. You know what I mean, uh... and... when I work... you know, I set my own goals to what I wanna do, they gave me some paperwork of how to get paid... about retirement. And I looked at it, figured it out, just went to work. That's what I did.

LB: Yeah.

GB: And then I'm getting more money out of [the/their] pension plan than I do out of social security. You understand what I'm talking about, you know. It's... all about... what you do, how you think about it, it--it--management, they looking out for their end of cost (?). You understand what I'm talking about, ok, you know, so many people up here, they'll hire em, you know. Give them a good job and... somewhere decent to work. They don't come to work. You know what I mean. They don't. [Laughs] they got incentives out there. Now, you know what I mean, we'll pay you two-hundred-and-fifty dollars if you keep... a good attendance record. Do you understand what I'm talking about? Now, they over there crying cuz of all these part-timers be jumping on the work, so they minimized what we can make. You know what I mean. Things like that, you know what I mean. Uh, I think we have... uh, great management. Trying to keep this thing rolling. The main thing is to keep it rolling. Because once it's gone, it's over. Cuz, see, back in the day... when it was VTC, it was privately owned. And we had this issue of who was gonna buy it. If... the city of Richmond hadn't picked it up, we wouldn't have had no job, or there wouldn't be no GRTC. You understand? But I believe that with the city contract... uh, the city charter that saved us. Ok, they said that the city of Richmond had to provide public transportation for their people. That's when they city of Richmond jumped on this... system.

LB: And that was back when city council was really getting active, yeah.

GB: Yeah. Uh, [laughs], you know, they really didn't wanna fool with it?

LB: Yeah.

GB: Cuz we had a union and they decided they wasn't gonna bargain with this union, you know what I mean, cuz if they and to bargain with the union, then the police department want a union, the fire department, everybody want a union. So... they got some outside management company to deal with it. Ok, and they call it the, um... Greater Richmond Transit... Company, managed by Old Dominion something, you know what I mean. Before they... keep this thing going. And then with... these people that we got that be upstairs, they be getting all the subsidies they can to keep it going, the signs on the buses... and things like this cuz they're not getting it all off the street. You understand what I'm talking about, so--

LB: Mm hmm.

GB: They do pretty good upstairs to keep it going. And then we got a brand new building.

LB: I know!

GB: [Laughs.] You know what I mean. Get to go up three stories. [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs.] Yeah, looks really different from the old building.

GB: Oh, God, yeah. We stayed in that building a long time. The old building was old... Pepco (?) building? You know what I mean, where the trolley--old trolley buses came in at?

LB: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

GB: Yep. Uh... those was the days [laughs].

LB: So how did--how do you think the, uh... the rank and file has changed over the years? [Pause] You know, kinda in their attitudes cuz I keep being struck, you know--I'm from New England originally where... everyone was unionized. Right?

GB: Yeah.

LB: And here, it's so unusual.

GB: We all are not unionized, you know what I mean, um... I wouldn't cross that picket line, I'm not a union member. You know what I mean, um... the benefits that I get from the union were already negotiated. Ok, prior to... um, these people taking over the union, you know what I mean, um... I feel that, um... everything that we worked for back in the day, we done lost. You know, as a result of the rank and file in the union. You know what I mean. Um... the people... everybody want their fair spot (?). They don't take a long-term look at things nowadays. You know what I mean, way it's gonna be in the future down the road.

LB: Mm hmm.

GB: You know what I mean, uh, we lost a lot. Lost a lot of uniform of uniform allowance. We lost the cost of living. Um, the... guys like us? We have to pay health insurance, four-hundred dollars a month. You know what I mean, where--I think that the union should've been negotiating that. Now, I'm a military person. So I'm qualified to go to VA. Ok, when I retired. Rather than... getting a health plan, I dropped their health plan, joined the VA system... if I hadn't of--oh, God, I'd've probably been dead. Cuz I found out what--them people had cancer. And I had a [?cancer?]. Ok? When I went to VA, uh, them the people that saved my life. Ok, and, um... if I had stayed here, stayed in this same health plan and stayed with the same health doctor... some of my friends that worked here, um, they've been dead, like... Beanie (?). He retired the same year, 2004, we both were diagnosed at the same time. Beanie been dead [four/for] years.

LB: Mm. Mm.

GB: You understand, he [weren't a vet?]. Ok. And... being a vet, uh...

LB: And McGuire... that--that's--

GB: Yeah.

LB: ...that's an amazing hospital.

GB: Yeah. Yeah. but they have this well-being thing you have to go through to be a part of their system. And that's how they detected my cancer.

LB: Wow.

GB: Yep. And then after all of that, they told me that my cancer was, um... as a result of my partipa--participation in the Vietnam crisis [??]...

LB: Was agent orange?

GB: Agent orange, yeah. Ok, so, they treated me, I'm still here, and they paid for it every month. You know what I mean, so... [I'm really not doing bad at all?] I mean, and I still work here. You know [laughs]. You know what I mean, it's alright to me. [Laughs] You know what I mean. I have no--they--I'm trying to figure out that everything is--the bad things up here? I don't--I don't know too much about--I can't remember them.

LB: Yeah. No, everyone seems to like it here.

GB: Yeah. Yeah, it's pretty good here, you know what I mean? Uh, as far as I'm concerned, you know what I mean, they'll look out for you. Long as you just try... really, just try, they'll cover your back. We got standard operating rules. And they written, you know what I mean. You go by them, but if you're the type of person that, uh... that don't listen, um, wants to be arrogant and stuff like--you're not gonna make it, no way. Cuz you're not gonna make it in the public. That's the first place you gotta survive. Cuz they'll deal with you...

LB: I'm sure they will. [Laughs.]

GB: Yup. Yeah, but, uh...

LB: Now, were you on the same route most of the time? Do you like to--did you like to keep one route going? Or...

GB: Um, myself, I work a lot of express. I work Commonwealth Center, I work Gaskins, I work Glenside, I work the 81 (?)... uh... I'll work anything into my schedule. That they got... to work extra.

LB: Mm hmm. So you're on the extra board?

GB: Um, you could call it the extra board. All the part-time people work all the extra work.

LB: Ok.

GB: Ok, when they, like... I work two runs on Glenside, one in the morning express, one in the evening express. But, see, I choose to do it every day, Monday through Friday, in the morning. Then I tell them I work in the evening for them at night. Once... one night a week, Wednesday. Because I got... social security on my bumper. Got a limit on what I can make.

LB: Oh yeah. Yeah.

GB: Ok, so I have to check that. Ok, cuz at one tie I was doing 65 to 70 hours [by? my?] time, you know what I mean. They got me.

LB: [Laughs.]

GB: [Laughing] So I had to stop, you know.

LB: So how have you seen... you know, you--you've been in the system a long, long time. How've you seen bus ridership changing over the years?

GB: We--we not... losing bus riders due to, um... aggressive people on the bus or arrogant people on the bus. We losing bus riders... to the automobile. People wanna be where they wanna be. Right now. Right in front their door. And see, and the bus ain't doing that. You understand? I got friends that ride the bus cuz they would never drive a car. You understand what I'm talking about. You know, it's a lot of circumstances out there for that. But we not losing... because of the bus system... we losing because of the automobile. Ok. Now, I work express. And I worked at Commonwealth [Center ??] for a while out there, and those people really appreciate the bus. Cuz they get on the bus, leave their car right there at the church. Cut their costs, or ride around downtown trying to find somewhere to park. You understand what I'm talking about? And the bus, circle that loop, pick them up, bring around back to the [light?] in the evening and get in the automobile and go on about their business, you know what I mean. I think we do--I think we do better business with the park-n-ride situation.

LB: Mm hmm.

GB: You know what I mean. Cuz you know the town done blew up, leaps and bounds and this place gone crazy. It's everywhere. You know what I mean. It--remember how... Richmond used to be--used to run the south side plaza? That was the only mall around here. [Laughs.]

LB: Yeah, I know.

GB: Back in the day. And... everybody shop downtown. For Christmas, you go downtown, it take you... on the bus, it take you about three hours to get from First and Broad to Twelfth and

Broad. At Christmastime back in the day. You understand what I'm talking about, when everything, Miller & Rhoads, Thalhimers, [M??] and all that stuff. Everything just went--boom--it's everywhere. Short Pump, uh... community [??]. I mean, I--this place done blew up.

LB: And it's a whole different situation.

GB: It's a whole different situation.

LB: Do you notice a difference in the kinds of people who take the bus now versus the kinds of people who took the bus back in the early 70s?

GB: ... The kinds of people.... This the way I feel about it. In the black community, on the bus service, the buses jam up.

LB: Mm hmm.

GB: Going west. In the white community in the bus service, the buses jam up. Going east. You understand what I'm talking about, but like I'm saying, there's so many automobiles out there nowadays... you know what I mean... it just... take--

LB: No one wants to be there.

GB: Yeah. That's what taking a lot of the, uh, transit business, you know--

LB: It's so funny because--I used to live in Boston, I used to live in Providence and there... everyone takes the bus, right? Everyone is on the subway or the bus. New York... Washington DC, Chicago, it's like... that's what you do.

GB: Yeah. But listen. You look at that traffic around in the DC area, and Boston and New York and... major cities, you know what I mean, you.... It's back to back, bumper to bumper, downtown. It's not like that around Richmond.

LB: But Providence... Providence is just like Richmond. Right? It's not crazy but still, people are taking the bus. All the time. What--why do you think it's different in Richmond?

GB: I--I don't--I can't say why. But I think... we--we have a pretty good ridership, people coming into town, you know what I mean.

LB: Yeah.

GB: But the express, they--a lot of people riding the express.

LB: Yeah.

GB: You know what I mean, we don't have as many local riders... as we used to do, the town done spread out, people living everywhere. You understand what I'm talking about.

LB: Mm hmm.

GB: If you look at the express buses, rather than the local buses, and you see them during their peak, when people traveling to and from work, you'll see more people on express buses than you do on local buses. You understand what I'm talking about.

LB: Absolutely.

GB: That's... uh, that's--I don't know why it's like that in the city. But you know, it's... business done spreaded out too.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Business everywhere.

LB: Yeah, it's true. It's not really concentrated like it used to be.

GB: Yeah, it's not concentrated like in New York. You can go to--down to Staten Island, might be nothing but major business down there. You understand what I'm talking about? That's where everything concentrated at.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Where Richmond is not like that.

LB: Yeah. It's true. It's very spread out.

GB: It's spread out, yeah.

LB: Now, how do you think the people who don't take the bus in Richmond--cuz there's definitely people who do, and people who don't take the bus view the GRTC, or view the buses?

GB: Mostly, they don't know the system (?).

LB: Mm.

GB: Uh, I--I--I could be out there standing in line, buying some lunch or some stuff, have on my uniform, 'man, I don't see how you work that kinda job. I know them people out there crazy.' 'Man, what you talking about?' You know what I mean? They're not crazy, I don't have any problem with them.

LB: Mm-mm.

GB: You know what I mean? It--you know, that's just... that's--them type of people have [just an?] attitude about what's going on on the bus. But ain't nothing going on on the bus. People just

trying to get where they're going.

LB: I know, and all the operators are telling me stories about how their riders are bringing them presents and Christmas and, you know...

GB: Oh, yeah. Yeah--

LB: They're meeting their wives on the bus and--[laughs].

GB: Yeah. Yeah, I got gifts that I been saving for--six, seven, eight years. You know, the people gave me cards and things like that, uh...

LB: It's sweet!

GB: Huh?

LB: It's really sweet!

GB: Yeah! Yeah, yep. And then you know, sometimes, [??] I'll see somebody gave me--a lady gave me this cup with this bow. And I [everything on it?] you know what I'm saying, I still show her the cup with the [?] on it and she'll look me, 'you still got that!' [laughs].

LB: [Laughs.]

GB: Yup. Cuz I'll see them people... um... maybe--she gave me it three years ago and I ain't seen her in a while, then all the sudden, she'll pop up. Ok? And maybe I'll pop up, because I done changed runs, I'm working something different, or I'm in her area again.

LB: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

GB: But they like that. That's where that work (?), you know what I mean. Um... it's... it's kinda hard. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

LB: So--so what do you like to do for fun when--when you're not... uh, out there.

GB: When I'm not driving the bus?

LB: Mm hmm.

GB: What I'm going to do when I leave here, I'm gonna get my boat straight for the--go down, um... York County this weekend. Going fishing. Um, they got my hold (?) in paper. Where [that at?]. It's about here, it's my favorite spot.

[Laughter.]

GB: That's where I go fishing at. You know, now I'm gonna go get my boat straight and then

going out there, I'm gonna try to get out there this weekend. Either on the pier or on the... cross the river.

LB: Do you take your daughters still? Do they still fish? Do still hunt?

GB: Um...they liable to be anywhere. [Laughs] Two girls. They... they got their own kids, their families, you know why I mean, um... they might be down in Atlanta, they might be up in New York somewhere--

LB: So they're just busy all over the place.

GB: Yeah, they be busy. See, I got one granddaughter that plays soccer... and she's getting into this professional thing with soccer--

LB: Wow.

Gb: Yeah. Then I got a... a grandsons, they play, um, football. You know what I mean and they into that. You know what I mean, and one of my daughters' husbands live up in New York. The other one live in Jamaica. You know, they liable to be anywhere. You know what I mean. And, um, mostly I roll by myself. Or I got one of the... guys, my little friend, we'll get together and do some... work on something or... stuff like that.

LB: Fixing things or...?

GB: Huh?

LB: Work on something like fixing things?

GB: Fixing things, yeah.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Might... fix a motorcycle or... or... his daughter got a, um, pocket bike (?). We might mess with that, you know what I mean.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Then he'll sit down and wanna tell me about all his girlfriends.

LB: [Laughs.]

GB: And I listen to that [laughs].

LB: That's funny.

GB: But he's a young guy. Yeah.

LB: So--so, um--Mr. Barrett, how do you think your job has changed the way you look at the city?

GB: The way that--way the job has changed the way I look at the city.... I think the city of Richmond done changed the city.

LB: Yeah!

GB: Ok. The job... to me... I don't know, it's still the same. But it's just so automated and high-tech. You don't do nothing but drive.

LB: It sounds like you miss the old days... where there was more excitement, no power brakes, no [laughs].

GB: [Laughs] n--no. It--I don't--

LB: No air conditioning [laughs].

GB: I don't, uh... I don't miss none of that. Oh, God.

[Laughter.]

GB: The--the, um, power brakes and, um... automated fare boxes, you... the sign, you don't have to get up and move it, you know what I mean, you just sit there and drive nowadays. Ok, and listen to the box to beep. The box beep? The money right. Know what I mean, the box don't beep, you gotta see what's going on. Maybe it's the box, maybe it's the person. You understand what I'm talking about--

LB: Mm hmm.

GB: Just check things out, you know what I mean. Mostly... nowadays all it is is driving. You know what I mean. Um... it's--not that much to do as far as passengers concerned.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Yeah. They got that straight. Um... GRTC, what they doing now, with the younger people coming in, they're expanding the bus service to go everywhere. They're trying to branch this thing out. Get where it needs to go.

LB: Do you think it'll ever get into the counties?

GB: Um... I try not to be racist about it, you know what I mean, getting into the counties, you know what I mean. Um... some people might not want buses in their neighborhood. You know what I mean, like in the city, buses go through the neighborhood but in designated areas that are neighborhoods, you know what I mean. Also, in the counties you've got to look at... the speed of

travel in the county and where you gonna stop that big thing at. That block up everything. You know why I mean, somebody run off that bus--

LB: Mm hmm.

GB: out in to that traffic at the high speed--

LB: Well, that's true.

GB: It's a high risk. It's--if you going up Midlothian, you know why I mean, speed limit reach up to 55 in certain areas, and 45 is pretty fast... for you to stop that bus and get somebody off--

LB: And then get going again. Yeah.

GB: Yeah. And they run out from the front that bus, then people come down that right side of the bus and never see them. They out there, boom. You gotta [?] be accident there. You know what I mean. So, you know... it's... a reason why certain things, they don't do. Like if you look down on the city end of this corridor, they done put cut-ins for the bus.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Ok, now if you go up on the western end of Midlothian, there's no cut-ins nowhere up there. Unless somebody lets you come into their lot... and let off.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Now, how many people gonna do that? You know--

LB: Not many.

GB: Not many. Now, we go out to Chesterfield Town Center and let off... ok, we go out to the Swift Creek Church, and we let off. Paraham Road--

LB: Mm hmm.

FB: And Hungary Spring, uh, what you call these people out here, they--created a park-and-ride lot. You understand, it's a different, uh--some of it gotta be a safety factor, why they don't do it. You--you understand what I'm talking about.

LB: No, that's a good point. It's just... it's kind of, again--not coming from Richmond originally? It's kind of amazing to me that that started during the annexation and is still going on today.

GB: Yeah.

LB: But I, you know, I--I get what you're saying about the speed, too. Because it's true.

GB: Yeah.

LB: A lot of those roads are just [whooshing sound].

GB: Yep.

LB: You might as well just be on the highway.

GB: Yeah. It's pretty fast out there. And you stop that bus, and you know the bus is a... if you out there driving and you behind the bus and it stop... right? And you in a hurry to go where you gotta go, and you need to come from behind that bus... alright the bus done stopped to discharge somebody. That person that got off that bus not going to... pay attention. You dash from behind that bus. That person dash out that bus. Right? And then you be in incidents where, um... those people in those other lanes, they can't see around that bus either, you know what I mean. So they--try not to stop the buses out there. You--they don't let you stop out there. Ok, cuz it be like going down 95--stopping in the middle of 95. You know what I mean. I feel that--that's the reason why they don't do it.

LB: Yeah.

GB: But they do let us go through one of those lots out there.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Where these people will let us drive people. Ok? And we have some the public to ride to those lots and walk where they gotta go. Now they have the Chesterfield link that will pull [it?] into spots... you know what I mean, certain areas that... that they'll let us come in and discharge. But if you don't get the ridership... I mean, you can't run.

LB: What are you gonna do, right?

GB: Huh?

LB: Yeah, what are you gonna do?

GB: What are you gonna do if you don't get the ridership. Yeah. People don'r ride the bus you know, you can't... keep running up and down the road, burning up gas, paying the driver for nothing.

LB: [Laughs.]

GB: [Laughs.] You know...

LB: So... what would you say is the hardest thing about your job, what would you say is the best thing about your job?

GB: [Pauses] The hardest thing about my job is probably traffic. That's it. Traffic. Dealing with traffic. You're dealing with all kinds of attitudes. Traffic. Know what I mean? For what I work. Traffic. And other than that, that's--that's [?] really hard about it.

LB: So what's the best part?

GB: Uh, I get my check every two weeks.

LB: [Laughs.]

GB: [Laughs.] That's the best part about it.

LB: So what would you tell someone who's about to start a career as a bus operator with GRTC?

GB: Well... they got a lot of opportunities here. You can grow... you know what I mean. If--you can go into management if you like, you can be in the shop if you like, you can be a driver, you can drive a fixed route, or you can drive the C-Van type bus... the income is unlimited if you wanna work.

LB: Mm hmm.

GB: You know what I mean. Um... what I'm talking about, they got a good retirement plan. Ok, they got a good health system, and this, that, and the other. They will work with you. And I think it's a mostly family-oriented business, you know what I mean. Uh, I think it's pretty good here. You know what I mean. If I was looking for a job and I didn't have a whole lotta skills you know what I mean, this is what I would look at, trying to get hired there to be a operator. Then from there, you could--I think we get paid more than Greyhound drivers and all the rest of them, um, GRTC drivers, you know what I mean. Uh, I wouldn't work for nobody else, cuz see, I can get finished here, I can go home. And make more money. You know what I mean. I'm... this the place to be.

LB: Yeah!

GB: You know [laughs]...

LB: That's what I'm hearing! [Laughs.]

GB: [Laughs] Yeah. I don't work for nobody else. Ok, I just work here.

LB: So is there anything I didn't ask you that you'd like to talk about?

GB: I don't... [laughs]... I didn't know I was gonna get through this much. You know what I mean, uh...

[Laughter.]

LB: The interrogation.

GB: Uh, I think... uh, I think we've covered the transit system, you know what I mean. Pretty good people to work by. Been here forty-two years and I'm... right now I don't plan on going anywhere unless my health... fails. You know what I mean to where... I can't get that [?] straight.

LB: Yeah

GB: Yeah. You know, they require to be a... good... be a healthy person or be about to pass a [?] physical. You know what I mean?

LB: Yeah.

GB: I mean, once you start getting older, you start losing things like--I was in artillery in the military, for to come here and talk to you (?), I had to put my hearing aids in.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Ok, so I could hear you. Alright, um... um, I have to... have--pass that part of the my t--this test, this high blood pressure thing that... they really... they really screen a lot of things as far as healthy drivers when they're out there behind that wheel... and you hauling people.

LB: I could imagine. Uh, is--is that why you all have the split shifts?

GB: No, we--

LB: Cuz we were talking about that and trying to figure out why the split shifts were such a big thing here.

GB: Well... if you think about it... they put the mass amount of buses out during the rush.

LB: Mm hmm.

GB: Evening rush... um, noon rush... um, the morning rush. Then after the rush, they cut the bus service. They take out some buses.

LB: Ok, so there's just not enough work to go around in the middle of the day then.... Is that what it is?

GB: It--it's... I'm not gonna say it's not enough. It--those same people work all day. But they work all of the rush. The morning rush and the evening rush that make the run a split.... You understand what I'm talking about.

LB: Mm hmm.

GB: Then you got those people that'll work straight through. You know what I mean, they'll be working an early straight for that bus that going to stay out there all day.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Ok. For the [?], the--rest of the load all day. There's no sense in having them buses out there all day. When the people ain't riding them all day.

LB: Right.

GB: You just... we--what we call a split, what you trying to say... that one guy might say it would run 7381 (?). It's a split. In the morning you work out here, in the evening he work Ginter Park. It's a split.

LB: And he might have, like, four, six hours off in the middle of the day.

GB: Yeah. Be off four hours in the middle of the day but they have a 8-hour run.

LB: Yeah.

GB: Yeah, you understand? But they got it set up where they don't have all the buses running all day, only what they need out there. And those guys are working early straights. Then you got your late straights. Then you got your middays. People go to work from 12 to 8, you got--people might go to work from 4 to 1. Then you got people come in from 12 to 8. Alright the you got the people work, morning split, and the other half in the evening. That's the way it work...

LB: Cuz they don't do all night shifts anymore. Right?

GB: No--no, I used to do a all-night run. Um, was 12 to 5. Nobody out there.

LB: No.

GB: But, if you think about it, the buses run till 1. So it's a two-hour break. Till the first bus you got to ride around 4 to 6 (?). So, you know, you're not out there long, gotta do is sit there and wait till the bus start running.

LB: Yeah.

[Laughter.]

LB: Well, Mr. Barrett, thank you so much for your time.

GB: Ok. Alright. Thank you.

LB: It's been great talking with you.

Benjamin: Yeah, really, thank you so much.

GB: Alright [laughs].

Benjamin: Nice to meet you.