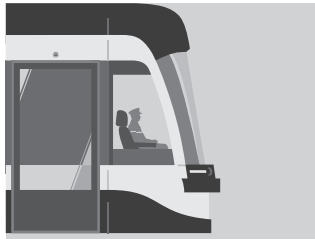


GET ONBOARD:

Walk in the
Shoes of a
Transit Operator



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Walk in the Shoes of a Transit Operator



RICHARD LEE



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*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

INTRODUCTION

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 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.

WALKING IN THE SHOES OF A TRANSIT OPERATOR I

Author: *Do you think that the public really know what TTC operators go through?*

Operator 1: *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.*

Operator 2: *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.*

Operator 3: *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*

I might as well be a robot. There were even days picking up and dropping off customers when I didn't receive a single "thank you." By the end of the day you sometimes can feel the same as a piece of dirt.

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 with 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

CHAPTER 1

BEGINNING OF THE JOURNEY

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 ... Rrrrrr ... Rrrrrr ...”

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 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

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.

Don't let one day go by without you saying thank you to someone who did something for you. Who knows, those two little words might change a person's life for the better.

—Richard Lee

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.