

## **GRTC**

### **Interview: Kasandra Ellis**

Kasandra Ellis: ...chickened out.

Laura Browder: I'm glad you didn't!

[Laughter.]

KE: I'm gonna--

LB: Here's a pen.

KE: Ok, thank you.

LB: This is just your very standard--

KE: Thank you.

LB: ...release form.

KE: Ok.

LB: That says we can use your, uh, words and image.

KE: Ok.

LB: And it's mainly gonna be for this exhibition.

KE: Ok.

LB: And our photographer, Michael Lease will get in touch with you... early next week or maybe even this weekend and set up a--a time. To take your portrait.

KE: Ok.

LB: And he's been taking some gorgeous--

Benjamin: Yeah.

LB: ...gorgeous portraits.

KE: Ohh...

LB: You'll see. They're beautiful.

KE: Wonderful. I can't wait.

LB: I know it's--it's always a treat when he shows me a new one.

KE: ...I was--I was so nervous. And then I thought... I just had a lot of other things, and I said, oh, no, I just can't. I can't do it, I don't know what to expect, I don't know what... So I said, I just have to let my fear... just have to get over it.

LB: I know, cuz, you know... it's just a feeling.

KE: Yeah, that's true.

[Pause.]

LB: But I know that, um... Marsha was so appalled when I told her that out of thirteen interviews I'd done there were only three women? And so [laughs]--

KE: And she--and she automatically--'Kasandra, you *have* to do this. You have to do this. You're perfect. You have to.' I said, 'But I don't know what to expect!' She said, 'I'll help you.' She's sick right now. Um...

LB: How's her dad doing?

KE: He's doing much better.

LB: Oh, good.

KE: She went to New York to spend time with him. And got sick.

LB: Oh, no.

KE: It was really cold in New York.

Benjamin: Huh.

KE: Really cold. So it triggered her bronchitis.

LB: Oh, that's really rough.

KE: Today is the 16th?

LB: Yes.

KE: Ok. Ok.

LB: Thank you.

KE: You're so welcome.

LB: And did you.... Ok, yeah, you did everything here [laughs].

Benjamin: I'm just gonna move this little closer to you.

KE: Ok.... Sit up right

LB: I'm just looking it over because when we did Eldridge Coles, he signed his name but he didn't fill in anything else, and I had to go running down the hall to chase him down [laughs].

KE: To catch him.

LB: No, but, I think it's gonna be fantastic to hav your story--

KE: Ok.

LB: ...in here.

KE: Ok.

LB: It's gonna be you, and Sheronda, and Leslie Zink are gonna be our last three interviews.

KE: Wonderful--three--two other beautiful people. They're really beautiful people.

LB: That's great.

KE: So I think Marsha picked some good people.

LB: That's fantastic.

KE: To ki--some good females--the kind--you guys will see. Sheronda's--she's beautiful, and so is Leslie.

LB: Oh. That's wonderful.

KE: Yeah. So...

LB: And Marsha's doing a little better now? Or is she still sick?

KE: She's out until, I think she said the doctor took her out until Monday.

LB: Wow.

KE: She was... I saw her on Monday... she was coughing and a little--but Tuesday, it struck her down. She had to go to the doctor and everything. So--

LB: And I--

[Break in recording]

LB: ...they say it comes back more easily.

KE: Yeah. I suffer from that. And I didn't even realize that it was bronchitis. So now they said I'm borderline asthmatic. I was--I got struck down--the first time was during the first inauguration, I was out for three weeks.

LB: Wow.

KE: They said I pretty much... what the--the... my bronchitis was so b--so--so severe, it was pretty much pneumonia. It was like pneumonia. So I couldn't--I... I mean, I was moving at a snail's pace. It's horrible.

LB: That's really hard.

KE: Mm hmm. So... But, glad that's over. So I try not to catch a common cold.

LB: Yeah.

KE: Like during the winter months? Cuz if I catch a cold and I don't get right on it? As soon as I catch one, I get the doctor give me zepac (?). To keep it from...

LB: Those zepacs are great.

KE: Mm hmm. Keep it from triggering my bronchitis. So--so exactly what am I... with the interview...

Benjamin: We're good.

LB: Uh, we're good to go, well... I'm gonna start with something really simple which is, can you start by just... telling me your name -- so we have it on tape, and we--

KE: Ok.

LB: ...keep all organized.

KE: Ok. My name is Kasandra Radford Ellis.

LB: And you tell me something about how you grew up?

KE: Well, I grew up in a very cultured environment. I grew up in Washington, DC, I was born and raised there. Um... I... pretty much have a very rich... history. But humble. Um, my grandfather was a coal miner. In West Virginia. And he moved to DC for a better life. Actually, Senator Byrd, who passed away, got my jo--grandfather a job, at the Washington printing office in DC. And so... from there, my grandfather just stressed... just excellence and education and it just trickled on down from my... father to... myself. So, um... let's see. And... my parents, um... by growing up in Washington DC, I was exposed to a lot of culture... *a lot* of culture. Um... my mom worked for the main Washington post office. Came from very, um, humble beginnings. My dad was a long-distance truck driver. So, my mother's father was a bus driver. As well, my grandfather, so... they said, you know, driving the bus is in--driving is in my blood, so I love to drive. And I'm one of two siblings. Um, I was an only child for eight years. My brother's eight years younger than me so it's just the two of us.

LB: And when did you... come to Richmond from DC--did you start driving when you were there?

KE: No, I didn't drive, uh, professionally in DC. But I started in Richmond, um--what sparked me to drive, I started with the school bus first. I drove for Chesterfield County... um, school systems for seven years. Um, I started in 1996. And I drove--and the reason I did that because I had three small children. And the job just fit perfect for me at that time. Um, I left... Chesterfield schools, and briefly drove for Greyhound. But I did not like Greyhound. Because there was no schedule. It--and if... it just didn't fit for me with having small children. So I went back to driving a school bus for another three years, which I wish I had...just come to GRTC right then. But I didn't. So, I, um... started with GRTC in 2007.

LB: And what led to your decision to join GRTC?

KE: Because GRTC was the perfect for me. Because with the school bus, I had a schedule. And--but... not decent pay. With Greyhound, I had the decent pay, but not the good schedule. So GRTC was both. I didn't care what days off... I had. I just needed a schedule so that I could plan around my schedule.

LB: So how old were your kids when you came here?

KE: Um, my kids were--I had... one in college... he was a freshman in college, let me see, he was eighteen.... And... my son was thirteen--they were twelve and thirteen. Twelve, thirteen, and eighteen.

LB: So they were getting to that independent time.

KE: Yes. Yes. So... worked out pretty good for me.

LB: It sounds like it.

KE: Mm hmm.

LB: Can you talk about, um, what kind of training you received when you came here and what you remember from your first days here.

KE: My training was excellent. I would have to give it five stars. Um, I was trained... what I feel was by the best, was, um... Mark and Ronnell (?). And, um... it's just--they... they took time with us, they didn't... feel like everything was rush rush rush rush. You know, we learned all the routes down to precision. Which... really helps me to learn the city of Richmond. Because when I came to GRTC, I had live in--lived in Chesterfield... for so many years, probably fifteen, sixteen years. All I knew... the only thing that I knew was to get downtown. I didn't know anything about the surrounding areas of Richmond, except for by highway. So... by... the training that they taught us, they taught us each sing--every single route. Before they threw us out there. You know, to--to drive on their own. My very first day I was really afraid. Um, just because I was out there on my own. But... I find that each day, it got easier and easier and easier as the days went past. Then months went past. And then, now years.

LB: And--and can you talk a little bit about the difference, because I've spoken to several drivers who started off driving school buses--

KE: Mm hmm.

LB: What was the big difference for you between driving the school bus and driving a GRTC bus?

KE: The big difference for driving... school bus versus the GRTC bus is... not having to constantly look behind you -- constantly. Watching the kids, watching the kids. Just the discipline and it--it just... it was a whole... different type--even though I'm driving a large vehicle. But at the same time, the--you know, the people that'll get on the bus, they're pretty much responsible for themselves. So that enabled me to be able to focus... pretty much on the road. And the fare, and the--you know, any kinda little questions, but -- it's different from having 50-some children behind you and... and just having to constantly keep an eye out for them.

LB: I can't imagine--

KE: And drive.

LB: ... you'd--you'd have to be like a police force and a driver all in one.

KE: Exactly. It took a lot of discipline. I had to really discipline my children. Because, you know, you can--you can cause--have a major accident trying to focus on someone behind you, and trying to focus on the road at the same time.

LB: Now what... what are the best and worst moments, generally speaking, in your job now? Or, you know, during the whole time you've been at GRTC.

KE: Um, the whole time... I probably would--I'll start with the worst, I'm trying to think... um... hmm. Oh, man, that's a tough one. [Pause.]

LB: And you know what? If you want, I can ask you another question and we can come back to that.

KE: Yes, please.

LB: Even though it's gonna be a related question, which is, what--over the whole time you've been here, what have been... your most challenging moments operating the bus? And what have been some of your most memorable experiences?

KE: Ok, my--

LB: And--and again, I'm sorry, now I cut you off--

KE: That's ok.

LB: ...to say that anytime that a thought pops into your head, even if we're talking about something else, just feel completely free... to... jump in with it. Because we're gonna be editing this so it doesn't matter what order we talk about anything.

KE: Ok. My most challenging moments are when... the cars cut us off. Just out of nowhere, I mean, it could be... a bus, another bus, say like a VCU bus or... a--just a large vehicle, a truck, an ambulance, and car, and--but they, for some reason, I would say that's the most challenging if... if it's cutting it pretty close. Because... my biggest fear is having an accident. You know, like having a major accident, just because I--we just don't wanna have an accident. Um... my... most memorable experience? Which would also fall into my worst experience? Would be, um, I was on the Ginter Park route. Um, I've been here seven years, hadn't had an accident... ever. With the exception of a lady opened her car... door on my bus. And they didn't charge me with that because it wasn't my fault. But, um, that happened about three or four years ago. So since then, no accidents. And I was coming through Jackson Ward, heading to the garage. And I got hit. By a drunk driver. She was in her car, and her s--she was at such an excessive speed that by her hitting the rear end of my bus, she hit me so hard with her car that she sailed my bus into Jackson Ward apartments. I was able to fight the steering wheel, and I stopped short of an electrical pole. I think I... was about maybe three or four inches from that. I was about an inch from a car. And I was actually in the yard of... Jackson Ward apartments, which means if I wasn't able to get control of that bus, I could have landed in someone's living room. That was my worst experience. Which was totally out of my control. Um, I believe the driver was... under the influence of quite a few things. And they arrested her... the next day, once her tox--you know, toxicology came back.

LB: It sounds terrifying.

KE: Yes. It scared me... it scared me to death. I--it--it just... words cannot even describe. It's like all of a sudden, I'm driving and I just feel like I hear a loud crash and I feel a push... and I feel my bus just sailing out of control. Just like glide--sliding to the left. And so she ran the red light, of course. I believe she was doing maybe... say like 50 or 60 in, like, a 25. Or something

like that, you know she had to be going pretty fast. To--for her to move my bus in a car. So that was my worst and most memorable... experience while driving.

LB: I can't even imagine what it would feel like... to be in a vehicle as massive as a bus...

KE: Mm hmm.

LB: And to feel out of control.

KE: And to feel like you have... you've lost control of it. That's how I felt. It's the scariest feeling ever. And I was not hurt... Um, I wasn't injured in any kinda way, but mentally, it really shook me up. It really shook me up. So I took--I took a few days off. But I decided, because my mom said when she had an--she was in a car accident, if she didn't get back out there? And st--that she wouldn't--she probably wouldn't be driving now. So I kept thinking about that and thinking about that and... as each day went past, I said, you know, I really need to get back out there and drive. Because if--if I don't get out there now, I might not drive a bus again. Cuz it--it shook me up pretty bad.

LB: Is this something that drivers talk about with each other a lot, you know... like, what do you do, psychologically, when you have these things happen to you?

KE: Um... I don't think we discuss it a lot. We--you know... everybody was just concerned, you know, how I was doing and, you know, was I hurt. I said, no, I wasn't hurt. You know, physically, I was not hurt. It's just mentally...

LB: Yeah.

KE: ... I was pretty shaken up.

LB: Cuz I have talked to so many drivers during this project who've had some pretty scary-sounding accidents.

KE: Mm hmm.

LB: And I was... I have to admit a little surprised to realize how completely routine the accidents are, because there's so many... cars out there...

KE: That constantly--

LB: ...acting crazy.

KE: Exactly. They constantly cut us off. It's like--even the passengers will sit in the passenger seat and they'll be like, 'wow... did you see that?' You know -- 'what were they thinking, they're in a car and you're in a bus.' You know, people don't think. Or they're in such a rush... to get... places that, you know, really... well, I guess once they get there, if you don't get there alive, what's the point. You know? So that was my worst and most memorable.



LB: [Laughs] All wrapped in one.

KE: Yes.

LB: Can you give an example... of good leadership that you've experienced--and it can be on any level from something... in the GRTC to something in the city to... something in the nation-- I mean, people take it any which way.

KE: Hmm. I'd have to really think about that one.... Let's see... excellent leadership.... I'm sorry for pausing, can we move to another question.

LB: Of course we can.

KE: And I'll think of...

LB: Well... [laughs] and of course with that question comes a question about less good leadership. And again, you can take that any which way. But why don't we go not to... what have been the biggest moments of change in your job for you, since you've been here.

KE: Um... I would have to say... the turnover. It's been such a big turnover. I believe... when I started this job, my seniority number was... two-hundred and maybe sixty-five or sixty-eight, something like that? Now, my seniority number is like one-hundred and twenty.

LB: And that's in thirteen years?

KE: That's in seven years.

LB: Just seven years.

KE: Just seven. That's a major turnover. And... and I've--of course, we've gone through, um, where... Mr. Coles is our second CEO... since I started. So that was a major change. Um... the... I've seen upper management... change. The... the lady, Alicia Pogel (?) who actually hired me, and then, um, Joy Jordan (?) and Charlie Mitchell (?) actually did my job interview. Um, Mr. Mitchell's still here, but... Alicia and--and Joy are gone. You know, so I've--I've seen--I've just seen a massive... turnover.

LB: which is kinda surprising when you consider... this is one of the very few union jobs in Richmond.

KE: Yes. Yes. And, um... and it's a job that I just don't understand why people would wanna leave. Because, me personally, I love my job. You know it--it comes with its ups and downs. Some days are more stressful than others, it just depends. You know. Uh--because working with the public... can be stressful. Because if they're having a bad day, they try to make everyone else have a bad day. But I just put a shield up and kinda block it out--block everything negative out in my mind.

LB: What are some of the techniques that you use, personally, to do that, because that seems like one of the greatest challenges when you're working with the public. And it's a pretty unscreened public. Right? Anyone can get on your bus. What are some of the things you do when people... kinda act out or get in your face or do--do whatever it is they do...

KE: Um... well... I have quite a few techniques. Um... I can't tell you all of them, but--cuz that would take forever. But I'm trying to think of just a couple. One is, like if the people are on the bus and they're using severe profanity or something like that, you know I'm--I'm always trying to talk to them, like in a really kind manner. To not seem like I'm very aggressive or... you know, trying to get in attack mode with them. Because then that... you know, puts everyone else's guards up and automatically that can take a... a situation that... could be fairly calm and that could make it worse. So I try to always treat people how I would want to be treated. So I pretty much just kinda have like, a... the passengers kinda know me, that, you know, I'm really nice. But I have, like, a kinda no-nonsense rule, if you can't follow the rules on the bus, then you're gonna have to get off the bus. Because you know, we have elderly and children that are riding. If you... if you can't act like... you know, a civil adult, then... you know, you just... you need to think about your actions first, so... Um, but then sometimes I--I tell myself, like if someone comes--gets aggressive, or, you know--well, they're getting ready to get off the bus. You know, just kinda--just keep your cool, and they're only gonna be on here for a few minutes. If--me, personally... like, one day last week, I was having a really bad day. And I always try not to... come to work... and wear what's going on in my life on my sleeve and take it out on people, so that's something I work real hard. So something that I did last week was I watched one of my favorite episodes of Sanford and Son. And so I laughed so hard... before I left the house, that when I came to work, if ever a bad situation, I just kept thinking in my mind, about the scene that made me laugh the hardest. And that helped. So... [laughed] I do s--

LB: I bet it did.

KE: ...I do crazy stuff like that.

LB: So what if a passenger starts... getting either really rude with you or really aggressive towards another passenger. Or someone comes on the bus and they're under the influence of whatever, I mean, I'm just trying to imagine some of the scenarios that other drivers have--have told me about.

KE: Oh, yes, we have a lotta scenarios, um... usually, es--especially if I see that one--someone is severely intoxicated, I tr--I just sit there and just wait, even if it takes them five minutes. I just wait until they totally sit down. Because if I don't and I pull off and they fall, we have another situation. Then you have to wait for supervision, you have to--you know, it's--it's a process you have to go through. So I--I try to--I try my best to make sure they're seated first. And if they ride for quite a bit, I might stop the bus and ask them, you know, hey, where are you getting off, do you know where you're going? Because sometimes people, you know... they're so--such under the influence, they don't... they just get on any bus, they really don't even know. Where they're going or... you know, so I just... I--I just try--I try to handle it as calm as possible.

LB: What about aggression towards you or other passengers, what do you do then?

KE: Um, I just would automatically call... um... you know, s--the radio.

LB: Yeah.

KE: For help. And it depends on the form of aggression and--and how aggressive they are... I would let the radio know, you know, you need to send communications, which means you need to send the police... ASAP. It just depends on the situation. Yeah, so, um, I had a situation last week, that... it wasn't the boyfriend, it was the girlfriend beating up on the boyfriend. And it all happened so fast that when I looked in the mirror and so--then fi--the boyfriend was like moving around on the bus trying to get away from her. So I spoke to her and I said, you know, 'you need to calm down.' or, I said, 'one of you guys are gonna have to get off.' I said, 'you--because you--'she wouldn't calm down. So she kept saying, 'oh, I'll get off.' And she wouldn't get off. So he got off. So then when he got off, she went a couple stops ahead and then she got off. But I had to call... you know, the s--radio and let them know what happened. You know, no one was hurt. No--innocent passenger didn't get hit, but... you know, it was a couple on the bus fighting. So these--these are just daily things that... that can occur.

LB: I imagine it takes a lot to keep... calm, and keep serene and with a good attitude through all of that turmoil around you.

KE: Yes. Yes. So, like I said, you just--I just think of pleasant things. That's... that's about the best--I just think of pleasant things. Like constantly, I try my best just to block out negative. Because there can be *so* many negative forces around us. So much negativity. That you just really have to focus on the positive.

LB: It's really true.

KE: Mm hmm.

LB: How do you think the bus ridership has changed over time?

KE: Um... I don't see that the bus ridership has changed a whole lot. That's something that has pretty much... uh, pretty much remained... steady.

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

KE: I don't think that they realize, um... how much easier it could be for them. If they, um, example--I have one of my best girlfriends works downtown. I've been working on her to catch the bus for seven years. She still won't do it. She said sh--you know, she doesn't wanna lose her special parking space that she finally... I guess moved up to. And I said, 'yeah, but you're paying for parking, you're paying for gas, you're paying for tolls. It's so much cheaper just to catch the bus.' You know, but some people just--I don't know why they look at the bus as a--as a negative. When it's such a positive. Mm hmm. Public transportation is a positive. And sometimes when passengers get on the bus and complain... about... the bus. 'I hate riding the bus' or, you know,

'this makes me sick and all the waiting.' And I remind them, be thankful that you live in an area where you have public transportation. Because public transportation is not available to everyone. Just depends on the area that you live in. I said, 'so think about that, and think about... you not having a vehicle and being stuck at home and can't get around at all.' And then, you know, they say, 'you know what, I never thought about it that way.' I said, 'think about it.' So...

LB: It's true.

KE: Mm hmm.

LB: So... do you think... that perceptions of riding the bus have changed over your time working for the GRTC?

KE: I'm... not sure. Um... I think... excuse me, um... might've changed... slightly. Um... ever since... we've been doing the express routes, I think that's been a very positive, you know, and--and people see the--the coach buses, you know, doing routes like Kings Dominion and.... you know, and then we go *way* up Broad Street on the 19 Pemberton, so I would say... the perception has maybe gone more in a positive direction.

LB: That's good.

KE: Mm hmm.

LB: And... how do you think your job has changed the way you look at the city?

KE: Um... I look at the city in a much more positive light now. Um, I wasn't real... happy with Richmond when I first moved here.

LB: And when did you move here?

KE: I moved here--excuse me--in, um, October of 1990.

LB: So you've really been here a long time.

KE: I've been here along time. But the majority of that time was actually in Chesterfield.

LB: So you came right from DC to live in Chesterfield.

KE: Yes. Because my husband is from Richmond. And so, um, I couldn't afford to live how I wanted to live in DC. My parents live in the Shenandoah Valley now in the mountains. They wanted me to come live there but there's no opportunities there--there's nothing there. And so... you know... when I looked up school systems. Uh, cuz I lived in the city of Richmond at first. At the time, Chesterfield County schools were... I wanna say the number one public school in the nation. So that...

LB: That's big.

KE: ...was the reason. Yeah. That was the reason I moved to Chesterfield. So that my kids could get a decent public education. And which they did. So...

LB: So all three of them went all the way through.

KE: All the way through. And college. They didn't all graduate college. Um, I have... three kids, um... two boys and a girl. So they are... twenty-six, twenty-one, and twenty.

LB: So the youngest is still in college.

KE: The youngest is still in college, she's a junior at Spelman College.

LB: Oh, fantastic!

KE: Mm hmm. Yeah. So. And then both my boys attended Virginia State University. And then they both went to Fortis College (?) and, um, and graduated. So. They're... you know, all of them doing pretty well. My daughter is an engineering intern for Delta Airlines.

LB: Wow.

KE: So I fly free across the... across the world.

LB: That's fantastic.

KE: So... a little bus driver.

[Laughter.]

KE: I said, and I'm trying--you know, pe--sometimes they put me in first class and... I guess people are just looking around, like, wow, what is she doing here. You know? Cuz I might be in jeans and flip flops. Just riding in first class just because that's where they put me.

LB: It's a nice way to go.

KE: Yes. Yes. So it's been one of the major perks. You know...

LB: Well that--that leads me to my next question, which is, what do you like to do when you're not at work?

KE: Right now I've been traveling a lot. I... collect music. I am like a mu--what they call a m--they--everyone calls me a music connoisseur. Um... I read a lot. I probably would say I listen to music more than I watch TV. So--and then I read just as much.

LB: So what do you like to listen to, what do you like to read?

KE: Um, I read... a lot of... I'll go from one extreme to another. I might read history... and biographies, and then I might just read, like, trash novels. So I'll just... just depends on my mood. You know, and, um... music... my favorite music is, like, jazz and neosoul. But I listen to everything. Like, everything is in my collection. I have classic rock, I have... a little bit of country. I have--I have so much. So it's too--it's too many cd's to name. I have, like... probably about twenty-five hundred cc's.

LB: Wow.

KE: And that doesn't count albums and cassettes. So I really collect music.

LB: So you've got enough to keep you busy... all the time.

KE: Yes. Yes.

LB: And now you're traveling with your daughter's free flights.

KE: Yes, I am.

LB: Where do you like to go?

KE: Um... so far, I'm working on my passport. Because she wants to take me to Paris in the fall. For, um--yeah, she--so... I'm excited about that. Um, supposed to do that for my vacation. Um, in October. So far, I've traveled to California for my birthday. I went to Arizona. Going back to Arizona in October for a girls' weekend. Like, my cousins--everybody's coming from California cuz it's just a five-hour drive. Um, I went to Columbus, Ohio. I've been traveling back and forth to Atlanta. To check on my daughter. And... um, my trips in the future, my twenty-one year old son just moved to Houston, Texas. So the end of this month, I'm going to Houston, Texas for the first time. I've traveled to Killeen, Texas before. It was really nice. Um... let's see, I've gone to Alabama. Um, Columbus, Ohio. I'm going to Tampa, Florida to visit a best girlfriend. Just because I can, now.

LB: So nice.

KE: You know, it's like I've--my biggest complaint was, 'well, I can't really afford to fly' you know--now I can.

LB: I hope your daughter stays with Delta a long time.

KE: She said she is. She said she is. Once she graduates, um... the gu--she'll have a job offer. And she said she's gonna take it.

LB: That's fantastic.

KE: Because the flight benefits just really--and I don't... I don't just fly free, her dad flies free. Her brothers can't... under her. If she had children, her children would fly free. So she said once

she becomes an employee for Delta Airlines, she can get buddy passes for her brothers. So that wherever she is, they can come see her. So, yeah. So she--her flights are unlimited. Like, she can go any--she's... she has actually... gone to Barcelona... um... Belgium... Jamaica... um, she's just been--like, they just... she and the interns just take weekends and just go outta the country. For, you know, just... just for the weekend.

LB: That's so fun.

KE: And so, you know, she said, 'Mom, get your passport, get your passport. So you can go with us, so...' you know, so I'm working on it.

LB: Oh, the sooner the better.

KE: Yes.

LB: Could you imagine how much fun you'd have with her?

KE: Exactly. Yeah, and she said... you know, the funny things is, going with other interns, she said, I want my mom to go because I know you. And she said, 'we have such... so many different personalities... this one's clashing'--my daughter doesn't drink. She said everybody wants to drink. You know and she just kinda feels outta place. She said, 'but if I'm with you,' she said, 'we know each other. Cuz you raised me.' So, you know, we can just kinda... kinda feed off of each other what the next one wants to do.

LB: Well, that sounds great.

KE: Yeah. So...

LB: So I'm gonna take you back to... a couple of questions that I asked earlier...

KE: Ok.

LB: ...that stumped you for the moment. And say, what's the hardest thing about your job and what's the best thing about your job.

KE: Ok.... The hardest thing about my job... would have to be... and I'm a good multi-tasker? But it would have to be multitasking. Just... constantly keeping an eye out for traffic and... distractions. Say, like, someone just... running up to your bus while you're in the midst of driving and looking out for traffic. Just to ask a random question. You know, it's... Sometimes the timing isn't... you know. If--if someone's cutting me off in a vehicle, and someone's running up from the back to ask me a question. And then, you know, it's like you have to... try to... juggle. So I would s--I would say multitasking. But... it's something that through time, you know, you learn to master it. But, it--it is probably one of the hardest.

LB: How about the best thing. What do you like most about your job?

KE: The--I love... because I'm a people person... and I love to drive. So this job was perfect for me. Because... I have coworkers that aren't people.... people. You know, they don't have people-person skills and it shows. It shows in how you treat people. And you have--if... this job--if I didn't want to be here, if I didn't love to be around people, I wouldn't--I wouldn't have this job. Cuz it's--it's a must. So I would say that's the... that's the best part is that it fits perfect for me. Because I'll drive from here to Timbuktu. I once drove from here, to, uh, Meridian Mississippi. For my mother-in-law's funeral.

LB: How long did that take?

KE: Uh... it was probably around 16 or 17 hours? Something like that. Because I went through... um, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee... Alabama, then Mississippi. It was a good--cuz I--I went--we had to pick up a nephew in Roanoke. So it--it was quite a bit. And everybody kept asking, 'do you need me to help you drive?' 'No.' I was fine. As long as I had my music and--or either conversation.

LB: What do you love about driving?

KE: I don't know, what--I... I guess just... just the--the site seeing as you're--and just... the road. It's--it's something about it. I just love to--I guess I just love to move. You know, it's... that's a tough--kind of a tough question. I guess just the scenery and... just... seeing other places. Just going from one place to another, even if it's in the city.

LB: Do you feel like the city itself has changed in the seven years that you've been driving?

KE: I've seen quite a few changes. Um... the... Hilton Hotel across from the Marriott? That--they renovated that and rebuilt that. Um, I see a lot of construction and a lot of... um, things going on in the city. Since I've been here, since 1990... since 1990, I see a lot of cultural... change. Which is good. Because that was my biggest... issue when I first moved here. So... and--Richmond has... they've come around at least 75%.

LB: I think coming from DC, it would be a little challenging at first.

KE: It was very challenging. It was *very* challenging. But with... three children, and I've, um... had my two youngest here. In Richmond. And I just could not see having... a... being able to live, if I tried to live how I live here in Richmond? It would cost me an arm and a leg in DC, and... to put your kids in decent schools, you have to pay. You have to put them in private schools, so... I just weighed my options and I said, even though I love it, you know, I'm only an hour and a half away. So... it just made sense for me. To--to stay here.

LB: It does make sense. And it has changed so much.

KE: It's changed. It has. You know, now I look at, like the Folk Festival? That's going on this weekend--you know, they have--they have so many things. And they have so many things going on that a lot of people don't know about. Like, they have jazz, um, concerts, at the science museum. I forgot what night it's on, like, Wednesday or Thursday nights? A lot of people don't



know about it. They said those concerts are awesome. I can't attend cuz I drive at night. So, but-- I hear people talking bout them, and they just said they're--they're just awesome. You know, not just that, they have a lot of things going on here. I saw my first opera in Richmond. My--for the very first time. So it was Porgy and Bess. I used to volunteer at... the Carpenter Center. So that I could see all the events free and get a taste of everything.

LB: They have some amazing events there.

KE: Yes. So I used to usher. I was a volunteer usher. And the whole point was that, you know, you could s--you could sign up for what you wanted to usher for. And you can just see anything. So I would see the Richmond symphony, I would see--you know, just pretty much anything. And opera was on my list. So I--I did do that. Didn't quite understand it, but... you know, at least I got the experience.

LB: So... what would you tell someone who was about to start a career as a bus operator here in Richmond?

KE: I would tell them... first of all, I would ask them... um... what are your people... are you a people person? If I know them and I could tell that they're not a people person, I would tell them it's not a good idea. For them. And I would tell them that you really... have to leave your problems at home. And you really have to ignore the negativity once you get out there and you start driving. And you have to remember to treat people the way you wanna be treated.

LB: I guess--you know, one thing that I am still kind of mulling over... both talking to you and talking to some of the other drivers, is... how do you stay a people person, when it sounds like sometimes your'e seeing the worst of people?

KE: Mm hmm. Well, you just have to remember who you are. And you just have to--I always remember that... I don't go home with these people. You know. IF they're getting angry with me or they're nasty, it's only temporary. That's what I have to tell myself. I constantly talk to myself and say, you know what, in about five minutes, they'll probably be off the bus. And then you might not see them again. You know, so why get yourself all worked up and get your blood pressure up and get in a tizzy. When you might not even run across this person again. You know? So that's--that's what helps me.

LB: That makes sense.

KE: Mm hmm.

LB: And is there anything you would like to say to all of those Richmonders who have never set foot on a GRTC bus?

KE: They need to experience... riding the bus for at least a week. At least a week. And put on paper what you would've spent in gas... tolls... parking... and compare it to the bus fare. And I guarantee you that you... will be riding the bus. I--I guarantee they would. Cuz it--it saves--saves a lot of money.

LB: Now... Kasandra, is there anything that I did not ask you that you would like to talk about? Or go back to or anything?

KE: Um... nothing that I can think of.... Um... nothing that I can think of. I'm just... I'm just pleased to be able to... work for a company like GRTC. I feel like it's a wonderful company. And I feel like that I made a very wise choice. By coming here. And I'm glad that it was the happy middle that worked out for me.

LB: It sounds like it really did.

KE: It really did. And... as my kids got older and older and older and now they're all gone, ti's like, now I can really work the shifts that I want, and not base everything around my kids, you know, really--the days... I have more seniority now so I can choose my days but -- if I choose to be off on the weekdays, you know... it's no big deal. But, it's--I'm really happy that... I made the choice to come here. Because I feel like that--it--that it is--it is the best of both worlds. And this job... you know, it's... it can be stressful. But I feel like the job is what you make it. If you just keep a positive attitude and, you know, you come to work and you just do your job and you treat people like you wanna be treated, and you drive cautiously and... um... I've taken several defensive driving classes. Which I feel like has really helped me.

LB: Do you take them here at the GRTC or--?

KE: No. Um, with the school bus--and it was something that I mentioned to our trainers? With the school bus, every two years, we had to take a defensive driving class... an assertive discipline class... and a CPR class. That was mandatory. We had to do it every two years. And so, um, I... I... dropped in the idea box... that... at least a defensive driving class. We should do that, maybe, like, every couple years. Because it would keep drivers up on their Ps and Qs, the ones that haven't had that class. It really does help. So my daughter realized in that--driving in Atlanta--cuz I told all my kids, it scared me to death once she got a car. Like that scared me to death. But she said, 'Mom, you were right.' I said, 'Every driver needs to take a defensive driving class.' And when she took one, she sees the difference.

LB: Cuz Atlanta is scary to drive in.

KE: It's scary. It's scary. And she does fine. She--I--I'm just in shock. When I got in her car and, you know, from the airport to... her little loft, I was just like, 'I can't believe your'e driving in Atlanta. I just can't believe it.' You know cuz I drive there, but... Atlanta confuses me. And I--and I don't get lost... I don't get lost anywhere. But I got lost in Atlanta. Because they have, like, seven... like, they have... this is an example. they have seven or eight different Peach Tree Streets.

LB: I know!

KE: But none of them are connected. So you never know which one you're--get--and they have several other streets with the same name, and it's like--I just said, I give up!

LB: It's crazy!

KE: Yeah, let's just catch the bus or take--get on the Marta or something.

LB: Well, thank you so much, Kasandra, this has been a wonderful interview.

KE: Yes, thank you. Thank you guys for having me.

LB: And I hope it wasn't as horrible as you feared.

KE: It wasn't--I was--my nerves were just, like... I didn't know what to--but, yeah, hopefully everything... hopefully you guys were pleased.

LB: Oh...

Benjamin: Oh, absolutely.

LB: It's great.

KE: Yeah.

LB: And, you know, what we're gonna be doing with this is... we'll have your... portrait... next to, like, three- to five-hundred words of your interview. So it'll just be you, no me. Um--and--and I'll just edit it together and then Ben--

KE: I was gonna say, and please edit my English and everything because I don't know--

LB: No, you sound great.

KE: [Laughing] Ok. Thank you.

LB: And Benjamin is going to edit together the sound. So...

Benjamin: Sound of you talking and then... other... ambient background things.

KE: Ok!

Benjamin: Maybe we'll even work in a little jazz.

KE: Oh, that would be beautiful.

Benjamin: Who's your favorite--

LB: Don't you think?

Benjamin: Who's your favorite--?

KE: My favorites are Miles Davis and John Coltrane.

Benjamin: What's your favorite Coltrane?

KE: Um... I like 'A Love Supreme.'

Benjamin: [??]

KE: Yes. And Miles Davis, my favorite is 'Kind of Blue.'

Benjamin: Ok.

KE: Yeah, those are two.

Benjamin: Those are the two best.

KE: You have to have them... if you--if you... people that collect music. Even if you don't collect music. Those are two must-haves.

LB: They really are.

KE: Kind of Blue is like, whenever I'm feeling like really bad, I just stick that CD in. That's like a real... a lot of people have sampled off of that.

Benjamin: Yeah that--those first notes where he goes [taa!].

KE: Yes. Yes. They--they sample, and you--if you--when you watch the movies? You hear so much. Of the music in movies. And I know you probably thinking, how is that, I know I've heard that before. And they'll always ask me, 'who is that?' and I'll just-- spit off and tell them.

LB: [Laughs.]

KE: So--and I forgot to tell you guys my grandfather was a jazz musician.

LB: Oh, which--now which grandfather. The bus driver or the--the printer--

KE: My father's... the printer--

LB: The printing office.

KE: The one in the printing office and the, um... I'm actually working on a book. Mm hmm.

LB: Tell me about it.

KE: Um, it's--gonna start with... it's basically gonna start--it's starting with my mother running in the streets of DC. On April 4th, 1968. She was, um, eight months pregnant with me. Martin Luther King got killed. So it's--it starts, just to capture people? It starts with that. My mom dropped out of college. So... um, she went to Eastern Mennonite College for two years. She met my dad, he was singing in a band. And, um, it's--it's just... so much to try to cover. You guys, like--when I tell you I come from such humble beginnings, but rich? My father tried out for the Redskins in '73. He was the last of three to get cut. The last of three. He was such a beast in football. And so my grandmother constantly reminds me. Because she's 85. If a game is on, she's jumping up and down and screaming like a [man?]. And she's 85 years old. So... you know, we went from that... my grandfather was the first... black to attend West Virginia Univeristy. When my grandmother got pregnant with my aunt, which is a year older than my father, he quit school and went to work in the coal mines. With his three brothers. And they each built shacks. For each family to live in. In West Virginia. And my grand--my grandparents' house was the only ones that had encyclopedias and dictionaries so all the kids from the neighborhood would come to my... grandfather's house. To study and read and do all that. He was so education. He was...

LB: And so--how did he... get the job from Senator Byrd to go work in Washington--how did that work out?

KE: I have to--I'm getting the details from my grandmother. Because I think he wrote the senator. And... he just... was explaining about his experience in the coal mines. And he just felt like that he wanted a better life for his kids. And just, yo know, a bet--he wanted to move to DC cuz my grandmother's two sisters were there. And, you know, he just said he really didn't wanna move without having concrete job. So... and... he put in a word for him.

LB: And so then... your dad was born in DC, he met your mother...

KE: My dad was born in West Virignia.

LB: Oh! Ok, so before...

KE: Yeah, my dad--

LB: The move.

KE: Yeah, before the move. My dad was born in West Virignia.

LB: Small town.

KE: Yeah. In a little town called Rhodell. It's called 'the biggest little town.' and that--because they had a movie theater--and that's--it says it on the sign... when you go... in there. It's called 'the biggest little town.' I can't remember if it's in West Virginia or the United States. But there's so much going on in that little teeny town. So, yeah. So he, um, moved to DC. And... that's when... in DC, they had one more child. We're three weeks apart. So we're very close, we're like brother and sister, even though he's my uncle. And, um... you know, it just was--just went uphill from there.

LB: How did your--both of your parents end up at Eastern Mennonite University? Cu--I mean, they weren't Mennonites, were they?

KE: No. My mom, um... I'm not exactly sure why she chose that college, I think it was... one of her favorite teachers urged her to go there. And she ended up getting a scholarship. you know, cuz she was pretty smart. And so that ended up being her choice. Plus... I think she was looking at the strictness of the school and... um, but... I have to... they met... somewhere in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Where my mom attended a concert and my dad's band was playing. And so that's... that was how they met. And ironically, my grandmother, my grandfather met the same way. Cuz she was a tap dancer. And he was... you know, a jazz musician. So... that's how they met. And--

LB: That's a rich history.

KE: It's very rich. It's very rich. So that's why my mom kept saying, 'you need to... work on that book, you need to work--' so I'm working on it.

LB: Oh, you really do.

KE: Yeah. And so I--I wrote my daughter a letter. Um, after I dropped her off her freshman year. And she said someone asked her in an interview... a question, um... if... something about, say, like, if she thought she was gonna leave this earth... or if they told her that she had to go to another country, she could only take three things with her or something like that, what would the three things be. She said my letter would be one of them. She said as she read the letter she was in tears. Because she had no idea, cuz I told her how proud, you know, your great grandfather would be. To know... you know, that he has a granddaughter at Spelman. And that, you know, just--just the odds, and I tell her everyday, and she said her friends tell her that they're so tickled with her because she stays humble. Cuz I always tell her you gotta stay humble. You know, don't put your nose... way up in--in the air. Because... um... the first... when we went for--I forgot what it's called. Spelbound or something like that? That's where, um, the girls that are accepted... you come and you have, like, a really nice weekend. So that you can see if... that, if--you want to choose the school? So she applied early, got accepted early. So she got accepted before everyone else, in December. And... the lady explained to us that they had fifty-five-hundred applicants. The year my daughter was accepted. And only 500 got accepted. So you had to pretty... I mean, you pretty much had to... have, like, straight A's. In order to even... be considered. So she said, 'I wanna let you ladies know that are here... you know, that have been accepted, that you really... you know, it's really a honor and a privilege. So I--my mouth was just, like... five thousand girls got turned down from this school? Because the campus is--even though the name is big? There's only 2,000 girls. Um, at the school.

LB: That's nice having a school that small.

KE: That small. Mm hmm. Oh, I feel very safe when she's on campus. Very safe. They're really strict. So... you know... that's about it!

Benjamin: Wow. That's amazing.

KE: Mm hmm. So... I thank ya'll so much for...

LB: Well--we thank you!

KE: ...I apologize that I'm in flip-flops, but--at least I was able to give my toes a little extra time to dry.

[Laughter.]

Benjamin: As long as you're comfortable.

KE: Yes. I am.

LB: That's the most important thing.

KE: Yes.

LB: And I am so excited about getting your transcription back from your interview and starting to work on it because there's so much that I know I wanna include.

KE: Yeah. It's--

LB: About your family, too.

KE: Yeah, oh my family--it's--it's a lot. And... and something else that I didn't tell you guys, this is on my mother's side -- the grandfather... that drove the school bus... he raised... 8 children and two grandchildren. He... quit school in the third grade. So that he could help provide for... his parents. Because you know, back then they were doing that. Somehow we figured out that he must've been, like, a secret mathematician or something. Because... when he passed away, in the 80s... he has so much... farmland. He had chickens, he had cows, he had pigs... plus he raised ten children. Drove the school bus. Had all of this on a school bus driver's salary and farming.

LB: That's amazing.

KE: And--and he made it. He made it work. They didn't ever ask anyone to borrow money or-- anything like that. They--they made it. My grandmother didn't work. So... her job was taking care of the kids and... you know, and then taking care of my granddad as he got older, but he ended up passing away from Lou Gehrig's disease.

LB: That's rough.

KE: That's a *painful* way to watch somebody go outta here. I had never heard of the disease until in the 80s when my grandfather got it. It's terrible. Cuz one minute they're walking around and fine. The next minute, their muscles are just deteriorating. And tin the end he couldn't even

cough.

LB: Ugh.

KE: Yeah. So... you know... so that's... that's my mom's... whole side. Of history, so we--we have a lot.

LB: You've got a lot to work with in your book.

KE: Yeah. Oh, I do. I do. I'm not gonna even focus... the first part is gonna be--I might put a little bit in about my mom's dad. But I'm gonna do a separate one on my mom's family cuz that's a whole 'nother... it's a whole 'nuther book!

LB: It is!

KE: Yep. It was so nice meeting you guys.

LB: Well it was great meeting you and thank you so much for a really wonderful interview.

KE: Oh, you are so welcome.

Benjamin: Yeah, appreciate [?].

KE: It was nice meeting you.

Benjamin: Yeah, it was nice to meet you, too.

KE: And will I see you guys again?

LB: Yes, well, I hope you'll come to the opening of the exhibition.

KE: Yes.

Benjamin: It's at the old GRTC headquarters, September 12th.

LB: 11th, I think.

Benjamin: Or 11th.

KE: What day is--is that on a...

LB: I don't know. We should check.

Benjamin: I have the 12th down in my calendar, but... I could be wrong.

LB: Maybe... maybe we install the 11th? That could be it. And it opens the 12th?



[Pause.]

KE: I think I'm doing really good time-wise. Oh, yeah. Thank you guys so much. Think I can go-

-

LB: This was fun.

KE: Yes.

Benjamin: ...Yes. Laura is correct.

LB: Ok, so it opens the 11th.

KE: Ok. That's perfect. What should be, like, the middle of the week because... my mother's birthday is on the 8th and that falls on a Sunday.

LB: Ok. So that would be...

KE: So it should be like a Wednesday or Thursday.

LB: Wednesday?

KE: Mm hmm. That's perfect.

Benjamin: It's on Wednesday.

KE: That's perfect.

LB: Yeah. And then it'll be up all the way through the weekend.

KE: That's perfect. I'm excited.

Benjamin: [Laughs.]

LB: Us too.

KE: So next I just have to get dolled up for my picture--I'm glad I didn't have to take a picture today.

LB: [Laughs.]

KE: I'm gonna grab my keys and my... sunshades.

LB: Oh, yeah, of course. Um--

KE: Thank you so much.

LB: Thank you, and... Michael will be in touch with you, the photographer.

KE: Ok.

Benjamin: Yeah, he's great, too.

LB: Yeah, he's [?], you'll like him.

KE: I'm really excited, you guys. Thank you all for c--for [noise]--

LB: Oh!

KE: ...and being persistent cuz I was getting ready to chicken out, I was so nervous. [Laughs.]

LB: You did great.

KE: Thank you.

LB: It was pleasure. Thank you so much.

KE: Nice meeting you all.

LB: Buh-bye, Kasandra.