GET ONBOARD:

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RICHARD LEE
You never really know a person until you understand things from his or her point of view, until you climb into his or her skin and walk around in it.

—Nelle Harper Lee
The Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) is a community of its own with thousands of employees, numerous working sites throughout the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and thousands of regulations and policies that govern the body of workers. It is a company whose sole purpose is to serve the people of Toronto and the GTA with a means of public transportation. With its rich history in Canada and its long relationship with the people of Toronto, it is truly something to behold. The TTC has been operating in Toronto for over 90 years and it has definitely left a mark in the hearts and minds of millions. What an amazing thought that, in just a few more years, Toronto and the TTC will have been cohabiting for an entire century.

If you fast forward from the beginning of the TTC until now, you can see the vast changes that have occurred within the company. These include changes and additions to TTC landscapes, expansion of transportation routes and the growth of subway and light rail infrastructure. There has been change within the city of Toronto itself with the widespread growth of the population and
the increased demand that this has placed on the TTC. Facing such demands, the TTC has had to respond in the way that it operates its business and services to customers. One of the key responses has been to aggressively push towards a more accountable and reliant transit system.

The vision is simple and can be wrapped up in one sentence: the TTC should be a transit system that the people of Toronto can be proud of. But why stop there? Why can’t the TTC, among the three largest transit systems in North America, be one that the whole world can admire? Why can’t it be a transit system that other transit systems around the world come to emulate? A transit system where others come to seek advice on how to improve their own transit system? On how to build trust and faith amongst the customers? On how to boost morale among its personnel and allow that positive energy to flow out to the public?

The importance of a better customer experience has been the TTC’s focal point in recent years. There have been committees created specifically to focus on customer relations. Roles were introduced to work on enhancing the face to face interactions that the TTC personnel have with customers. For it is the customers that ultimately will enhance or damage the reputation of the TTC. There are those who are sceptical about the TTC and view it as a fallen empire. I am sure that we have all heard many complaints, and even voiced a few ourselves. Complaints about service levels, complaints about routing and scheduling adherence, complaints about the price of the fares and complaints about the congestion that TTC vehicles cause. You probably can add to this list yourself.

There are thousands of opinions on how to improve the TTC and its service and there have been many steps implemented towards those goals. However, there is one major issue that has not been discussed that can further change the experience of passengers and the TTC. We can build the best subway systems, purchase new buses and streetcars and place them on the road with the anticipation of attracting more positive vibes. We can offer ample service levels, whether in buses, streetcars, or subways. We can offer the newest technology to dazzle the customers. Having such improvements and upgrades would definitely send off positive signals about the transit system.

Nevertheless, there is something that has been overlooked for many years now and that is as vital or even more vital than all the upgrades and technology to improve customer service. There is an underlying issue that hasn’t been widely publicized. This underlying issue has been right in front of our eyes and yet rarely talked about. We need to understand that the relationship between the TTC and the people of Toronto goes well beyond just a transit company reaching out and serving the customers. It goes well beyond a company bending its ear to the people but it has everything to do with people serving people.

It is not the equipment or the vehicles, the newest technology or latest upgrades that serve the customers. It is the TTC operators who are at the frontline. It is the TTC operators that see the customers 365 days a year, 7 days a week, 24 hours per day. TTC operators and the public have a deep rooted connection, a relationship so intertwined that there is no way around it. But we rarely hear about the life of a TTC operator and how dealing with the public can have a dramatic impact on that life. There is a common understanding that the TTC is definitely a vital service to the city of Toronto but also the same understanding that city of Toronto is the reason why TTC exists. In short, just as much as the TTC needs Toronto, Toronto needs the TTC.

But what has happened over the years? The emphasis and selling point has been to improve customer service and their experience
with the TTC. Rightly so but solely placing the emphasis on the customer’s experience is just one side of the coin. Improving the customer’s experience is key but what about improving the TTC operator’s experience with the public? If this question is left unanswered, it could be disastrous both for Toronto and the transit system. It is like seeing an apple that is red and shiny on the outside, not one blemish or bruise on it. But when you take a bite, you realize the inside is dark and rotten.

So what does that rotten core represent when we speak about Toronto and the TTC? What issue has been missed for so many years that the apple is starting to decay? The rotten core represents the relationship between passengers and TTC frontline workers. Have you ever thought that, if the relationship between the frontline workers and the public were more of a teamwork, more of an understanding, how the entire transit system would dramatically improve? If you’re a transit passenger, have you ever taken into account the difficulties that the operators go through on a daily basis? If you’re a transit worker, have you ever taken into account what the public goes through on a daily basis?

The present-day relationship between passengers and TTC operators is, for the most part, one of distrust and discontent. Imagine if the relationship between the public and TTC operators was based more on cooperation and teamwork, rather than unpleasantness and criticism. For the public to have a better experience, and for the TTC to be the leading force in the transit system business, it comes down to the relationship between these parties. It is the customers and the frontline workers who walk hand in hand through the ups and downs, through the bad weather and the good weather, through the valleys and the heights. All those times during subway closures, route diversions, delays in service, accidents, street closures due to parades and festivals, it was the passengers and the TTC operators who shared those experiences. Yet the mending and building better relationships between the two hasn’t been a priority.

The reality is that the public at large does not know what a TTC operator actually goes through, and what they actually have to deal with and put up with on a daily basis. There are no articles out that give an accurate or thorough picture of the issues facing operators. There are no platforms or committees that allow TTC operators to share their issues with the public in order for the public to get an understanding of where they are coming from. There is nothing that explains to the public the stresses and pressures of being an operator. I have talked with many operators and the majority of them have said: “If the public only knew … if the public only knew what we (operators) go through …” The spark to create this book started with that statement.

There are situations in the lives of operators that have not made the news headlines, newspapers, or in any other media. Have the assaults on TTC operators been covered? Has the press reported incidents of rude passengers spitting on TTC operators? What about the violence and physical assaults that TTC operators have experienced and continue to experience? We’re not talking about isolated incidents. Former TTC chairman, Adam Giambrone, has stated:

*Every day, a TTC driver is assaulted on the job. They are verbally abused. They are threatened. They are punched. They are spat on. Enough is enough. The message is clear: if you commit a crime on one of our vehicles we will catch you, arrest you, charge you and prosecute you. Criminal acts have no place on public transit. Our employees and customers deserve to work and travel in peace. We are committed to ensuring that happens.*
With your own experience and hearing about other stories through social media, it is natural to blame the ones you see the most, the frontline workers. And it is these frontline workers, the TTC operators who get the abuse, negativity and verbal diatribes. Despite the fact they often have little control over the situation, the frontline workers get an earful from angry customers. If you look at the situation in terms of a marriage, for more than 90 years the TTC and Toronto have been wed. Now it appears that the marriage has gone sour. For the longest time the public and the frontline workers of the TTC have had an unhappy, unappreciated, rocky relationship at best. It is time to seek some marriage counselling.

What will you gain from reading this book? It is all about seeing, walking and understanding that TTC operators are human beings. You will read first hand stories and statements from operators who have actually lived through such experiences. You will read about how dealing with the public can literally affect a person’s life, attitude and even their view of themselves. You will appreciate and understand the deteriorating connection between the people of Toronto and TTC operators and how it really does influence what type of experience each party will have of the other. I have also included my own story, my journey from the beginning of my TTC career to the present. You will have the opportunity to see the pitfalls, the temptations, the mind-battles, and the triumphs I have gone through to get here. At the same time, I am not alone in this. My story is similar to that of many other operators.

This book is dedicated to the Toronto Transit Commission frontline workers who have been giving their all in order to serve the public. This book is dedicated to those who are presently serving the public but also those who are retired. All you did for the TTC and for Toronto should not be forgotten. This book is dedicated to the frontline operators all over the world. You truly make a difference. This book is dedicated to the thousands of operators who have been physically assaulted or verbally abused for simply doing their jobs. The world needs to know what you truly go through by walking in the shoes of an operator.

I am passionate about getting the awareness out that transit operators are human beings and that as such they deserve to be treated with respect. I truly believe that, as we begin to change the core of the apple, the apple itself will begin to look and taste better.
Do you think that the public really know what TTC operators go through?

It is pretty sad but the reality is that most passengers have no clue what we go through for many think it is just a case of driving from point a to point b. When some see us they think: “What an easy job.” That we just sit and drive. But dealing with the public is no walk in the park. I saw a driver break down in tears after being yelled at by a passenger. There is one driver that I know personally who is dealing with stress related issues because of the demands of the public. If the public only knew what we face I totally believe they would be more understanding about what happens with the operators.

I have heard a lot of people say that transit operators are just lazy people who sit on their ass all day and do nothing. But little do they see the impact we truly have on people’s lives on a daily basis and the sacrifices we endure in our own lives.

I don’t think that the public at large knows about all the incidents, the abuse, the mental stresses of this job and what the operators face on a continual basis. I would say it is the verbal abuse that would be the number one choice of weapon used by angry customers. But just imagine if I go to the bank day after day and verbally harass the teller. How would the teller feel as a human being? It is
the same with TTC operators. The public doesn’t understand that we are human beings too.

Operator 4: There has been times when after listening to angry customers for whatever reasons, that there have been other customers that come up to me and say how he or she doesn’t know how I can do this job. There have been many customers who understand that not everything that happens with the TTC is our fault. So I have to say that there are some who really understand what we go through but the majority of customers don’t or just don’t care.

Author: How do you feel when you know that the public can literally say anything to you whether negative or positive without being held accountable?

Operator 5: It is really unfortunate knowing that being employed by TTC is like having a target on your back for the public to throw verbal axes at. I remember after work one evening being at the local grocery store still being in my TTC uniform. In the process of paying for my groceries, a gentleman behind me began to tell me everything he thought was wrong with TTC and kept going for the whole time I was gathering my food.

Operator 6: I love my job and I have nothing but respect for this company, but what I believe is missing is the accountability of the public for the things that they do and say to operators. TTC is doing an amazing job now of charging unruly passengers, and it is good to know that the organization is starting to see what operators have to deal with. Sometimes it feels as if we (operators) are human punching bags for the public to use at will. It is sometimes hard not to say what is on my mind when a customer starts to scream at me.

Operator 7: I know it is hard not to take it personally, but usually all it takes is one person’s rude comment to throw your whole day into the gutter. I know it shouldn’t be like that but that is the reality. I remember I was giving directions to an elderly lady who was confused with the diversions the buses were taking due to a closure. It took longer than I assumed and I heard a voice coming from back of the bus saying: “Just drive, you bus driver.”

Operator 8: I have had many experiences from customers who have said many wonderful things to me but also many customers have said nasty things. On this job you really got to take the negative words by passengers with a grain of salt. I give much respect for the TTC operators around the city because, with the verbal attacks that many get, they still act in a professional way.

Author: How do you feel about working for the public these days and do you think times have changed regarding how the passengers treat TTC operators?

Operator 9: What is sad about the passengers these days (and I have been driving for a long time) is that common courtesy is no longer the norm now but it is looked upon as abnormal. Before it was common to receive a thank you from passengers. Nowadays the ratio is so low that sometimes
Operator 10: I have 20 plus years on the job and I would say that the manners and attitude of people have definitely changed. I am not saying that all passengers have this negative vendetta towards the TTC, but certainly what I am saying is that respect from passengers towards operators is on a slippery slope.

Operator 11: We are definitely living in a day and age where the mentality is all about me, myself and I. But there are customers who still have manners and common courtesy. It is rare to see, but they do exist.

Author: Why do you think it is important for the public to get a more positive view of TTC operators?

Operator 12: The public needs to know that we are human beings as well. We are mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers, not robots. The view of TTC operators has gone down simply because of the increase in videos and pictures taken by people that present only a part of the story to the media and public. Images and videos are portraying operators as the aggressor or the antagonist without really having the full truth. It is unfortunate that there are people out there who thrive from getting their 30 seconds of fame.

Operator 13: It is very important that the public changes their outlook on operators especially because it is not like they can avoid operators or try to avoid them. We see them every day, sometimes twice a day and yet there is such a wall between us and the public. There needs to be something done to change the attitude that the public has with regards to the TTC but more importantly the operators.

Operator 14: There are thousands of TTC operators and it is very disturbing that the majority of the attention is on the ones who are unprofessional. We (operators) know the ones that just don’t care about their jobs, but if you ask them to quit, they won’t. But at the same time there are so many operators who excel at customer service and they hardly ever get noticed. That is a shame.

Operator 15: It is so important to get the awareness out there that being a TTC operator is much more than just driving for we deal we so many things on any given shift. We are serving the public daily and it would be nice to know that the public views us as humans not just an object.

Operator 16: It is hard not to go on social media and type the letters TTC without coming across some form of negative statements. But what would be such a relief is for the passengers to see what really happens in the life of a TTC operator. There needs to be something that gives out such awareness.
Transformation is a process, and as life happens there are tons of ups and downs. It’s a journey of discovery, there are moments on mountaintops and moments in deep valleys of despair.

—Rick Warren
Growing up in Toronto as the youngest of three brothers, and a home devastated by the divorce of my parents, it was hard for me to find my niche. When I was six, it was obvious my parents were having marital problems and within a few years they divorced. My brothers, Robert the oldest and Ryan the middle child, spent a lot of their time together as they had similar interests. My mother was so distraught with the divorce that she spent the majority of her time in her room watching television. Many nights, I wanted to share with her things that were in my heart, but I held back when I heard her crying in her room.

I handled the breaking of the family and the feeling of being unwanted by isolating myself in the basement of the house. I took all of my belongings from the bedroom that I had shared upstairs with Ryan, and took refuge in the “cave” of the house. Many nights I spent sleeping on the floor with four to five blankets covering me to try and keep warm, especially during the winter months. Coming from school I would go straight to the basement and spend
the majority of my time reading books, mainly on character building and leadership.

Despite the fact that my home life was not ideal, school was my biggest fear. I developed a severe stutter as a child, and grew up having others stare and laugh at me. Speaking in front of others whether in groups or individually was more terrifying than the idea of dying. One particular incident put a dark cloud over my life and cast a negative experience in me as a young child. I was in the 4th grade and it was the first day of school. Though I was very excited to see my friends from the previous year, I was also extremely nervous about the beginning of the class. For it was at the beginning of the class that the teacher would always request us to stand up and say our name and then say something about ourselves. Into the classroom I went, sitting in the back and trying to hide so as not to be spotted by the teacher. I could hear my heart pounding inside my chest so loud that it drowned out all the noise around me. The classroom started to fill up with students and, as the commotion simmered down, the teacher got up and said:

“Let’s start off with the introduction and I want everyone to tell the class a little bit about themselves as well.”

Starting with the front row, one by one each student introduced themselves and told the class what they did in the summer and how they were excited about the coming year. The time was coming for me to give my name and the closer it got to me the louder my heart pounded. My palms were sweaty, my throat was dry and the realization of my having a hard time even saying my name aloud was vivid. There was no way out of it. There was no excuse. I turned my head to listen to the boy beside me give his name and say something about himself. The time came when the classroom was staring at me and, with every eye was on me, the teacher said:

“It is your turn, son. Tell us your name, how your summer went and one thing about yourself.”

I slowly gazed across the classroom and saw the eagerness of the students listening to me. I saw the teacher and I could tell that she was wondering why I was taking longer than all the other students. I started to rub my hands together trying to wipe away the sweat that accumulated on them. I took a deep breath and opened my mouth ...

“My name is Rrrrrrr ...”

I stopped and paused. Putting my head slightly lower to my desk I opened my mouth again.

“My name is R ... Rrrrrrrrr ... Rrrrr ...”

The classroom erupted with smirks and laughter. I tried once again and the same blockage hindered me from speaking my name. The noise of the classroom got a little louder and I could see on the teacher’s face the frustration she had with me and the noise created. I mustered up the courage to give it another try but before I could even open my mouth this time, the teacher interrupted me and told the class to be quiet.

“Richard, why are you causing trouble? Go stand outside the classroom please.”

I rose from my seat and feeling ashamed and humiliated, packed up my stuff and stood outside the classroom. Such experiences happened often throughout my childhood and such experiences created in me a sense of despair.

To counter the rejection that I had felt at home and at school, I had a secret place where I went during the night time that was very special to me. Behind my house was a large forest with a path that led down to an open field and a small creek. My alarm would wake me up around 1:00 am and I would quietly leave my home to head towards this open field. Sneaking outside, my heart would
be filled with joy knowing that I would soon be at my secret place and be all alone. When you stood at the entrance of the path at the top of the hill, there would literally be nothing but darkness. The tall trees would cover the night sky and prevent the stars from giving any sort of light to the path. You could see nothing in front of you or beside you and all you heard were noises from the bushes or the rustling of the trees all around you.

I must confess that some nights I was filled with fear, heading down that hill as a young boy, but the desire to spend time sitting at the creek in the open air looking at the stars was worth the fear. Finally reaching the bottom of the hill, stepping away from the darkness of the forest and into my sacred place, it would appear as if the curtains from a window had been pulled open because the light would suddenly come shining through from the stars and moon. There was a lovely small creek between two pieces of land and an old bridge that gave a connecting pathway for the two. Along the side of the creek were large rocks and boulders giving me a perfect place to sit and admire the beauty of the night. I would sit there for hours and think about life and allow my imagination to soar as high as the stars. It was as if being there gave me a sense of peace, a sense of innocence and a sense of calmness in my soul. I hated leaving that place of tranquillity to face the realities of the world. However, it wasn’t all negative.

Growing up in a neighbourhood filled with kids was the greatest time in my life. We used to play any type of sport imaginable. My house was the rallying point and from there we would branch off to our destination to start whatever activity we came up with. One summer day during school break, struggling for something to do, we decided to watch a wrestling match. As young boys the adrenaline started to rise, so much so that we began our own wrestling matches — on my mother’s bed! We each picked our World Wrestling Federation characters, created the costumes for each other and had the entrance song that resembled the character we had chosen to imitate. We even recorded it. The stage was set, the wrestlers ready and the match was on. It was quite the sight. Just imagine 10 young boys wrestling and fighting on the bed without a care in the world. We ended up breaking the majority of the things that were in my mother’s bedroom. The look on our faces was as if everyone had seen a ghost.

All the other kids left, safe in the knowledge that the impending doom from my mother would not rest on them, but on me and my two brothers. Ryan and I looked to Robert to fix everything. My oldest brother was known to be the handyman in the family growing up, so Ryan and I were given the assignment of cleaning and making sure that the room was tidy. Robert managed to fix everything and the room looked as if no one had used it. When my mother’s car pulled up to the driveway, my brothers and I yelled, “MIC, MIC” (mom is coming). Hearing the keys jingling at the door, all three of us ran to our own rooms pretending to be sons of perfection.

After my mother made known that she was at home, she skirted up to her room to watch television. I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn’t hear my mother say anything for more than 20 minutes. But the silence broke when all three of our names were called and we were instructed to come to her room at once. I was the last to enter and noticed that the room really looked impeccable. I thought that we had got away with the wrestling match because I couldn’t see anything in that room that was out of the ordinary. Until she pressed play on the VCR. The entire wrestling match that we had recorded was playing on the television screen in front of us! We forgot to remove the video after all the kids had watched it. Busted!

I loved the neighbourhood kids. Though we got into all kinds of trouble, it brought a sense of family into my life. I noticed
quickly that the only way to be truly accepted and welcomed in that neighbourhood was to play basketball and to play it well. Being a small boy desperately in need of acceptance, I gave myself over to the idea of becoming the best basketball player in the neighbourhood. I dedicated countless hours a day to improving my basketball skills and abilities. I transformed my room in the basement into a basketball obstacle course by using all sorts of items and furniture in order to create greater challenges for me with the ball.

By the time I was 10 years old, my skills and abilities in the game had grown so much that the dream of playing professionally was born in my heart. It was my only desire, a burning passion to someday step onto the hardwood court and live out my dream. I would practice my dribbling and shooting skills every day, even missing classes at school. Training at night was the best teacher to me because just the thought that everyone else was sleeping fuelled me to push and train harder. Soon around the neighbourhood I was considered to be a top notch player and the dream about playing professionally grew larger each passing day. It was either playing professionally or nothing at all for I had no other goal or prize to pursue in my life.

Throughout my early teen years I travelled extensively in the United States to various basketball exposure and training camps in order to get some sort of attention from coaches at reputable colleges. I taped every game that I played during my tenure in high school and sent the tapes all over the country, trying to get some sort of break and a chance to play. I used every cent of the little income I had earned from my job at McDonald’s to fund my travelling expenses and the sending out of video tapes to universities. The cost didn’t matter to me. I wanted to get a scholarship more than anything in life. One by one letters from the colleges and universities I’d approached came — letters of rejection. When my mother would call and say that I had mail from a certain university regarding my basketball tape, I was filled with excitement. But that joy would quickly turn into disappointment when I opened it and read that my skills weren’t needed at that time at that particular university.

Over the course of several months and after realizing that I had exhausted all the colleges and universities, I decided to email and send tapes to as many basketball camps in the United States as possible. Again one by one recruiters from these camps already had the players that fit my style of basketball. Until one day I received an email from a coach in Jacksonville, Florida. His name was Grayson Marshall. He wrote me a beautiful email and said that he would love to give me the chance to showcase my talent at his upcoming basketball exposure camp. He mentioned how he would also invite me to stay in his home with his family and give me free board during the time I was in Florida. Of course when I showed my mother, she investigated it thoroughly. After a few weeks she was quite satisfied to let me go.

Getting off the plane that sunny morning was scary. I was alone and had no clue who this man was or what he looked like. But I had such a calmness in my heart that everything would work out perfectly. After picking up my bags from the luggage conveyor and walking towards the exit, I couldn’t really see anyone looking around as if to search for someone. But when I was walking out into the crowd a little further, I saw a big smile from this bald well-built black man. I walked up to him and there was an instant connection between us, like a father and son relationship.

We drove to his home and I was introduced to his lovely family and they took me in as their own. Daily I was working out with Coach Marshall in his gym as early as 4:00 am, working on different drills and practicing my ball skills. Off the court, I was exposed to much more than basketball. I witnessed the love and tenderness
Almost a year had passed since I’d returned home when the realization of foregoing my childhood dream crushed my spirit. Thoughts of regret rushed through my heart, thoughts of being a failure in life consumed and overwhelmed me. There was no returning to the junior college, no more interest from colleges or universities and it caused me to go into a deep depression. From time to time my family and friends would remark that I could have played in the NBA if I had stayed. It was like having a demon inside my mind. At the age of 20 I was unmistakably at my ultimate low. I felt as if I had nothing to give to the world, as if I had no other skills or abilities. I felt as if I was not a man. I didn’t finish college or university; I hardly had a really connection with my family and very few friends in Toronto.

Scrambling around in my mind and doing some soul searching, I had to come up with another plan for my life. Some other goal to strive for, some other purpose in my life to pursue. But I came up with nothing. Some nights the tears from my eyes soaked my pillow and the flies on the walls heard my wallows. I saw some of my friends already at university. Some had full time jobs. Some had cars and girlfriends. It hurt me to compare my life to theirs. In my own eyes I was an utter failure, a man who quit when the going got tough.

I made a vow never to quit at anything ever again. There wasn’t a lot I could do regarding getting a high paying job, since I didn’t have schooling or any particular job experience to fall back on. So I went back to the same McDonald’s where I had worked previously. The owner welcomed me back with open arms and I was glad to be a part of the crew would again. I was a cook for a while, and during my time at the grill my mind would again be the battlefield of wars fought with myself on how I was on my way to becoming a basketball star, and now I was working at a fast food restaurant flipping burgers.

that the Marshall family shared with each other. It made me again think about the lack of togetherness in my own family life and my lack of close friends.

Travelling a lot as a young teen made it hard for me to establish strong relationships, and I was starting to feel that void in my heart. Despite these feelings of loneliness, I pressed on towards my goal of getting a basketball scholarship at this exposure camp. I was 17 years old at the time and, as a result of the camp, interest came from the recruiter from the University of Tennessee at Martin. It was arranged that I would attend junior college for a year and then would be recruited to this particular university. My dreams and goals were starting to turn into reality and off I went to the junior college.

It was a very lonely time, and I arrived at a place in my life where all I wanted to do was to have quality relationships, just someone to love me. All of my youth, I had been travelling and trying to chase after my dream but there was a yearning in my heart for friends and connections. I was getting homesick and, despite my growing success within the college, I woke up one morning and decided I didn't want to play basketball anymore. I walked into the head coach’s office and told him that I wanted to go home. He pleaded with me to continue, to stick it out. But his words fell on deaf ears.

I wasn't really thinking about my dream at the time. I wasn’t really thinking about basketball and my future. All that was going through my mind was the emptiness in my heart. The need to be wanted, the need to be loved was too overwhelming for me, and, no matter what the coach said, my heart was not with basketball anymore. I packed up my stuff and headed back home to Toronto, to my family. I didn’t realize at the time what a devastating mistake it was, one that would haunt me for many years to come.
I decided to change my outlook about my job and about my life. I needed a positive direction. I challenged myself every day to try to stay positive. If I was going to be a cook for McDonald’s, I made up my mind to be the best cook that McDonald’s had ever had. I started to see every shift as an opportunity to grow my character, to improve on my interpersonal skills and to focus on being a better man. Working with such a mindset started to pay off as it was apparent that I was gaining the favour of my boss and other store managers at that restaurant. The owner offered me a manager’s job, and I gratefully accepted.

During my time as a manager at McDonald’s, I fell in love with Emma. We met at the local church where my mother had taken us since our youth. Emma had this grace about her that was unmatched by any other woman I knew at the time. I was 21 years old, with no formal education, no real idea about a career plan—and working at McDonald’s. She didn’t care about that. She loved me for who I was as a person with all my flaws and weaknesses. We spent all of our free time together, like peas in a pod, and we both felt like it was us against the world.

At the same time, the flame of becoming something more in life started to grow within me. I knew it would have been impossible to see myself as a man if I had settled with being a manager at McDonald’s. All I wanted was to make this woman proud of me and even more proud to say that she was with me. After hearing my desires to advance my life and career, my colleagues at McDonald’s as well as others I knew suggested that I apply for a position at the TTC.

Richard, you know that the TTC is hiring and you have been working at McDonald’s for a while now. Why don’t you just give it a try?

All you need is to get your foot in the door and you can do whatever you want within that company. The TTC is a very reputable company to work for and I know you would do great there.

After listening to my friends about the benefits of working for the TTC and how it would be a great career choice, I was fully convinced that it would be an amazing accomplishment for me if I got the job there. I tasked myself with pursuing ways to acquire information on being a TTC operator. Wasting no time, I put my resume together, put on my only suit and made my way down to the TTC employment centre. Walking into the building was a thrilling experience. I had read about the history of the TTC and the background on how much the company had grown. As I walked into the employment office, several others were filling out applications. I knew that, despite the negative perception about being a “bus driver,” this job was highly sought after. I placed my resume in the tray and walked out with great anticipation and zeal about becoming an operator.

That night, I told my mother I had done but didn’t tell anyone else, not even my girlfriend. As the months went by, my relationship with Emma had grown into something very special. But I didn’t feel like a man because I was working at a place where I knew that my potential wasn’t really being used. However, the possibility of working for the TTC faded after a while because I thought that my resume had perhaps not made the grade. I started to look at other careers and applied to the Toronto Police Services, but to no avail.

I have been working there for over 20 years now. Richard, it’s a great job.
During this time of searching for self, searching for a career and trying to establish myself, I was reading books on leadership and the character of the soul. At work I tried to lead by example, in the way that I dressed, the way that I spoke to the customers, the way that I conducted myself and related myself to the team that I was managing. Every morning I would wash the windows and clean the outside of the restaurant despite the fact that there wasn’t anyone inside yet. One morning, after the usual peak hour rush, I was washing the windows when I felt my phone vibrating. The person introduced himself as a TTC representative. He wanted to conduct a phone interview. By this time, I had totally forgotten about the TTC application and the position that I had applied for, so it took me a few moments to recollect what he was talking about.

After composing myself and understanding that this one phone call could change the course of my life, I answered every question to the best of my ability. After hanging up the phone and feeling quite satisfied about my answers, I felt as if I was already in possession of the TTC employee pass. One day, a few weeks later, after returning home from work, my mother called me into the kitchen and handed me an envelope. It was from the TTC. I slowly opened the envelope and, taking the letter between my fingers, I placed it on the table face down. My mother looked at me and said: “Whatever the letter says, I am very proud of you.”

I took the letter from the table, turned it over and read the first sentence. My eyes swelled up and got a little watery as I knew that my life would change for the better.

*Congratulations you have been selected in the recruitment process …*
WALKING IN THE SHOES OF A TRANSIT OPERATOR II

Author: What was life like before you worked for the TTC?

Operator 1: Before the TTC, I had several jobs. Two and three jobs just to make ends meet. It was very hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel but who knew a simple application could change all of that?

Operator 2: The TTC has been a great company to work for, despite what anyone says about it. I worked construction for many many years and I would say that is a lot harder than what we as operators are doing. I had to work more than 14 hours per day usually to keep food on the table for my family. A friend of mine who worked for the TTC told me to apply, and I am glad I did.

Operator 3: It was tough before the TTC, for I was married and had two children and for many years we survived on one income. My wife used to pick up odd jobs here and there but it was definitely a struggle month to month.

Operator 4: I actually started this job as a summer student so I was very fortunate to get this job at such a young age. But I could imagine what life would have been like if I had not had this job as an operator.

Operator 5: I remember getting that phone call, the over the phone interview. I was so nervous. At that time, even though I had finished university with a good degree, I wasn’t successful in landing a decent job. It was so tough out there
to find a good job but luckily that phone rang and I passed that stage of the process.

**Operator 6:** I had many jobs before working for the TTC—even my own business. But at the end of the I was always worrying. I was always thinking about the businesses that I ran and over time my health started to decrease. Work was literally destroying my life. I was stretching myself too thin. I was more than willing to give it all up to work for the TTC.

**Operator 7:** I think life for me was normal. My family and I were actually doing very well but it was the whole security aspect of my job at that time that was not really stable. However, I was greatly humbled when I got this job over 10 years back—and I still am.

**Operator 8:** I was working for a large corporation before working for the TTC and I must say, despite what others may say about the company, it is definitely true in my own experience that the TTC is one of the best companies to work for.

**Operator 9:** Before working for the TTC as an operator, I actually had my own business but it was very difficult balancing life and work. I was always on call and took a lot of work home. So to get a job where I can just work my hours and not worry about work after work is a great privilege for me. TTC has been good for me and I am so looking forward to spending all my working years with this company.
Finally I could see a bright future ahead of me, the light at the end of the tunnel. After realizing that I couldn’t go back to the States and fulfill my basketball scholarship and, after losing all sense of self, it was this letter that brought hope and gave me something to strive for. But not just that. I was also thinking about how working for the TTC could advance my relationship with Emma. I saw her as a wife, someone I could be with for the rest of my life and I thought that having a job with the TTC would enable me to take care of her in many other ways than I could do as a manager at McDonald’s.

On the day of the orientation, I wore the same suit as on the day I handed in my application. There were hundreds of people lined up waiting to enter the hotel where the proceedings would take place. I remember sitting in the auditorium, filled with applicants all dressed in their best attire waiting for a spokesperson from the TTC to tell us more about the job. I was 22 years old and full of energy and excitement. I kept thinking how thankful I was to even get this far in the recruitment process.
As the meeting was about to commence I noticed that a few people were not allowed to enter because they had missing documents and inadequate information. I questioned why people would take such an opportunity so lightly and not have the necessary materials. I knew that there must have been thousands who applied and thousands who were rejected. I was humbled to make it this far. When it was time to start the presentation, the chatter among the audience came to a stop as the TTC representative walked towards the front of the room. We all looked intently forward, listening with open ears in order to learn as much as we could about this job. I wanted know everything that being a TTC operator entailed, the ins and outs, the good and the bad.

About five minutes into his speech, the back door opened and a young lady rushed into the room and sat down at an empty seat. The spokesperson discussed many things about the job: the scheduling of the work; how it wasn’t a nine-to-five type of job; how it was strictly shift work. He discussed the importance of customer service, the importance of being on time, the importance of representing yourself as an operator in a professional manner. He went through the benefits and pay of the job and all of the perks, leaving nothing out.

He spent as much time telling us about the negative aspects of the job, as he did the positive. Many people in the room may have been thinking about the job as if it was something easy to do. But hearing what the job entails caused many to have second thoughts about pursuing such a career path. At the end of the presentation, a small test was issued, to be completed within a set time. The same lady who came late at the beginning of the orientation was the first to finish. She walked proudly up to the front of the room and handed her paper to the spokesperson. After she exited the room, he took her paper and ripped it in half. I always assumed the reason for this was because she came in late. This wasn’t something to play around with. This company meant business. After completing that small quiz, there was an assignment that needed to be done in preparation for those who would go on to the next stage of the recruitment process — the panel interview.

The assignment was job shadowing. The potential candidate had to shadow an operator on the job and ask him or her about the job and about their own experiences. It was an excellent way to get a better snapshot of the life of a TTC operator. There was a list that was given out at the orientation of the specific routes and questions that needed to be answered. Some questions were the name of the route, the time of the day, the number of the bus and run number. There were also questions more related to the operators themselves. It was apparent that the process of becoming an operator was no easy task and, looking back at what needed to be done, I have nothing but respect for all those who endured and passed this process. Emma at this time was no longer just a friend whom I loved. We were officially in a relationship. She encouraged me throughout the whole process and came with me on every assignment.

The homework required the candidates to perform 10 different interviews with various operators from the bus division, streetcar and subway. We rode around Toronto from the east to the west trying to conduct these in interviews with different operators from different routes and areas. One of the requirements was to interview an operator during the midnight shift on a streetcar route. Leaving the midnight interview until the end was a tough one because of the schedule that Emma and I had with our current jobs. But off we went into the night, to gather the information to finish the assignment. She parked her car at the Eaton town centre parking lot, and I knew that she was so tired and was starting to
About The Author

Richard Lee is a vibrant and passionate young man who began trusting his natural gift for storytelling in his late twenties and this has led to his first book. Years of drive and dedication along with the fear of only ever being an “average man” have helped him to become a supervisor today with the Toronto Transit Commission, one of the world’s largest transit systems.