

GRTC

Interview: Sheronda Hill

Laura Browder: It covers everything... that has ever been invented in the universe --

Sheronda Hill: Oh, ok [laughs].

LB: ...or will ever be invented, [laughs] so....

[Long pause.]

Benjamin: I'm curious if I'm gonna pick up their voices...

LB: I know... how does that sound?

Benjamin: No, I can... totally hear them.... Should I [?]

LB: Yeah, you can be the bad cop.

[Laughter... pause.]

LB: Oh, Ashland, that's a beautiful place to live.

SH: Mmm, I love it there.

LB: Have you been out there long?

SH: I've been there three years. So I'm still learning.

LB: I go out there sometimes to buy plants at Coles--Coles... Colesville?

SH: Mm hmm. Yeah.

LB: Yeah.

SH: Yep, it's a nice place.

LB: But I haven't really explored much. What do you like there?

SH: I don't think there's a lot to like...

LB: [Laughs.]

SH: I think it's the area is really quiet. That's the main reason... why I decided to go there. Um... I see to frequent the mall and br--and little... shops that they have further down Route 1. But,

um... friend of mine lives... on the other side, like the Elmont (?) side and she said, 'you wanna get away from the hustle and bustle, you should try out here.' And considering what I do for a living, peace and *quiet* is... *greatly* appreciated, so...

LB: I bet it is.

SH: Yeah, so that's the main reason why I'm out there, for the peace and quiet.

LB: Well, that's definitely gonna be something that I'll ask you about in the interview, then.

SH: [Laughing] ok.... [Long pause.] Today is the...

LB: 16th.

SH: 16th. [Pause.]

LB: Thank you so much.

SH: You're welcome.

LB: And now I'm gonna start with a giant softball of a question, which is, tell me something about how you grew up, where you're from, what your childhood was like -- all of that.

SH: I am... from Richmond. Born and raised. Lived here all my life. Aside from me moving to Ashland, of course. Um... I grew up in what is considered the Church Hill area. Um... childhood was great, I don't have any complaints [laughs]. Um... grew up riding the bus. Ironically, I drive the bus [laughs]. I went to... elementary school, middle school, and then high school... in the city. One school of each. People think that's kinda strange, didn't transfer to any other schools, nope! One elementary, one middle, one high. Um, I came outta high school in 1998. Um... I was working for a retirement home for years. Decided to go from there to... manufacturing. Company I was working for... folded. And here I am! I work for GRTC now.

LB: So what led you to move from manufacturing to the GRTC?

SH: It was actually on a whim. I was looking for a job... um... a friend of mine's father was working here, and he said, 'you should come out!' And it was funny because... I had my CDL learner's for almost a year. It was just something to do--friend of mine was trying to get her driver's license. So I got tired of sitting there doing nothing, so I got the book, read it, took the test. And I had it but I had no plans of using it.

LB: What's a CDL learner's?

SH: It's a commercial driver's license--

LB: Ok.

SH: permit that you hold--

LB: Ok.

SH: ...before you get the original one. So, he said, 'you should come work here.' And I'm like, 'nah, I've never driven a bus before. My cars have always been small. I don't think that's for me.' Filled out the application, did not think that I would have gotten here as soon as I did, because everyone was saying it's a long process. I got laid off my job... December 18th. I started here... January 26th. So, yeah, throw me to the wolves, right [laughs]. But I came in, I got the training and... about a... month before my learner's expired, I got my drivers license--my commercial drivers license, so... that's how I got here.

LB: So tell me about your first impressions when you came here and your first days here.

SH: Completely... over...whelmed. I thought... what am I doing here? Everything seemed so technical. It seemed... just something out of the norm for me. Driving a bus was out of the norm for me, cuz like I said, I had never driven anything larger than my Nissan Sentra. [Laughing] So... I had to get accustomed to that and acquainted with that really quickly. And I had to do that... in conjunction with a whole bunch of other things. So, multitasking was a big needs, so... think that was the hardest part. That was the most overwhelming, having to... drive that large vehicle that I was scared to death of. And having to deal with the passengers, answer their questions, and still get everybody from point A to point B. That was the most overwhelming part for me.

LB: What was your training like?

SH: Training was... awesome. I didn't expect the training to be as... hands-on and one-on-one like it was. Because... I was in a group where everyone had previous driving experience. Except me. So... that kinda made me a little leery of what it would be like because, it's like, who's gonna take... and do the one-on-one with one person, you got all these other people who've driven large vehicles before. But it was awesome, I mean... everything was one-on-one down from the classroom to... the driving to the line instructors. It was sweet. So... I didn't have any problems with training. Training saved my life.

[Laughter.]

LB: Do you still remember your first day when you were out there by yourself.

SH: Oh, yeah! I remember it like it was yesterday.

LB: Tell me about it.

SH: Wheelchair ramp broke [laughs]... on my bus. On the other--the--we weren't at this building, we were over at Cary Street then and... the rule is... you pre[terp?] your bus, you check to make sure all the major components are working. Well... at the time, the building was pretty small, so... it wasn't... unlikely to pull the bus out of the garage to check the lift. And

that's what I did. I pulled the lift out... and it wouldn't come back in. So I had to get on the radio, which wasn't working [laughs] so I had to get off the bus, walk in, get somebody to come out, so... at the same time, I have somebody... fixing the wheelchair ramp and fixing the radio. And at the same time, I'm thinking, oh my God, I'm gonna be super late. [Laughing] devastation, hands sweating [laughs]. It was something else cuz... you don't wanna be late. Being late stresses you a lot. So... that was... I'll never forget that. [Laughing] First day out.

LB: It sounds very challenging.

SH: Yeah. It--it is. It is when you're starting out. But once you've done it for a while... I don't ever think I'll get quite used to actually driving the bus. I don't think I'll become a hundred percent with that. And I say that because... the vehicle is so large... and if you become overly confident? I think... bad things will happen. You know, as far as transporting people... the mechanics of the bus or... you get too comfortable with driving on the interstate or... it's kinda like when you get comfortable driving your car, you're not holding it with two steering--two hands anymore, the steering wheel, you're holding it with one. So I don't think I'll ever get that comfortable simply because I don't wanna... I guess, take for granted that... something... could happen. If I'm not safe.

LB: How many years have you been driving now?

SH: I have been here, March of next year will be five years.

LB: So you are the newest driver I've interviewed so far.

SH: Is that right?

LB: Mm hmm.

SH: Oh, wow, yeah, I'm st--well, I guess I am still a newbie [laughs].

LB: And by far the youngest.

SH: Yeah, I think, well... yeah, oh, wow, yeah, there isn't many of us here who are in their late 20, early 30s.

LB: Which is why it's fantastic--

SH: Mm hmm.

LB: ...that you're here.

SH: Yeah, it is. Well--here? I--thank you [laughs].

LB: Because... starting out, I talked to a lot of... older men who were driving in the 60s.

SH: And... you'd be surprised how many of them I remember from when I was taking the bus. And some of them remember me. So it's... it's something. You...you--I guess you form... tiny relationships with people that you see every day. And when I came to work here, it's like, 'wow, you guys are still here? like... I remember you taking me to middle school. I remember you taking me to high school. That's something.'

LB: So where did you go to middle school and high school? We both live up in Church Hill, so...

SH: Oh! I went to... middle school was in Northside. I l-- went to Henderson.

LB: Ok.

SH: High school was John F. Kennedy which they've changed to Armstrong on Cool Lane.

LB: Yep.

SH: They changed that two years after I left.

LB: But certainly, yeah... I've been in Henderson... recently -- it looks like there's a lot going on there.

SH: Yeah, it's--it's al--it--but you know what, Henderson was always a different type of middle school. I don't--I haven't been there in years, but... that one was... I guess what they would consider the state of the art, compared to the others. Because of the--the classroom setup. Back then we didn't have walls, we had--

LB: They still don't have walls.

SH: Oh--oh then nothing's changed... We had partitions, little push doors and you could see over the thing and... we have the different areas, alpha, gamma, delta, beta, it was--it was different. It was different. I talk about what I'm doing at school, as opposed to my friends who went to Mosby and... I think a couple of... them... went... to Albert Hill. But theirs was just the same classroom setting, and I say, 'oh, well. I'm in... alpha area' and they're like, 'well, what does that mean?' So it was different. So if they don't have walls, it's still the same.

LB: I know. It's amazing. It's *loud* in there!

SH: It is. It is loud. It was like that when I was there and I think... part of that is because they don't have doors.

LB: Yeah.

SH: They can't close it off like they sh... you know, rest of the classroom. So... but that's sweet, you guys live in Church Hill. Sweet.

LB: Yeah, where--where did you grow up in Church Hill?

SH: I actually lived in Creighton Court.

LB: Ok.

SH: Yeah. I lived in Creighton Court--oh. My goodness, I lived there about... probably until I was in the seventh grade. Then we moved to Fairmount Avenue, that's near Mosby Middle School.

LB: Oh, yeah.

SH: That's probably about a couple blocks up from there, around the corner. Then from there, we moved to the West End... and then... of course I became an adult, got my own apartment. And... ventured out, all the way to Ashland.

LB: Where it's peaceful--

SH: Oh my goodness.

LB: ...and quiet.

SH: You have no idea [laughing] how much I appreciate that.

LB: Well, tell me about it. Tell me about what it's like to go from the hustle and bustle of your job... to... your peaceful place out in Ashland.

SH: You ever have this experience where it seems like everything is going on, a lot of people are walking around, people are answering telephones... um, 'hey, how are you,' hear shoes clacking across the floor... and then you see the person and it stops. They're there and everything's around them but they can't hear it? That's what it feels like to me. When I go from... all of that to home, is like... I'm just sitting there and I don't hear [whispering] anything, it's like, yeah... [laughs].

LB: Peaceful.

SH: Break time. Yeah, that's break time. [Laughs.]

LB: So what is your typical day like? What--what routes do you have and what are kind of the best and worst parts of your days, typically?

SH: Um... my day... I... I have different routes I do. Um... the hardest routes... I would say are... the Broad Street 6. That's the one that travels up and down Broad Street. That is a very busy route, as well as the 62 Hull Street. Those two are very, very busy. I think the easiest part is dealing with... picking people up, dropping them off. That's easy. The hardest part is the *traffic*. I think that's the part that bothers me [laughing] the most. If... it weren't for traffic, I'd say it was a cakewalk. In my opinion, but... that's just me. Somebody else may think it's... picking people

up and dropping them off. Nah, that's the easy part for me.

LB: A lot of drivers I've talked to have said that it's... the passengers that are both the best and worst parts... of the day.

SH: They can be. Um... dealing with the harsh one--ones... were... difficult at first. Because I wasn't used to that. Um... like I said, I worked manufacturing. So it's just mostly the... the people you work with and that's it. But... and everybody has different personalities, but I think... you see more of it, driving the bus... because it's... people who have gotten up the beginning of the day, and you have folks who've gone through the day, whatever has happened, good or bad... you're the first one that's... get the response from them because your'e taking them home or you're taking them to the daycare or... wherever they're going to finish up their day. So, yeah, I-- I think it can be good and bad with the passengers. But for the most part, I think they're pretty decent. I don't... I don't have... a whole lotta conflicts with the people on board. A lot of the times, I had to learn that you don't take what they say and do personally. At first I had a hard time with that. Oh, it got on my nerves... so bad. But now I don't really pay it any mind, I just... drive the bus [laughs].

LB: How--how did you learn to... not take it in.

SH: I decide--well, taking it in is bad. It always makes you feel bad. It always made *me* feel bad.

LB: Yeah.

SH: So I decided that I wanted to do something to not make myself feel bad. I felt like... making me feel bad, it made--it'll--it'll make my driving bad. It'll make how I interact with the good passengers... bad. So I said, to make this good all the way around, I need to figure out a way... to not... internalize it. So... people would get on board, complain or... say things... and I just... tell myself, it's not about me, whatever went on with this person, went on before they got to me. [Laughing] I just happen to be the last stop. That's all. That's how I, you know, how I do it. Now... you can't let the pass--just because I don't take it personally? You can't allow people to... act a certain way on the bus, cuz there are rules. So sometimes I do have to step in and say, sir or mam, would you mind not--or could you tone it down a bit, or, of course, you know, but... and of course, that's not liked. And sometimes you have to take it to the next level by having... call someone to assist you, but... for the most part, a lotta people don't like to be told what to do. So number one, I don't internalize it. Number two, I don't... tell people what to do. I ask them if they can do such and such. Or I ask them if they could tone it down or quiet down just a bit. And that works for me for the most part. So... that's how I get through the day [laughs].

LB: Now, can you tell me about... some of your most challenging moments since you've been driving the bus? And some of your most memorable experiences?

SH: Challenging... let's... see.... Um... [pauses]... I... I think the biggest challenge for me was getting used to driving the bus. Because... what I do is routine. I don't really consider it to be challenging. Because I've been doing it for a little while. I think... maintaining... composure and self control, I could probably say is a bit challenging. Because... we're human and... you... we

take a lot. So... sometimes you wanna get that moment where you jstu wanna just say, '*Look!* [angry sound]!' But you can't, so I think that's probably ch--I can say that's challenging for me. To... remain calm... and to remain cordial. At the same time, take care of whatever bad... is going on. That's challenging.

LB: Cuz, see, I think that... driving the bus every day would be anything but routine, because... you never know what's gonna happen out on the road. And you never know who is gonna be on your bus.

SH: You're right. You're right. I guess... me saying it's routine is because dealing with... strange... situations and dealing with different people is routine for me. So... when someone gets on the bus that appears to everybody else to be out of the norm... it's not that way with me. Cuz I've seen part of that somewhere else. Or I've [laughs]--I've seen... actions or things said--or heard things said, partly from somewhere else, so it's not to ally shocking to me.

LB: Yeah.

SH: So that's what I kinda think I mean by being routine.

LB: That makes sense.

SH: Yeah.

LB: You've kinda seen it all by now [laughs].

SH: I've... pretty much, like--yeah, pretty much. So... that's pretty much how I look at it. That's why I guess I think it's routine.

LB: What are some of the most memorable experiences you've had?

SH: I think one of them was the transition from the old building to this building. Because I was over--you have some drivers who have... never seen the other building. But... my class was the last one to graduate... from that building. Before we moved here. I think that... I could consider definitely that would be memorable. Because, like I said, we were the last ones over there. And I thought that was kind of... neat [laughs].

LB: It is. So you've seen both sides of it.

SH: I've seen both sides. Yup.

LB: And can you tell me about good leadership and not so good leadership that you've experienced?

SH: Um... I've had... great--we have great supervisors. I think... I can't say that they're all bad. I don't think that any of them are bad. I just think that some of them have... bad days. [Laughs.] To the point where you'll have... supervisors who... are Johnny-on-the-spot. You need them,

bam, they're there. And then you have some who... they'll Johnny-on-the-spot Monday and Tuesday, but Wednesday, they're dragging... their feet.... But, for the most part, I think supervision is pretty decent. I think they're pretty good. I just chalk it up to a bad day, I guess.

LB: Yeah, we all have them, don't we?

SH: Yeah, that's how I look at it, you just... had a bad day [laughs].

LB: Now, Sheronda, considering that you were born and raised in Richmond and now you're seeing a whole... new side of it, how do you think driving the bus has changed the way you look at the city?

SH: Oh, it has definitely changed. Because... of course I live in Ashland now. So... over the last... and before that, I lived in Chesterfield for a little while. So... if I didn't have to come into the city, I really wouldn't. I... frequent the areas I live in. So, driving the bus lets me see how things are being built up. How... traffic has changed. How I see more people walking and the newest thing I see is folks walking their dogs on Broad Street! I'm gonna have to get used to that. Cuz... they have apartments downtown. Back then we didn't have them, so... to ride down the street on Broad Street, on the bus, and see a lady walking her dog, that's... to me--and that might sound funny but that is the [laughing] strangest thing I've seen this year [laughs]. That's strange to me.

LB: Well, it's... you make a great point. I mean, it--the city really... looks different with all the apartments downtown.

SH: It does. Cuz at first it was downtown, that's where you went to go shopping. Buy clothes... I mean, that was the main route from one city to the next, but... to see it... evolve to a residential area? Like, I can't get over people walking their dogs on Broad Street. That has gotta be the strangest thing for me.

LB: Especially cuz remember all that time when there was 6th Street Marketplace--

SH: Yep.

LB: .. and then that wasn't doing anything.

SH: Nope.

LB: And they eventually took it down.

SH: And then they took it down, and... they have--that 6th Street marketplace was only there for a short time. It *may* have been there ten years. I'm not even gonna... bet it was even there that long. But... it has really changed. They took a whole block down and made a court building. I mean... Grace Street is totally different with all the apartments, the buildings that they've... brought up form... [condemnation?], they're now apartment buildings. It's amazing. Nice restaurants, up and down the corridor. It has *totally* changed, like... you can come downtown to

eat... now as opposed to when I was growing up... you could when I was smaller, but when I got to my early teens, things started to go down. And now they're coming back up. So it's great to see--

LB: It is great to see.

SH: ... you know, it's awesome to be able to get on the bus and go downtown to a nice restaurant. It's awesome. But, walking the dog on Broad Street. That is something.

LB: So... considering you... grew up riding the bus and now you're driving the bus, how do you think bus ridership has changed over time?

SH: Hmm. That's a good question because... when I was taking the bus when I was growing up, I think--I honestly think more people were riding the bus. Then. Than they are now. I don't... think... because now you can see where most ridership is during certain times of the month. Or certain times of the week. Or certain times of the year.

LB: Really?

Sh: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

LB: Tell me more about that.

SH: First part of the month is usually the heaviest. That's when the loads... are really heavy. Um... early morning... and afternoon, five o'clock.

LB: I mean, I understand that part, but why--why do you think it would be different different times of the month or different times of the week.

SH: I think more because a lot of people who are retired... and on a fixed income, they get monthly checks. A lot of those people don't drive anymore, because of their age or... health problems or sight. So I--and--and we pick up quite a few passengers who... are in wheelchairs. So I think that has a lot to do with it being the first part of the month. Everybody's out getting things they need, taking care of bills and grocery shopping, that type of thing, which you typically do that once a month. So I think that's why a lot of that happens.

LB: Ok, that makes sense.

SH: That time of the month. Because more people are out trying to take care of business. But... holidays, of course. Like, now, the load, I'm sure is gonna pick up because people are focusing on sending their children back to school. So a lot of people are out trying to get things together for kids. Backpacks and... tennis shoes and clothes, trying to get the kids ready. I went to Williamsburg yesterday. It was *super* packed! Because people were trying to get peep--get their kids in school, so... I think that has to do with the time of the year, [so to speak?]

LB: Yeah, that makes sense.

SH: But, um... Friday it cuts down a bit. And I think because... a lotta people don't like to work on Fridays [laughs]. I know I don't, *that's why I'm off!* And... people drive into work on Fridays. Because they get off early. They wanna go get their kids early or they need... to get things done to start the weekend early. So I think that's why Friday's typically is a little... [lax?...] early on in the day.

LB: But it's kinda surprising, don't you think, that fewer people are riding the bus now, considering that gas is getting much more expensive and everything's getting more expensive -- why do you think that is?

SH: Me, personally, I don't like waiting for the bus [laughs]. I rather drive. I don't know if that has anything to do with the fact that I have a... taken the bus for so long. I took the bus probably all the way up until I was... 25 maybe? And... I had a car, it's just that I wasn't comfortable driving on the highway [laughs]. But once I did, I started to drive more so on the highway and I got comfortable so. I didn't wanna ride the [laughing] bus anymore. Plus, the bus doesn't go everywhere I wanna go. I think that may have something to do with it as well.

LB: Yeah, that's true.

SH: More people wanna venture out. Nice things are in Short Pump. You know, nice things are in Mechanicsville. You know, so, you wanna see different things, you wanna go different places, if the bus doesn't go there, you can't see it unless you drive.

LB: It's true.

SH: So...

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

SH: I don't think they see it as anything, to tell you the truth. Um... now, I've had instances where... well, I'll take that back. Some--I think some people will think it's kind of a bad thing. I think there's a stereotype with people who ride the bus. I think... people think that people who ride the bus are bad people. So they don't want *the bus* in... their area, or they don't want the bus where they live, because they think it's gonna bring about negative t--negative activities or bad things, but everybody who rides the bus isn't bad. There are a lotta good people who ride it, but... I think that's... I think it's a stereotype. Um... toward people who ride the bus against people who have never ridden the bus. And I think I see both sides of that cuz I've ridden it... I drive it now, and I also drive a car. So...

LB: So you really see all aspects of it.

SH: Yeah... I think that's what the problem is... as far as... what I think people see.

LB: Yeha.

SH: Because... my nephew, he... he's lived in the county, he didn't live in the city like we did. So riding the bus to him is *really* new. He's 18 now. But he likes to ride the bus. It doesn't... bother him at all. He doesn't think that way about it. He thinks it's a... he thinks it's a way for him to be independent. And go about doing what he wants to do when he gets ready. So... I look at that as being positive. But... the negative is the stereotype. That's just my opinion, though.

LB: I know when my daughter started riding the bus, for her, it was, 'wow, independence!'

SH: Mm hmm. That's how he--he likes it. I mean... so... he--and like I said, he went from never riding the bus, never knowing anything about it to... riding it. And he doesn't... doesn't see anything wrong with it [laughs].

LB: Good for him.

SH: Yeah, he likes it.

LB: So... how do you think your job has changed your view of the city that you were born and raised in?

SH: Mmm...

LB: Do you think you look at Richmond differently?

SH: I don't... think I look at it differently... because of me driving the bus. Now, I... do... look at it differently based on my comparison of... earlier years, as opposed to now, things have definitely changed. I think... a lot of it has to do with our economy. I think a lot of it has to do with... the laws that have changed over the years. And I think those are the key things that I would consider... being the definite... reasons for why our city has changed.

LB: So what kinds of things are you thinking of?

SH: Um... I notice more homeless people. More people sleeping on the benches. Um... more people going... through trash, I see a lotta panhandling. I see a lot of... um... things that I didn't see before--that aspect. And--like I said, I think that has a lot to do with our economy. Now, I've seen a lot of good things, as well. I've seen a lot of buildings that I thought were... *never* gonna revitalized. I've seen them come up. I've seen a lot of, um... money being invested in trying to improve... our streets. I notice we've taken those ugly streetlights down and put nice roundabouts up with flowers and, um, I notice--especially in Church Hill, they've... got nice little restaurants tucked in between the houses. I think those are the positive aspects of the change, but... on both ends, it has definitely changed... since I remember being a kid.

LB: And in terms of the laws, what are you thinking of?

SH: Well, I think now they're trying to change some things as far as... um... driving laws--and that's the state, that's not necessarily the city, but they're cracking down on speeders. You know, they're trying to conquer the crime in the area. Um, I was noticing that, um, they have a lot of

police patrols in the VCU are which is super cuz those kids have been catching... you know what with people robbing them--

LB: I know.

SH: Yeah, so I been seeing more... police presence in the area. Because of that. I think it's initiative. I've s--I'm seeing a lot of initiative when it comes to... trying to make things better. So... I think that's great.

LB: Cuz I'm thinking now of--you know, I first moved to Church Hill in the mid-1990s, and you remember what it was like then?

SH: Mm hmm. It's t--it's--it's really coming up.

LB: It's really different!

SH: Yeah, it's coming up. It's get--it's becoming very different. And I like how the neighborhoods are integrating now. That is great.

LB: That's different, too.

SH: That--yes, different, too. So I think... taking the initiative to move forward in a positive manner, I think that alone is something that has really changed for the better, cuz at first it just seemed like it just was stagnant water, like we weren't moving... we weren't doing anything... in... the forward... direction. But now... it's moving forward. And I'm--I talk as if I'm still in Richmond, but Richmond is my home, so [laughs].

LB: And you're in Richmond every day, too, right?

SH: Pretty much. Pretty much. So...

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

SH: I am a book buff. I read a lot of books. Anybody that you... if you ask anybody about me, they'll say, oh, yeah, the one who has the book all the time, or the read--they call me the reader sometimes. I love to read. And I spend a lotta time at the library in Ashland. So I think that's... one of my... biggest things.

LB: What do you like to read?

SH: Oh, I read anything, but my favorites are crime novels and I'm being acqu--I'm being introduced to Michael Connelly. At first I was the Lee Child, um... Mr. Grisham, he's pretty good. Um... oh, what's the lady--Tammy Hoag?

LB: Mm hmm.

SH: She's good. But I'm being introduced to Michael Connelly now.

LB: He's good.

SH: Oh, he's excellent. Oh, yeah, he's great. [Laughs.] I *like* Michael Connelly [laughs]. He's good.

LB: I have to say I liked Lee Child until I saw Tom Cruise in *Jack Reacher*. And he was just so...

SH: He--

LB: ...wrong.

SH: Thank you! Hello! Jack Reacher is the man. They should've got somebody else that was gonna beef up.... You know, he's a bad boy! You know, I don't think Tom Cruise beefed it up enough. He's a... [laughing] Jack Reacher's a bad boy.

LB: I know and then--and then all you saw was, like, the ego.

SH: That was it. You didn't see... the... cuz he's a smart guy, too. So you didn't see the intellect play... it's... strong role like I thought it should. And... he didn't beat up anybody. Like, talking about it, [whispering] he was--I was like, oh...

LB: [Laughs.]

SH: But... of course, you know, the saying goes... the movie doesn't compare to the book. so that was--I think, that was just one of those cases. Cuz the book was sweet. [Laughs] the book was sweet. [Laughs.] *It was!*

LB: It was.... So you--you love to read and everyone knows you as the reader.

SH: Oh yeah, I'll say... they p--they made this rule. Ok, cuz... I would... oh, God, I take a plastic cart. You know the little pastil cart you get from Office Max?

LB: Mm hmm.

SH: It's a crate. It's gotta handle on the back with the two wheels. I walk down to the library with that, cuz they sell books there. Fifty-cent paper back... dollar hard-back. And I take that crate with me cuz I know I'm gonna stack it full of books. But someone got me a Nook. For my birthday. So I had to read all of my books and... of course I donated them back to them, so [laughing] they'll probably sell them again, but... at work, you can't have... electronic devices in the driver's seat. Oh God. That crushed me. Who I am went down the drain when they did that.

LB: Oh no.

SH: Because now I have to download the books on the reader. But I can't really read it like I want. Cuz you can't sit in the driver seat. And... I don't really--I drive at night, so it's not a good idea to have an electronic device in your hand. On the bus. Because... I get off the bus... [laughing] and somebody else will get off with it. So I don't really feel comfortable with reading it.

LB: Well could you go back to your paperbacks?

SH: ... I could... but... it's like... [sighs]... if I get those paperbacks, I'll never pick that Nook up again. So that's why I don't wanna go back to that. I'm old-fashioned. So I finally got acquainted with it, and they said, 'Oh! By the way, no electronic devices behind the wheel.' And I'm like, 'I'm not driving and reading,' but that's the rule, so... It sucks. For me. [Laughs.]

LB: I'll bet.

SH: It does.

LB: So... what would you tell someone who was gonna start a career as a bus driver in Richmond? What advice would you give someone?

SH: I always tell people... that... the job... is more so... what you make it at the end of the day. If you wanna make it hard, it will be... hard. The easiest thing to do is to focus on making the job easy. That's the easiest thing... to do. Patience is very important. You have to have a lot of patience. I feel like... if you don't, don't even attempt to apply, cuz if you don't, you won't make it driving the bus, if you don't have patience. And number three, come to work every day. That's it. That's--it sounds simple but you... have no idea how hard that is for certain people. If you can... master those three things, you'll be fine.

LB: What's your favorite part of the job?

SH: [Laughs] I think my fav--I get comedians on my bus. People who say things that we can't say. I think that's [laughing] the funniest thing in the world.... I have people who get on and they may... give me a hard time, and you got lotta folks in the back... they tell 'em like it is, and you can't so, I think that's kinda funny. You hear the different conversations on the bus [laughs], the--the [laughs]. The things people say and... [laughs].... Oh my God, I have been up at the front of the bus and I have had people behind me, and see if the mirror is positioned a certain way, they can see me. I have had people get on the bus and say some outrageous things... do outrageous things, and I have to raise the mirror [laughing] so I can get the laugh out. [Laughing] Because it is so funny... It is so funny to hear people express themselves. *Raw*. I mean, they [?]-I think they forget sometimes that there's a bus driver up front, but... that to me is so... funny, to hear that. To hear people say certain things or... voice their opinions about certain things and you--you hear people in the back, they're having discussions about *whatever*. And everybody has a different opinion about it. And to hear it, is hilarious to me. Bus drivers could write a book.

LB: You should.

SH: [laughing] We could write a book from some of the stuff we hear and... see, not only not the bus, but off the bus when we're waiting. It could be shift change or whatever. We see so much. [Laughs.]

LB: What is the craziest thing you've seen on your bus.

SH: On... my bus? Let's see.... Um.... I--in the wintertime, I had... a woman [laughs]--I don't know what it was about, he... but she didn't like it. She would get on the bus... and open as many windows as she could. Ergo there are other people on [laughing] board the bus who are freezing. So... that would be a problem, because then the passengers are getting involved and they're--they're going back and forth arguing. And she would do this quite a bit. Um, I had another passenger who would board the bus... and... for some reason, she just didn't like bus drivers. [Laughing] She'd stomp all the way to the back of the bus and... make this tyrant (?) of herself. And... that's, you know, one instance. I think the last one is we have... um... [laughing] this guy dressed as woman, who walks up and down between 3rd and 4th Street. He's a--I don't know if I should say this but he has a fake butt. [Laughing] And fake boobs.... And fake hair, and... makeup and the whole nine yards and that's... something we--I see on a regular basis [laughing]. Oh my goodness. You guys should ride the bus one day.

LB: I know!

SH: I'm telling you, it's--it's... it's something else. Oh God. It's something.

LB: There's always something going on.

SH: It's always something going on. Always. If there's a quiet night, its raining out, snowing on the ground, something like that, but--aside from that, it's always something going on. Always.

LB: What would you like to tell Richmonders who don't ride the bus?

SH: To ride the bus! There's nothing wrong with it! Ride the bus, um... know the route you want--you're gonna take. If you... never... rode the bus before, don't judge it. Until you've done it. Take one trip. One time. And then you take it from there. But... I guess I'm saying it to--to hit back to what I was saying about stereotype. If you don't try it, you won't know.

LB: It's true.

SH: Mm hmm, *and it's really good!* It's--it's... not bad. It's just that... you have to know the route and you have to know the schedules. And all of that is provided... for a person who wants to take the bus. And that's it!

LB: So, Sheronda, is there anything that I have not asked you that you would like to talk about?

SH: ...Mmm... I did wanna mention how the type of buses... have changed. When I was a kid riding the bus, they had no air conditioning. And I--and I'm saying this cuz people take this for granted. But, when I was a kid? It had no air conditioning. Um... I remember... um... a couple

of older drivers saying that those buses I'm talking about, some of them didn't have power-steering. At the time. Um... the fare box. I think those are new. I th--I think I remember my mom saying that the driver would give you change at some point. And... there were no swipe cards. There were no... transfer cards. It was a piece of paper. And buses then had back windows. And they all weren't equipped with wheelchair ramps. As time progressed, we got air conditioning. We got more wheelchair ramps. We got better fare boxes. Power-steering.... Now we've evolved to... live GPS tracking. Clever devices onboard, that call out each stop. Bell rings by push of a button. Buses kneel to the ground.... Um... what else can I think of.... We've got new buses now with, um, CNG, compressed natural gas fuel. With... the gas tanks on top of the bus... instead of underneath. So, not only has... time changed, city has changed, but what we drive has changed. Dramatically. Over the course of I'll say twenty years. It has really... changed.

LB: Well, I'll tell you what, some of the drivers from the 60s were telling me how they didn't used to have any means of communication on the bus.

SH: Mm-mm.

LB: If something happened, they would have to... park the bus on the street, go knock on someone's door and ask to use the phone!

SH: And use the phone! Oh God. I... like I said, I only remember some things from my childhood. I wouldn't know that, of course, but... it has really, really changed. I mean, you can... you can press an emergency button and live feed comes up. Some of the buses I've been told, you hit a bump, and... from inside the radio room, if the bump is hard enough, you're on live feed. They can see you. It pops up. So... things have really progressed. They can--they call you. They can tell you where you are. It's really... it as really changed. It has really moved forward. So...

LB: Could you see yourself spending your whole career here?

SH: ... For the company? I would say yes. I don't think I'll be driving the bus... that long. But I do... I would like to see myself... go up the ranks a bit. I don't... I don't have a problem with... driving the bus. But I don't think it's something I could do for thirty years.

LB: Yeah.

SH: No [laughs].

LB: But you've got this incredible example here of Eldridge Coles starting off... as a driver and then doing every single job at the GRTC.

SH: And moving up the ranks.

LB: And moving up the ranks.

SH: And that's why I say, the job is all about what you put into it. He put *a lot* into it. He put a

lot into it to go from where I am to where he is now. So... like I said, it's all about what you put into it. I plan on putting a little more into it than driving the bus. But, to each his own. [Laughs.]

LB: It's true.

SH: To each his own.

LB: Well, thank you so much Sheronda, this has been a great interview, and I really appreciate your taking the time.

SH: Thank--thanks for having me [laughs].

Benjamin: You're such a good storyteller.

LB: You are.

SH: Oh, thank you! [Laughs.]

Benjamin: So visual [?].

SH: Thank you.

LB: I know and... I hope we'll see you at the opening. Michael, uh, Lease, the photographer will in touch with you probably over the next few days, I know he's winding up his beach week right now, so [laughs]...

SH: [Laughs] Ok.

LB: But I think he's coming back this weekend. And he'll be in touch and set up a time to take your portrait.

SH: Ok, that'll be fine.

LB: And then the show is gonna open on... September 11th.

SH: Ok, wait a minute, that's familiar. 11th.

LB: It's the--

SH: I'll be in the Cayman Islands.

LB: Ohh, my goodness, what are you gonna do there? Vacation?

SH: Oh, God, I'm gonna do everything that they have available [laughs].

[Door opens]

Background: Didn't know if you were still here or not.

LB: Oh, we're just wrapping up.

Background: Let me leave you alone. Sorry.

SH: Yeah, um... I leave... we're going on a cruise.

LB: Oh, fun.

SH: From the seventh... to the fourteenth.

LB: Well, when you get back, I think the show is gonna be up till the 15th or the 16th? So--

SH: Oh, that'll be sweet. Because I get back on the 14th. I'll be off the next day. I won't return--

LB: Perfect.

SH: So that'll be sweet!

LB: Yeah, come see it.

SH: So where is going to be?

LB: It's going to be at the old GRTC terminal.

SH: ... [And that?] I just was talking about how the new drivers have never seen it before. They should come too.

LB: I know. I think it's gonna be pretty amazing cuz it's gonna be this exhibition and benjamin will be creating soundscapes to go with the photographs and the text panels--

SH: Oh, God, my picture--is my pic--my picture gonna be [laughs]--

LB: Yes!

Benjamin: And your voice.

LB: You'll see. It's gonna be--

SH: And my voice?

LB: And your voice, and your words.

SH: Oh my God, did I talk right? Did I use proper English and ev--

Benjamin: [?] fantastic.

SH: Ok, I just--

LB: You did great.

SH: You tell me that after the fact, I--[laughs].

LB: No, you'll--you'll see, the portraits... look... amazing. Michael has shown us some of the ones that he's taken already and they look fantastic.

SH: Ok, cool. Ok, I feel better. [Laughs.]

LB: You'll love the way you look. You really will love the way you look.

SH: I feel better. [Laughs.]

LB: And I'm gonna take the transcript of your interview... and then just edit it down s--to like three- to five-hundred words and that's gonna appear right next to your portrait.

SH: Oh wow.... Oh, that's gonna be sweet--can I get one of those? Like, can I get a picture?

LB: Yeah, I'm sure. I'm sure.

SH: I just--I'm--I'm a... memory knick knack person. I just love to save things for...

LB: Absolutely, I mean--

Benjamin: Smaller print...

LB: ... Michael is taking--

SH: Yeah...

LB: ...He's shooting digital. So he could give you... a, you know, an image. A file that you can always have.

SH: That would be awesome if he could...

LB: Yeah.

SH: That would be sweet, cuz--of course I don't typically do [laughing] things like that. And when Miss Schmegalo said something about it, I said, 'Oh, sure, I'll do it.' And I thought, 'oh my God, what have I got myself into?' But this wasn't bad at all [laughs].

LB: Piece of cake.

SH: It was a piece of cake!

LB: But I--I think... I think you'll enjoy seeing the exhibition because it's just so wild to talk to you and to talk to some of the drivers who were here for forty years--

SH: Mm hmm.

LB: You know, back before air conditioning, power-steering, radios--

SH: Yep.

LB: ...you know, let alone anything... like GPS.

SH: Yeah, it's--it's--it has really changed. I mean... in the four and some--in the four and a half years I've been here, it has changed a lot. So I can only imagine... what bit of a culture shock it is to someone who's been here 40 years.

LB: I know.

SH: Cuz... I'm gonna... it has really changed.

LB: Well, it's crazy, looking at... like, a class picture, from the early 1960s. And it's all white men, there's like one African American man--

SH: Yup.

LB: ...and one white woman.

SH: It has.

LB: And that's it!

SH: And now... women... make up almost half of the bus drivers. And--I mean, cuz back then, women weren't driving a bus, that's like a man's job.

LB: Yeah!

SH: Women aren't driving a bus, but... half of, I think, of our staff as far as drivers are concerned, I think it's almost down the middle.

LB: That is so...

SH: That's a lot of women drivers here.

LB: ...interesting. Because you know what, Marsha was one of only three women I interviewed out of the first thirteen. And when I told her that... [laughs] that's when she got motivated and she contacted you and Kasandra and Leslie Zink... just so it would equalize a bit.

SH: Yeah, people say--and you know what's amazing, because, I mean, I've had people get on the bus and say, 'you don't look like a bus driver.' And I'm thinking, 'well, what does a bus driver look like?' [Laughing] and I ask them, 'What does a bus driver look like?' But people think that that is a man's job.... I think... I gu--but I guess it's kinda like when you see women driving tractor trailers. I even look up sometimes and think, 'that's a woman driving that truck.' But women do it. Women do it. But lotta people think it's a masculine job.

LB: So I'll still be a little bit out of whack. With only six women... and ten men. But it's a little bit more balanced.

SH: Little more balanced. Yeah, little more balance. But...

LB: It's all about who answers my messages.

SH: Yeah, pretty m--but you know what? I think people--when they hear 'interview,' I think people are--some--feel... somewhat, uh, intimidated by that.

LB: I know.

SH: Like I did [laughing] when she said, 'Oh, it's gonna be a interview.' And I said, 'I... don't...know... about that, but...'

LB: I know, but it's not an interrogation. [Laughing] You know?

SH: Right, but--but people, I think... I think a lot of people are intimidated by it.

LB: I know. But I... I hope they won't be because it's--it's pretty low-key, I mean, all--all we wanna do is just... capture these incredible stories. That no one has heard.

SH: Oh yeah.

LB: That's the thing.

SH: It's... I--we all say amongst each other, we could write some great books. I'd be the first one to read it. [Laughs.] *I would!*

LB: I know! Well, Kasandra is writing a book.

SH: Oh, well, that's sweet. Tell her I wanna read it. [Laughs.]

LB: I know!

SH: Is it time to go, I saw you hit your watch, it's time--time to go.

Benjamin: [?]... yeah, I need to get back to the studio.... I'm sorry.

SH: Ok, he say, cut it out--gotta go! We made you the bad person.

LB: I know--

Benjamin: Yeah.

SH: [Laughing.]

LB: All afternoon.

SH: Well it was nice to meet you.

LB: Thank you so much.

SH: No problem. Nice to meet you.

Benjamin: You were really a great storyteller.

SH: Oh, thank you.

Benjamin: So your'e reading is paying off, if you're full of [?]...

SH: Oh, I appreciate that, thank you [laughs]!

LB: And we'll see you at the exhibition--

SH: Yes, you will.

LB: It's gonna be traveling around, too. So...

SH: Oh, it is, well that's sweet.

LB: Yeah, we're--we're figuring out all the venues, but I know... one place for sure it's gonna be is... University of Richmond downtown--

SH: Right. Yeah.

LB: You know the campus on Broad Street. It'll be at the gallery--

