

GRTC

Interview: Leslie Zink

Laura Browder: [Laughs.]

Leslie Zink: Cuz my daughter, she said, 'well, I pretty much did it all.' She said, 'it's nothing she can't... say' or whatever. So... we'll see.

LB: Well, good. Alright, Leslie.... Let's start the interrogation going. [Laughs.] Ok, will you just start by you telling me something about how you grew up, where you grew up... what your childhood was like, you know, all that stuff.

LZ: Well, I grew up in Richmond, Virginia. And, um... I had a pretty good childhood. It was... you know. I always wanted to drive a bus when I was younger. And, um, I used to pretend with my bike... that I--I--I--I always rode buses when I was younger. Cuz I always went to school, but I always, uh, wanted to, uh, drive. And I used to pretend with my bike that I was picking up people.

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: And I actually--during the interview, I actually told them that I did that. You know, on my application or whatever. But, um... it was, um... I--it was nice when--you know, when I was growing up.

LB: What... made you wanna drive a bus when you were... little.

LZ: I don't know. It's just... it's just a dream I've always had. And, um...it took me--it took me about five years, but... finally I was able to get here.

LB: So tell me a little bit more about--where did you grow up in Richmond?

LZ: I grew up--

LB: What's your family like--all those things.

LZ: Well, my, um... my is--my mom is still around. My, um--my father, he passed away a few years ago. Um... we grew--I grew up in the West End. And, um, it was, um, it was very nice. You know, just regular child. You know, just... had a lot of fun and everything. Friends and everything. I went to school--I went to Catholic school in Northside. And, um... you know, switched different schools cuz we used right much back and forth from Newport News back to Richmond and... um... pretty much, um... um... after, uh, that I went to George Wythe High School. Uh, graduated from George Wythe High School back in 1981. So...

LB: I've talked to a lotta, lotta people who went to George Wythe High School.

LZ: Really?

LB: Yeah. I... I taught a class last year where we interviewed tons of people from George Wythe and wrote a play about the years when they were busing there.

LZ: Ohh, ok.

LB: So I met a lot of really cool people that way.

LZ: It's--it was a nice school. You know, I um... I didn't ever have any problems or anything, I always... I always seemed to behave myself a little bit, so--

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: You know.... I was proud of myself. And then, um, you know, before I graduated, of course, I was working at White Tower and... um... different places and--

LB: What's White Tower?

LZ: White Tower is a restaurant. Used to be--it's like, some say White Castle.

LB: Oh, ok.

LZ: It's--it--but it--they say the food is not as good. At White Castle as is--is...with White Tower. So, um... actually, I guess, Dairy Queen was my first job. I worked at Dairy Queen when I was sixteen. And then of course I went onto White Tower. Uh, my mother, she was management there, so... she got me a job there. And I was pretty much on my own and stuff when I turned eighteen, and... then, of course, I had my daughter when I was twenty-one. And she's the only child. And, um... then, of course, we have grandchildren now, so...

LB: So how did you get to the GRTC?

LZ: My daughter's father used to work up here, Robert Stokes. He used to work up here. Um, he's passed on now, but... um... even before I met him, I always wanted to, uh... drive for GRTC. I always wanted to drive a bus. I can't explain it, but it's just something that it's always been a dream of mine to do. And, um... I've been happy doing it ever since, been here eighteen years. And it's been, um... it's been wonderful.

LB: So tell me about applying here, getting accepted, your training, all of that--what was that all like?

LZ: Uh, when I first applied here, um... you had to wait and stuff for someone to call you back. And, um... that was the best day. When I found out that I was accepted. Then, of course, you have to go through the regular routine of physicals and... um, drug testing. Stuff like that. And, um, then you go through a class. And the class is... um, back then... it was a--basically, it was... it was... it was really no wrong answers. But, uh, there was one correct answer that they were

looking for. And um... thank God I passed it. Thank God I passed it, and I tell you, it's... it's, uh... oh, and I was nervous. I was very nervous. But, uh...

LB: Did they have the simulators back then?

Leslie Zink: No. No, you did not have simulator back then. Um, I learned, uh... Eldridge Coles trained me. And, um... back then, I--we were over on Davis and Cary, when I was trained. And, um, I never driven anything big, before I came here. As a matter of fact, I had a license to do hair... back then. And, um... you know, I just kept thinking, wow, wow, I'm gonna... run over curbs, I'm gonna this, I'm gonna that. But they train you well enough and stuff like that, uh... by the tie you get out, I train--I guess maybe s... well, first when I first came here, I was part-time. And then, that was in March of '95. And then in May of '95, they asked me to become full-time. Then you go back into training for about six to eight weeks then. And then of course, you train with different operators and stuff like that. Um, before they put you out on your own. But back when I started, you had the older buses. You had buses that were not power-steering.

LB: Still, in '95.

LZ: Still in '95. They were phasing them out, little by little. Back then you didn't have, the, uh... wheelchair, uh, lifts back then. And, um, since recently--since I've been here and everything, you know, a lot has changed. You know, now you have cameras on the buses, uh... power-steering, of course. Um... uh, the lifts--the--the chair lifts and stuff like that. And, um... uh, radios. I think maybe we had radios back when I first came here. But they've been updated and... they're much better than they were back then, I think.

LB: How did you get wheelchair passengers onto the bus--or could they just not take the bus? You know, did you have to lift them on, or was it just not an option for them...?

LZ: I... I'm guessing that it was not an option back then. That, you know, in--in remembering... you know, back then, I guess... um, the [care van/caravan?] was the only thing, really, that they could, uh... be able to get around... in. Um... to the best of my knowledge. I can't recall... ever approaching that, um... you know, back when I first started here, I was working a lotta nights and stuff like that. You know. For some time, I didn't have weekends off. And then I started getting weekends off, and... I'm number 31 on the list out of 200 drivers, so--

LB: Wow.

LZ: I feel very special right now.

LB: [Laughs] you are special.

LZ: I feel very special right now. I've--I've--I've come a long way, but, you know, you have to have patience and stuff, that--that's the main goal. If... if... you know, the older we get the less patience that we have. And when I'm out there and stuff driving... I hope I'm not getting too far--

LB: No, you're fine. We can just wander...

LZ: Oh, ok.

LB: ...back and forth...

LZ: Ok, well... I, um... I--I speak to everybody. I get a little upset when they don't speak back to me because I feel like... you know... we're all going through changes and stuff. I myself have gone through changes, but I feel like... I don't take it out on everybody else. You know, I feel like... you know, sometimes I get people that get on the bus, they don't know me from Adam. And they start opening up. You know, it's just like... and I kinda feel good about it, you know, because, wow, you're telling me and you don't know me from Adam. You're telling--talking to me about your problems and stuff like that. And, um, I think--I think it's just--it makes me feel good. You know to know that maybe... something I've said or just being there as a sounding board... maybe, um... you know, it makes me feel better. You know. So, um... but I do, I love my customers. I love them. They're--I mean, they're great. Um... and not because they have brought me things in the past, but... I've got people every day and stuff, uh, this one particular lady, um, she'll bring me a snack in the evening, or... you know, Christmas gifts or... cards and things like that. It's just wonderful. I just love being out there with them. Um, every now and then you might get somebody that might wanna ruffle your feathers or whatever, but... you try to handle them in the... professional way, and you try to... you know, try to avoid confrontation--I don't like confrontation. You know, it... you know, it's just like... sometimes you'll get school children and stuff like that. You know, the cursing and all that kinda stuff. YOU know. And, um... I know I have to get into at--eventually to say something to them. But... all in all... I mean, I ask them one time. If, you know, they don't listen to what I say or whatever then I will call in and pull over But you hate to do that. You hate to drop--you hate to... you hate to hold these other people up. I mean, you know, you've worked eight hours, hey, I wanna get home. I don't wanna deal with all this conflict and stuff like that. But... you know, you're gonna come across some... um, hard-head sometime. But the main thing is is just to... you know... I have this thing where... as long as you don't put your hands on me, you know, or whatever, you know, I pretty much... I'm not gonna take but so much. But at the same time, as long as you just... don't bother me or my customers and stuff... but if it gets too much, then I'll call in. You know. But I really--I haven't come across really that big of problems.

LB: So let me take you back 18 years, and ask you, what sticks out in your mind when you think of those first days, the real early days, of driving the bus, after never having driven a huge vehicle before in your life?

LZ: I was scared. I was scared. And I mean, you know, every time I would turn the corner and then, wow, there'd be a car here and a car there and it's like, oh, wow, you know... And I just took my time and everything. Yeah, I was very nervous. I was very nervous, because I knew, hey--you're fresh, starting out and stuff like that and.... I mean, there was a incident.... Snow was my worst fear. And driving one of those. Well, back in '96, the blizzard of '96. Oh, wow. So, one time I was parked at the, um, right at the, uh, Boulevard and Broad. And there was a beer truck... that was in CVS servicing, um... you know, CVS. So I, um... pl---applied the brake... which I shouldn't have did. Um, the bus kept on sliding closer and closer to the truck. And then I was getting paranoid and then I had tears in my eyes. And then of course I called in and

everything. They sent somebody out to, um... you know... get me out of it and turn me back around and--they said, now, listen. They said, you've got to, you know... if you can't drive our buses, you know... back then, they said, if you can't drive our buses in any kinda weather, we can't use you. So I said, well... from that day forward... had no problems outta me. I still get scared when it comes. But now I'm more focused and better to handle it and stuff and what to do. But I was a nervous wreck back then.

LB: Well, that was such a huge blizzard, too.

LZ: It was a very big deal. But, um... I found out back then, if you take your time... and you just, you know, it--it--my thing is this: I worry about... it's--it's more than just me not he bus. And it's more than just me out here. First thing in the morning when there's not a lotta people steering, I was ok. But then I when I'd get around to other people and stuff like that? That's what bothers me because I don't wanna hurt anybody. You know, it wouldn't be intentional and stuff like that, but... I mean, in weather like that, hey, you know... I mean... you have no control on ice. I mean, that's just--that's just, uh... that's just one--that's just one of those things you just don't have any control over that.

LB: Were you driving any of the buses that had no power-steering way back then?

LZ: Yes. We had large 700s and stuff like that--they were the best on the--on the snow and stuff. They were--they were heavy and solid and you could handle them. Um... you learn a lot of trick when you're out there and surf like that. As far as--maybe putting it in neutral or something. I don't know... I have to do what's best for me. But at the same time, I wanna maintain the rules and stuff that I'm supposed to be doing. And, um... I say putting it in neutral and stuff like that, you know will, you know, calm it down and make it do what it's supposed to. It works for me. But, um... it, um... with those buses back then, I think... if you maintain your right type of speed and stuff, you didn't have to worry about it, but if the back end--you knew if the back end was coming to meet you? You had no control then. That was just... that was just it. And luckily, thank God, I never had that problem before. But it was always in the back of my mind because... me listening to the older drivers and stuff and their horror stories.

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: I learn not to listen to them anymore. I learn not to listen to them anymore because every individual drives differently. And, um... you know... I took all that into account but I didn't let it really scare me... after a while, I just... did what I could do. You know. If I felt like it was really too bad, which I had never got to that point, but if it ever got to that point and stuff like that, then I would pull it over. You know. Just get it out of the way for a while anyway.

LB: So, two questions. First one--when you say the back end coming to meet you -- what do you mean?

LZ: Well, you know, the back end and stuff, it--it, uh... you know, the, uh... engine is back in the back.

LB: Yeah.

LZ: And, you know, if you slide and stuff and then the back end goes...

LB: Like slides around?

LZ: Like slides around, like turns you around?

LB: Oh...

LZ: Yeah. That's what I'm talking about. And then there's no control, you know, you don't have any control when that just, you know... all you can do is just... um, well... I learn that the brake is not your friend in that kinda weather. You know, you just have to let it slow itself down, but--if you take your time and everything. And, um... you know, you're just aware of what's around you and stuff like that, then you'll do a whole--you'll do much better.

LB: So do the older drivers like to share a lot of horror stories?

LZ: Oh, yes.

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: Yeah. You know, I--when they first talked about the snow and everything and then you would look at TV and you'd... be biting your nails and everything wondering. Cuz I had a swing-shift. Wondering, oh my goodness, how bad is it gonna be--am I gonna be off by the time it starts, you know, and all that, and--driver said, oh, you'll do fine and stuff, just stay away from parked cars and all that kinda stuff. I'm like, oh my goodness. You know? I mean, but... it helped me to get it out with them and stuff. But they were trying to help me but it wasn't helping me. It was just--I'm a worrier. It was making me feel... worse. You know, just talking to them. So, um... but I survived it. Eighteen years later. Seventeen years later, rather. I, um, I survived it.

LB: You're here to tell the tale.

LZ: Right. There's not--there has not been anything... as bad... as '96. That I haven't been able to deal with. Or been lucky to be on vacation... when it started. Wow, that was... I love it. But, um... I mean, you learn a lot when you--when you... when you've been through, you learn a whole lot.

LB: So what are the best and worst parts of your day, typically?

LZ: The best part of my day is getting out there with the people and stuff because I'm on the University of Richmond line. And I love them people out there because--

LB: Oh, that's where I teach.

LZ: Really?

LB: Mm hmm!

LZ: Ok. I went, um... I used to work University of Richmond when it was running on the weekends. Then of courses, they stopped from working on the weekends. And that just--oh, that depressed me so much. I was working and I--I think I worked it for... maybe five years. And then just recently I started coming back to the evening part of it. And to see all the people that used to ride with me and everything and us joking and... you know, just really having a good time. And then of course getting them to where they'd have to be and stuff like the--you know. I--I still know that--I still know... my job is to get them from point A to point B safely. And, you know, I talk to them and everything. I don't have to look at them, that's a good thing. You know, and I'm not holding anyone else up. So I just--I just enjoy being out there with them. I look forward to it... you know, during the day and stuff like that. So...

LB: How about the worst part of each day?

LZ: The worst part of each day I think is getting up in the mornings. I'm just not a morning person. I get up... but, you know, the early s--I'm just... getting up early in the mornings and stuff like that... once I get to going, I'm good. And believe it or not, once I--you know, in the morning time, I work Chesterfield Plaza, the 81. And I work that in the mornings and, um... you know... I--I--I... in other words I'm not grumpy. I'm still... still alive as I am in the evening time. It's just that getting up in the morning.

LB: That's an achievement if your'e not a morning person.

LZ: Ohh, yes. But, um, I wouldn't--I wouldn't trade it for the world.

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

LZ: ... Um... well... every now and then I get some people and stuff that... might be short their bus fare or something like that. Um... I try to help them out. You know. I don't say, make a habit of it. Or somebody that does it all the time, because then you're taking advantage and I don't like that. But, um... you know, just looking out for people and stuff. You know... people that are trying to, um... trying to get up to Broad STreet to catch a particular bus. I go up Grace Street. But this rec--recent and stuff, this lady was standing at 9th and Broad and she was trying--9th and... Bank. She was trying to get to Broad Street to catch a bus. And this was in the evening time so... I told her to come on and I would take her, you know. It's just looking out for people and stuff. Day to day and stuff. That... you know, that--that just... that just makes the day. Um... um... I don't know, it's--it's a lot of good memories and stuff.

LB: Tell me some of them.

LZ: Um... I--looking out for people is one, and, um... um... I don't know. I... I... maybe it's not a lot of good mem--I mean, it's still good mem... it's still--it's still a lot of fun and everything. I have a lot of fun doing it. I really do. I love charters and everything. They're good. They--I'd rather do a charter in some cases. It's just like, I'm getting paid to have fun or something.

LB: Id isn't know that GRTC--well, I guess--out, like, to Kings Dominion? Is that what you're talking about or--?

LZ: Oh, yeah. I have done Kings Dominion line. That is fine. I mean, you can't go in the park. Uh--I guess you could if you had time, but... um... that's a fun thing to do. You know, it's just--I love Kings Dominion, as a matter of fact, we went this past Saturday and we rode the bus. And, um... it--it was nice. Um...

LB: Or do they do other charters?

LZ: Oh, they do a lotta other charters, they... you know, when, um... we had trolleys, I used to do, uh--I did a couple weddings with the trolleys. And that was--that was--that--now, that was good memories and stuff like that was to see... the people having a good time and stuff on the charters--on the trolleys and everything and ringing that bell. Oh, that thing was getting on my nerves, but... I mean they just--you know, and just... and then working Colonial Downs and stuff, working that with the horse races and stuff. You know, I told somebody one time, I said, 'well, you know... ya'll are gonna have to catch something else because I won a horse. And ya'll can't fit on here with the horse.'

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: So anyway... I mean, little stuff like that--I say little crazy stuff and they just laugh at me, like, you know.... But it's, um... um... I don't know. Um... uh, lot of accomplishments and things with the safety awards and stuff when, um... you know, and the 'years of service' pins and stuff like that. It just makes my day and stuff to be able to... you know, to, um... you know, know that I'm doing a good job and being appreciated for it. Um... the rate that the, uh--money and stuff, that--that helps too.

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: That, you know--the paycheck helps too. So...

LB: Well, what I'm getting from a lot of the drivers I've been talking to is that they really enjoy working for the GRTC, that it's a good place to work.

LZ: It is a good place to work. It is a very good place to work. You know, um... If you, um... have your ducks in a row. And you respect these customers and stuff out here--every now and then you're gonna get somebody that's gonna ruffle your feathers. The main thing is is just to... uh, like somebody told me one time when I first started here, put your foot down, get them where you gotta go... you don't have to take them home with you, you know. That's for the ones and stuff that may... you know, may decide that they wanna make your day a living... you know. Um... you know, because... you come across a lotta people and stuff, number one they're mad because they have to go to work. That's not your fault. But it happens. And number two, I mean, you--you come across somebody that--she's got four children. And... she has to pay at least three fares. Because, I mean, the children--you know... and you're gonna get somebody that--maybe

one driver... is not gonna enforce it. And then when you do it, you're nasty, you're rude. You know, but hey. I'm doing my job. You know. They, um... pay you to... you know, do what you're supposed to do. And if you do what you're supposed to... I'm like this... um... you fire yourself up here. You attendance and things like that. If you do what's right with your attendance and stuff, and of course we know about the drug test and all. But I mean, if you do what is right and stuff like that, you don't have any problems. You know, and respect management, like... you know. I mean, you respect them... you give them the same courtesy they give you. And that's the way that--you know, that's the way it should be. But, um... I... out of all the jobs and stuff that I've worked, this is the best. This is the best job I've ever had.

LB: So tell me, then... if you give me an example of leadership that you've experienced that's good, and leadership that's not so good. And it can be anything, anywhere. Here, out in the world, what--wherever you wanna take it. Um... what would those be?

LZ: Well, the leadership here, I mean, to, um... I don't--I don't--I don't know if I'm gonna answer this right, I hope I will. Um... the leadership and stuff that I've--that, here, um... I--I've--I've come across a lot of people... here at the job and everything that have... you know... you go to them and you need help or whatever and they try to help you. If they can't answer you, if they can't answer you, um--if they cannot, um, give you the correct answer, then they will find out the answer for you. You know, it's not like they're gonna answer you with just anything. You know. And the... other part... that, um, sometimes there--there have been--they're not on the radio anymore. But there have been times that you would call in on the radio and stuff. And they didn't--wouldn't call you back. And that--that part--you know, it's scary to me because... suppose I come across something and I need you really bad. You know, that's scary to me. So those--those examples and things--are the--the leadership, you know. Like I said, um... everybody... I mean, just like... I don't know what they go through in that--in--in those, you know... answering the phones and stuff, or... umpteen amount of buses and stuff like that. So I try to get an understanding on them as well. But also at the same time and stuff, if I'm out here at one and two o'clock in the morning? I... you know, I want you there. I've got to have you there. Especially since I have to go through you... for you to... if I ever... you know, they have to determine whether or not it's important and stuff to call the police and stuff like that. So you have to call them. But the thing of it is, is, um... that's the only thing that I don't like. I don't like--I want to be able to--and I understand the reason why... because it's like a boy crying wolf. I'm calling the police but really and truly... it's--some situations that I look back... hey, I didn't need to call the police, I could have handled it myself. So I can understand you calling into them. And letting them... call the police. You know, I can understand that because the police don't have time to keep running, running, running, you know. So, I--I--I would have to say I've grown up a lot since I've been here also.

LB: I would still imagine that at one and two in the morning, it would be a little intense if something was happening out there, like what's--what's a kind of typical situation...

LZ: One--

LB: ...where you would wanna call in?

LZ: Back when we had the VCU bus... um... I had a situation with this guy. And I asked him to see his ID. He was a student. But he told me, um... he, um... he had it. I said, 'well, I need to see it.' Well we kept going back and forth. So, you know, I said... you know... um... that is the way it is. when you use that card, you know... you are supposed to show your ID. And, uh, he told me that I didn't know him like that. And that I need to just go ahead and drive the bus. So I popped the parking break up because you're not gonna tell me what to do, you're not my boss. So I called up here and I guess maybe... I was just very impatient. So I got off the bus and I called by way of cell phone. And I called up here and stuff and then they got somebody to go on. But... I--I was... I guess I was too impatient and stuff, not thinking. You know, they could be on another call or something. And... just like yesterday I called here. And... the guy, you know, he came back on the radio and he was like, 'I have about twenty-some calls in here.' And I felt very bad because... you know, excuse me... I should be... I should've been more understanding instead... of trying to think that, hey... I'm calling and you need to answer me right now. That was very selfish of me. So I apologized to him when I got off. But, um... you know, that's pretty much the only situation and stuff that I've ever had. As far as actually feeling kinda scared and needing the police.

LB: Yeah.

LZ: You know, back then. So...

LB: How about good leadership that you've experienced?

LZ: Um... they're always out there to help you. I guess I'm saying--I--good leadership... there is a, you know... I can't say that there's ever been a time where I've had any--any--any bad leadership or anything. You know, they're always here to help you and stuff like that except that situation on the radio and stuff that... you know, I was kinda scared about, but... other than that, you know, I'm--I'm... I'm... I'm friends with all leadership and stuff like that. But I also know at the same time that... if I do wrong... friend or no friend, that is management. You know. So, I--I mean, I know the difference the bounds and stuff like that, but... you know, as far as leadership and stuff like that, I mean, when you have a problem... you can always go to them and stuff like that and talk to them, you know. Um... I'm in the union and everything, so that's another thing that I'm... I'm good with, you know. Um...

LB: Talk to me about that, because it's so unusual to have a union job here in Richmond.

LZ: I know. I mean, that--that's another thing, I mean I've called this poor man sometimes late at night and stuff like that and he still answers the phone.

LB: Which poor man?

LZ: The, uh, union president.

LB: Oh, yeah.

LZ: Yeah.

LB: We interviewed him, too.

LZ: Yeah. Did you really? He's a sweetheart. Mr. Tunstall, they call him the Godfatherh.

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: But, uh, he--he's very good. I, um, I had gotten out of the union briefly but when he got in there, um... I got back in it. I got back in it. Um... he is the most fair person and stuff like that, I mean... you know, he lets you know--he doesn't sugarcoat anything. He lets you know, you know... um... the, um... what's gonna happen, what could happen and stuff. But you call him, he's always there, if he doesn't answer the phone--like Laura Browder--

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: ...um... he'll always call you back and stuff like that. So I mean, he's always--and then your cell phone and stuff, if he has things that is important? He texts everybody, you get text messages on your phone and everything. And we've never--I've never had that before with other union, um, presidents. I mean, he--he's very good. He's very good. And very patient with you. Cuz I know I drive him nuts. I know I drive him--I know I drive him nuts. But here lately I've been doing pretty good, I might say--I must say. Been doing pretty good.

LB: Yeah, we interviewed him, we interviewed Julio Vidal and, of course, Marsha. And Deborah Hopkins, that's who I was trying to think of earlier, she's the--the other woman. I don't know if you know her.

LZ: I know her, that's a sick puppy.

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: I know her, but I tell you, she is just as sweet as she can be. I like Deborah. I been known Deborah for--since I worked at G.C. Murphy's, I met Deborah. So, like I said, when I was going to school I used to ride them. You know all the time and... going to work and all that. My daughter used to ride them.... excuse me.

LB: So you've got a whole history.

LZ: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Like I said, it's been a lotta fun. I can't... I can't say that it's been more, uh... um, bad times than good. I think it's been more good than bad.

LB: So... what have been the biggest moments of change for you du--during your eighteen years with the GRTC?

LZ: Well, actually the biggest change, I guess, is, you know, getting used to the different buses and stuff like that. When, you know, different buses come in and stuff. Course they train you very well on them. You know, if it's something that you need to be trained on. And I'm very

thankful for that. But, um... I don't know, I guess over the years and stuff the pl--the building... this building is nice but I'd rather Davis. I liked Davis. I don't know what--it's just like it seems like... you--you're locked out of every door in the building here, and... you know... I can un--I understand the reason behind it and stuff but I'm just--I'm just a friendly type, I like to hug and all that and... you know, just... just be associate--I mean, I still... I mean, they treat me like, you know. We... we all feel like family around here. You know. But, um... I guess the biggest change has been the management and... the different types of buses and stuff that you come across during the years and... drivers coming and going and stuff. You know... Um... and going to number 31 in, uh, in a... short amount of time, that's been pretty good too.

LB: Yeah, I'll bet.

LZ: That's been pretty good.

LB: And so how do you think the bus ridership has changed over time cuz you've seen it since you were a little girl.

LZ: I have seen it--it--it's--on some lines, it still... excuse me... on some lines it's still pretty good and stuff like that, but you come across every now and then, like the Westhampton and stuff. That's one of the reasons why the Westhampton was cut back, you know. It wasn't paying for its own self, you know. But, um... I'm glad to see it's still on the line and everything. But... you know, you--you, um... you get different routes and stuff, you come, like, uh, Chesterfield... you know, here today, gone tomorrow, or... you know, one doesn't wanna pay for this, you know, and the county and all that. But... I mean, that's some getting used to and stuff. Especially when you have people out here that's... um... you know. 'Well I [haven't?] rode the bus in years and it used to go this place and that place and...' then they're surprised when you tell them, 'look, well you know... I mean it's just--that--I mean that's change. You know, that--I don't like change, but... I'm used to doing the same thing over and over again, but... as long as they make 16 I'm good.

LB: [Laughs.] How do you think that Richmonders who don't ride the bus see the GRTC?

LZ: I think they see it as some, uh... there are some and stuff that--stress. You know in some ways and stuff. Because you try to explain to them and stuff. And I try to explain to them a lot, you know, in different ways and stuff I think they'll understand as far as the money's going and... different places that they can get to and get out to and everything. The only thing that I get upset about is--is somebody that's been riding... and they're constantly complaining to me about, um, 'ya'll need to go out in the county.' ya'll this, ya'll that. Well, I'm not the one--it's not my fault. You know, I'm just the driver. You know. And I hate to see them upset like that but again... it--it--it's just... you need to go to the proper people to talk to them about it, because... I'm on your side. You know.

LB: And I think the whole GRTC is--I mean, I interviewed Eldridge Coles and I know he is so frustrated that the buses can't go out into the counties.

LZ: Oh yeah.... oh yeah. And he--he is a sweetheart, too. I love him to death. He's--he's--he's--

like I said, he trained me and--yeah. Yeah. He's always been for the drivers and everything. That's the one thing about him--he's always been for the drivers. And the passengers and stuff. I've had a couple of situations where... I've had passengers that... did not get success from calling customer service. Or they felt like they didn't get success. And I'd ask them to call Mr. Coles. I don't know if they ever did or not, but... we'll keep that our little secret.

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: But, um... no, it is frustrating because I would love to see the buses go out to, uh, Short Pump and... um... you know, go out there a little further or whatever. I would love to see that. But unfortunately, I mean, you can only do as much as a person'll allow--you know, you can't do it for free, I mean, it has to be... you know... I hate to see the bus fares and things going up in... you know, in Petersburg and all that. You know the way they have gone up. But... again, I mean, you know, it can't run on--you know--[yawning] it can't run on, um... um... fumes, or... whatever. You know, it has--it *has* to be funded some kinda way. And I understand that.

LB: How do you think the GRTC, as an organization, has changed since you started?

LZ: I don't know, other than management and things like that, I... you know, it's pretty much... you know, and different drivers coming in, and... you know, of course us together now, [caravan/care van?], um, all of us together. When I first started here, [care van] was somewhere else. And you know, we weren't all together and stuff. But we're all getting along in the same building. But, um... I don't--I don't really, you know, it--it's just... like, I guess, any regular place that you would work at, you know, it's--it's, um... nothing stays the same.

LB: No, it sure doesn't.

LZ: Nothing stays the same. You know, and, um... we have good management. You know. I think we have good management.

LB: How do you think perceptions of riding the bus have changed... over the time you've been here.

LZ: Perception meaning...

LB: Meaning how people look at the buses, and look at riding the buses--do you think that's changed?

LZ: Well, you... you know... I think a lot of people, it depends on who they ride with. You know, we've--we've got a lot of... drivers out here who think that, hey, just because I sit in that seat, you know, I'm... but that doesn't work that way, you know. I had some people to... you know, actually... tell me one time that... you know, 'you think you're all that because you sit in that seat.' No, I don't think I'm all that. I was a single parent and I was trying to take care of my daughter. That was my goal. So, don't stereotype me with other people. And, I mean, that has turned a lot of passengers off. The way they get treated and talked to. You know. And I can't blame them. And I get a lot of complaints, I mean, I--there again, I... I listen to you but I'm not

the one you need to tell. You know. But, that--that... you know.... for one thing, they can't get... where they wanna go, like... you know, on the weekends, I wanna get to Regency Square, you know. [Yawns] Excuse me. That's the way some of them feel and, you know... You explain to them that it's not GRT...TC's fault. We want to go... but we can't. You know, we can't get out there. You go a bruise or something--that comes from--?

LB: That's from my surgery.

LZ: Wow, they really--I--I just happened to see that.

LB: Yeah, no, I feel like the dentist must've just punched me in the jaw while I was [laughs]...

LZ: You never know. While you were asleep, you never know. So, I mean, other than, um, the way that some of these drivers do treat, uh, some of the passengers and stuff like that... um... you know, that's how a lot has changed with the dr--passengers. As far as some of them, you know, you've got some of them that they see different drivers and they won't even get on that bus. Unless that's the last bus. Then they'll get on it, but...

LB: Although, I've been amazed, I have to say, talking to all the drivers, how many drivers have really... great relationships with their passengers.

LZ: I--I don't know... you know, um... I know Deborah Hopkins has, um, a lotta great, um... great, um, relationships with hers and I have a lot. You get a--you come across some and stuff like that, they just can't tolerate and--I imagine there's a lot of people out there that don't like me, but... [yawns] you know, there again, um... I don't like to say it this way. I mean, I wanna be friends with everybody. But at the same time, you can't please everybody. You know. You can try until... the... you-know-what freezes over, but at the same time, it's--it's just... I mean, hey. You--you--you get them home safely. For--for, you know, they pay you money and stuff, you get them home safely and stuff. You tell them, have a good day or whatever the case might be. And then you--that's just the end of it. Yeah.

LB: So what--how do you like to spend your time when you're not working, Leslie?

LZ: I love to spend time with my grandkids. I'm crazy about them kids. And, um, I just basically spend time to myself when I don't have them. Um... watching TV and... um, well, I'm on a diet now, but I used to, you know, eating and stuff and.... just basically the two days I'm off, just taking time for myself, basically. When I don't have the kids. But those, you know, I try to get them as much as possible.

LB: They are really fun.

LZ: Oh, yeah. Yeah, they're really, you know... Um... he's in the third grade now and he's already been in trouble already. And yesterday was the first day, so...

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: We see where this is going [laughs]. But I hope he'll straighten up. I wanna take him to the Chesterfield County Faire, so I hope he'll straighten up.

LB: Oh, I bet he will.

LZ: He's got a few more days to work on it.

LB: [Laughs.] How do you think your job has changed the way you look at the city?

LZ: Well, you definitely see a whole lot of it. You definitely see a whole lot of it.... Um... I don't know, I guess with driving the bus and stuff, you--you come across a whole lotta, um... um... you know, construction and... um, different buildings, you know, buildings going up. Um... seems like just about every year, something different's going up, depending upon what line you're on. And pretty much in the city of Richmond, I--you know, to me, I think, um... other than seeing all those buildings and stuff closed on Broad Street, um... I think we're working on it. I think we're working on it, but... when you're driving a bus, you come across a whole bunch of different things and stuff going on. The construction, uh, the detouring, uh... you know, well, we're going down 11th Street this week. Next week? No, not--not this week. You know. Expect the unexpected is the way I was trained. So... you know...

LB: That sounds like good advice.

LZ: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. You run across a situation, you handle it, you call it in, and... you know. Just be patient with it. That's the key. Just be patient.

LB: So what's the hardest aspect of your job right now?

LZ: Dealing with the traffic out here. The traffic, I mean, you know, it's just... I don't say--well, some people, they see it as a dollar sign [yawns]--oh, excuse me. I--I get... I get kinda upset when, you know, somebody cuts me off. I'm sitting there, and I'm getting ready to go through the light. Well, you're gonna turn in front of me. And you're not thinking, gee... I mean, I've got thirty-some people on the bus. I mean, don't you care? That, you know, somebody could be hurt by me slamming on brakes. I mean, you try to do everything safely and everything, but you--it's very frustrating. And that's my--that's--that's my--my, um... worst... part of the job is the traffic out here.

LB: Everyone talks to me about the accidents they've had.

LZ: Mm hmm. Yeah. yeah, it's--it's some things and stuff, I just feel like, you know, wow... should this have been charged to--you know. You get--the police might not charge you. I really haven't --knock on wood--I really haven't been in a major accident and stuff to where... um... you know, my license was suspended or--I haven't been in anything major. The two accidents when I first came here--matter of fact, we had just got the brand new nine--the--not the 900s that's out there now, but the other 900s. Uh, somebody ran into the side of me, and... I'll never forget that bus number, 913. Ugh... and then they said, you know, they made fun of me and everything, they said, 'well... you're the first one and stuff that would tear one up, but that's

alright.' But somebody hit me, but... um, knock on wood, um... it... it--it has gotten worse... and when you're in the VCU area? I mean, psh--everybody's dashing in front of you. Bikes is my bad thing. Bikes is really, you know, they scare me. I knew when I--uh, little thirteen year old boy and stuff that was hit by a car. Um, years ago. And of course the bi--bike became entangled with his legs and everything and he had to have screws and stuff. And I think about that often. And I try to stay away from them but they make me so nervous.

LB: Well, cuz we don't have those bike lanes! They're just out in the middle of traffic.

LZ: Yeah! Because now I see where they--now in the middle of the street, they have to where the bike can ride n the middle of the street with you. But, you know, Grove Avenue is not that big of a place to be... you know. But they do, they make me very nervous and I try to get far, far away from them. But, um... traffic is really... has really gotten bad.

LB: And would you still say the best part of your job is your passengers?

LZ: Yes. I'll still say that. I'll always say that.

LB: What--what advice would you give someone who is about to start a career operating a bus in Richmond?

LZ: Be patient. Always know where you're going. You--you don't wanna lose the customer's confidence in you. Um, you've got some customers that are willing, even though they're willing to tell you, 'look, you're not going the right way,' and they're willing to help you, but in the back of their mind, they're either--have called in on you. You know... nobody likes to, um... be headed to work... and the bus driver doesn't know where they're going. And I mean, I've been through that before. I actually was trained on a--on the line one time. The Chesterfield line. And then I turned around--he showed me where I was going, but if I don't have the hands-on and stuff? You can show me all day. I still got them lost two hours later. But the guy was nice and stuff and he told me. But, you know... they want somebody that they can be confident with. And before you go out there, if you're not familiar, it's always best to... drive the run yourself first before you go out there -- if you have the time. And tell anybody, patience, patience. Because... that patience, uh, from my benefit have paid off. You know. Because, the same way that, you know, you get your grandmother, your mother, or whoever riding that bus? You want them to be on a safe--you want them to be safe. You know. You don't want somebody that's gonna be nasty and hateful to them because they don't have their fare out. Or something like that. And, um... you just have to be patient because you're gonna be old some day. You know. And I mean, who says that you want somebody to be treating you like that. You know. But, um... it's a great job to have. I mean, you know... if they just, um... you know, it's gonna take patience and stuff. You're not gonna--bam--get to top pay right then and there. You gotta be patient, and your attendance. you gotta do your attendance right, because my attendance is not great. You know. I'm--I'm--I'm at the borderline right now. I'm not facing... if I go two more, I'll be facing five days suspension. But I'm the type and stuff, I get up, I'm tired. I have sleep apnea. But not to the--not bad enough to fall asleep. But... there's been mornings and stuff, you know, I've called in, I haven't felt good, my head was bothering me. But you've gotta come to work. That's the main key. You come to work, do your job... you don't have any problems.

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

LZ: No.... No, I can't think of anything, I--I think I've really, really talked ya'll's head off today.

LB: Well thank you! I've enjoyed it. A lot.

LZ: I've had a good one, too. Um, did you fall asleep? Did I bore you any?

Benjamin: Not at all. You're great. Thanks so much.

LZ: Well, you're certainly welcome. Um...

LB: I'm excited about starting your text panel with you talking about how you wanted to be a bus driver ever since you were a little girl--

Benjamin: On a bicycle.

LZ: Yeah. Yeah.

LB: That's a great story.

LZ: Yep, my granddaddy got me a bike from Thalhimer's and I just... you know, we lived up there on Franklin Street, right down from, uh, where Village Shopping Center is?

LB: Mm hmm.

LZ: And I used to ride all through there and everything, just pretending and everything. It was so nice.

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: I had a good time.

LB: I interviewed, uh, Bruce Korusek, do you know him?

LZ: I *love* him!

LB: And talked about--he brought in this photo album of... photos that he's taken of buses and he said he took his first bus photo when he was five years old.... And he's been doing it ever since.

LZ: My grandson, he lov--he loves... he loves buses, too. He is crazy about buses. And, um... I try to show him every now and then about the new buses and everything. And, uh... he just says, 'Grammy, you... when can I ride with you, Grammy?' Bruce took this one.

LB: Ah! That's a great photo.

LZ: Oh, he's a sweetheart. Did he tell you about his animal?

LB: His animal, no.

LZ: He had a dog that had been with him for years and the dog passed away.

LB: Aww.

LZ: And it just--he had to put him down to sleep and everything and it was like... it, you know, it just took something out of him. It really did.

LB: That's really hard.

LZ: But he has two more now. He has two more. And, uh, he said they, uh... they give him--they give him a run for his money. So...

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: I'm glad cuz I didn't think he was ever gonna get any more animals, but he is a darling, I love him.

LB: He was really fun. We have interviewed so many really great people here.

Benjamin: Yeah. Everybody.

LB: It's true. Sixteen interviews.

LZ: Well, I hope I did right. I hope I did right with answering, I'm--

LB: You were great, you were fantastic.

LZ: Sometimes I ask a question and... I'm not sure if I'm answering it correctly or...

LB: Oh, there's no correct, there's no incorrect, it's just how you see the situation. That's all we're looking for...

LZ: Yeah.

LB: ...is different view points, you know?

LZ: Well... I--I just, you know... I, um... you know, they get a lot of things and stuff where we're not supposed to talk to the media and all this and... different things, but... they wouldn't have ya'll here if we weren't supposed to speak to ya'll.

LB: No, definitely not. The GRTC... has been great in helping us out. And they're really supporting the exhibition. Cuz... I think a lot of people here feel like... people don't understand what goes into the bus system, and they don't understand the drivers' experience.

LZ: People don't understand what we have to go through. YOU know, it's not the company, really, it's the... public. You know, that's the problem is a lot of times, the public and stuff--when you come across people, you know, you--you just... it's just--it--it can be frustrating at times. If you--if you allow for it to get the best of you... you know, like, um... you know, um... you--you look at your time and stuff like that, you're like, 'well, you know... uh, where were you, uh, you're late, aren't you?' And then I'm on time. I hate that. Because I'm giving you the best service and stuff. And here I am, I needed to go to the restroom and I didn't stop. Because I wanna make sure that you're getting on time. But see, I gotta stop doing that, but the thing of it is is you don't know... what I did to get here... as close to the time or on time... what I did without. And I mean, you know, I don't mind it at--you know, but when you... you know, don't--don't do that to me. I don't like it. You know. I mean... don't stereotype me with other people. What a--each individual does on their bus, that's their business. But when you come to me and stuff like that, you know, don't--don't talk to me like that. You know. Because, I mean, ultimately, this--this is--this is important to me. And I'm not gonna do anything that, um, I shouldn't be doing... you know, I--I did--I've done my dirt and everything. I'll say it, you know, I've done my dirt and everything. You know. You'll get here and stuff, and you've got a bus full of people and it's like... gee, I gotta be at 1st and Broad 11:04... and it's two minutes to 11. And then I'll look around and I'll see if I see anybody and I'll keep on going. But, um... I've kinda corrected on that and stuff because... I al--I don't wanna... I don't wanna get in trouble.

Benjamin: Seems like it should be that way, though. If there's nobody at the stop, you should be able to continue on.

LZ: I feel like that.

Benjamin: [?] obviously [?] just do that whether or not

LB: I don't understand that.

LZ: Yeah. I feel that--I like that. I feel like if I'm going down Broad Street and I'm trying to make connections to Hull Street or something, whatever down that way, I feel like I should be able to go ahead on. Now, if I'm going up to Regency Square or whatever, I feel like I need to slow down. You know. And make sure I pick up people, as far as, um... but... you know, if--if you're a regular driver on a line and... you know, there's really not anybody different, just the workers and stuff like that, then you try to keep it moving or whatever. You know. But I mean, if you've got express lines and they're like, you know, take them where they gotta go and stuff like that, and if you have to sit, sit. But, um... I mean, that's the way it should be with all of them.

Benjamin: Yeah.

LB: I just wish there was more bus service. Because I live up in Church Hill, and getting to University of Richmond, if I take the bus... and s--you know, have to switch, right? That's...

LZ: Yeah.... Well, you know they say Grove Avenue--

LB: It's a journey.

LZ: ...they say Grove Avenue used to go to Church Hill, I think.

LB: That would've been ideal.

LZ: I think, um... it would be nice if it could, you know, instead of just going downtown if it can just continue on and go back around and stuff like that. You know, turn around somewhere down there.

LB: Yeah.

LZ: But University of Richmond, sitting out there with the ducks and everything, that is the highlight of my day. I love it out there. I feed them and everything. One day I didn't have anything and then, you know, they were conning after me.

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: I've been honked at by a duck. Or by--whatever that thing is. And there's only one out there with the orange beak. And I mean, she's so hateful.

LB: Oh, that goose?

LZ: Yes.

LB: Yeah.

LZ: She's hateful.

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: I think she's pregnant, though.

LB: She could be.

LZ: I saw her and stuff. I think she's pregnant. But, um, yeah, she put her head down and stuff like that and she honked at me and... I'm like, well, you know... I cou--I feel your pain, honey, but... you know, don't get me, please. But I love out there at the water. I wish we had more time to sit out there.

LB: I know, it's pretty.

LZ: It is gorgeous.

LB: I was talking to a biology teacher out there and he takes all his students out to see how many turtles and snakes and everything there are.

LZ: Oof...

LB: Snakes, yeah, I'm not so crazy about.

LZ: Yeah. All I gotta do--

LB: He loves them.

LZ: ...is see one--my doughtier lives in Goochland, I told her, I said, if I *ever* see a snake, I'm not coming back.

LB: We get them up in Church Hill.

LZ: Do you really?

LB: Big black snakes.

Benjamin: Yeah, we're by the...

LB: Yeah.

LZ: Ya'll are married?

LB: No!

Benjamin: No.

LB: Benjamin's marrying someone else in a few weeks.

LZ: Congratulations!

Benjamin: Month and a half.

LZ: Yeah. There goes your twenty percent.

LB: [Laughs.]

Benjamin: I take good care of her.

LZ: Yeah. Congratulations to you.

Benjamin: But we're--we're neighbors [?] working together also.

LZ: Ok.

LB: Yeah. It's great. Partner in crime.

Benjamin: Yeah.

LZ: That's right. That's right. There's always nice to have one, you know, me and Marsha... we're--we're partners in crime.

LB: She's great.

LZ: Yeah. She's very sweet. I like Marsha. She's out sick right now, though.

LB: Oh, I heard she had bronchitis.

LZ: Yeah. Yeah, she--she doesn't--she didn't sound good at all a couple days ago. So she's been out... I'm hoping she'll be back today, but... you know... when you're sick like that, don't rush it. You know. We have FMLA, that's why it's there.

LB: Yeah.

LZ: Which she knows all that, I'm just saying, I hope she... I hope she doesn't come back. Cuz I know what it is to sit at home and worry about the bills. I know what it is, you know. And I don't know what she has to pay out. I just know... um... all the stuff I have to pay out. So.... Well... I guess I'll....

LB: Thank you so much.

LZ: ... go downstairs and... thank ya'll so very much--

Benjamin: No, we appreciate it.

LZ: ...for being patient with me.

LB: Oh, no patience required. This was easy.

LZ: Yeah, and like I said, I didn't know this was up here. This is pretty good. I can come here and yell and scream all day.

LB: That's right.

Benjamin: Yeah, when you need to let it out...

LB: [Laughs.]

LZ: Yeah... Won't have to worry and stuff, they might call the nut--nut--nut squad on me, but-- it's been nice to meet you, Laura.

LB: It's been great to meet you.

Benjamin: Nice to meet you, Leslie.

LZ: And congratulations to you, Benjamin.

Benjamin: Thank you so much. Appreciate it.

LZ: Thank you.

LB: Thank you. Take care.

LZ: Thanks, ya'll. Bye.

LB: Buh-bye.

LZ: You following me around, Karen? (?)