

# nice as pie

## PROFILE OF FELIX VITANDI, BUS OPERATOR AT CITY & RURAL RIDES IN COLEMAN, TEXAS

*Interview location: El Conquistador Restaurant in Waco, Texas*

*How we got there: By car and on foot*

*In one word, he describes himself as “Creative.”*

*By Laura Lee Huttenbach*



Felix Vitando in Waco, Texas, before the State Rodeo Competition in April 2016. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

Felix Vitandi is nervous about the Texas Rodeo tomorrow. “I’ll be honest with you,” he says, merging onto Interstate 35 in Waco on our way to lunch. “Competition is very difficult for me.” It’s easy to believe Felix. He is a shy, soft-spoken, gentle man in his fifties wearing glasses and a button-down plaid shirt tucked into navy slacks. To qualify for the National Rodeo, hosted by the Community Transportation Alliance of America, Felix must place first or second at the state rodeo. Bus drivers compete in three categories: an obstacle course, a written test, and “wheelchair securement,” where drivers safely load a passenger using a wheelchair onto the bus. The person with the highest overall score is declared the winner. >

# my philosophy as a driver

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As defending state and national champion, there's a lot of pressure on Felix. "My most difficult challenge is remaining calm," he says, petting his immaculately groomed mustache. He acknowledges he's come a long way since his first state rodeo 12 years ago. "In the early part of my career, I'd be on a course, and I'd make a mistake, and my anxiety would just skyrocket," he explains. "My heart rate would go up, and I would start doing worse. But last year, in Tampa, when I won, I actually messed up and hit a cone on the very first obstacle." Though he managed to stay calm, Felix never in a million years predicted victory. When his name was called at the award ceremony that night, "my heart almost came out of my throat," he recalls. "I was in a state of shock."

Today, in addition to nerves, Felix is trying to ignore expectations that he's the guy to beat. "One of the most important things I learned is never get overconfident in these competitions," he says. "Overconfidence is the worst thing you can possibly have."

Felix and I were supposed to meet two days ago in Coleman, the rural town in central Texas with 5,000 people and two stoplights where Felix was born and drives today. But a scheduling conflict forced us to meet here, in Waco. "I was kinda glad that it worked out the way that it did," he says as we pull into the parking lot of El Conquistador Mexican Restaurant. "Because what I did was I wrote you a little book that explains my philosophy as a driver."

"You wrote me a book?" I repeat.

"Yes," he replies. "I finished it last night."

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**A**t lunch, J.R. Salazar, General Manager of City and Rural Rides and Felix's boss, joins us for an unsweetened iced tea. He provides transit service area background. "I'm sorry you won't get to see Coleman," he says. What the region lacks in population, J.R. explains, makes up for in territory. "We've got a pretty big service area," he says, making an understatement. The company's nine offices and 65 buses cover 11,000 square miles and 11 Central Texas counties.

"From Coleman we go to San Angelo a lot, and it's about 78 miles," adds Felix.

J.R. says, "From easternmost county to westernmost county, it's about three hours. From Stevenville to Sweetwater, that's three hours." They operate a demand-response system, where a person needing transportation requests service at least 48 hours in advance. "It's nothing like the urbans and the metros that get to do fixed routes," continues J.R. "I wish we could, but we don't have the population." He mentions they are building a new multimodal facility in Brownwood.

"I think when I started, we only had one or two buses," recalls Felix. "To see the changes, it's pretty phenomenal."

After J.R. excuses himself to go pick up another driver competing in the Rodeo, I ask Felix how he came to work in public transit. "It's kind of a long story," he says, sipping his tea. For his first three years at San Angelo State University, Felix was an art major. "That was my main dream in life," he says, "to be the



Felix Vitandi, walking around the obstacle course prior to the State Rodeo. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

greatest artist in the world. Then I realized that if I tried that path, my fate was gonna be in someone else's hands. Because it would be their decision whether I was a great artist or not, and not my decision. I thought, *I'll never reach my goal, and I don't wanna live like that.*" So, he says, he switched majors and graduated with a bachelor's degree in psychology.

I ask what type of art he liked. "Mainly woodcarving," he says. "I started carving wood around 14." As a self-taught artist, he progressed gradually. "My first work was real crude," he recalls. But with greater investment, the carving became "more and more refined.

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I learned—and I'm sure most people know this—that just because you don't have a skill doesn't mean you can't develop a skill. That gave me confidence in other things. It's just like driving. When I first started driving in these roadeos, I'd get out there, and it was like, 'Man, this is impossible! There's no way I can do this.' Then you practice and practice, and you learn little techniques and before you know it you've got skills that you didn't have before. So you're born with the potential to develop skills. It's not the skills that you're born with."

From San Angelo State University, he moved to Levelland, Texas to work on an oil rig. "Have you ever seen the plains before?" he asks. I tell him I haven't. "Well you need to see that once in your life," he continues. "What changes is the skies. You'll see the most beautiful sunsets. And you notice the clouds a lot more 'cause there's nothing to look at so far as the country around you, so your eyes are directed upward." In Levelland, he worked as a pumper,

maintaining the oil wells. After a couple of years, the novelty of the clouds wore off, and he missed his friends. "It's very difficult for me to meet people," he says, looking down. "And there's something depressing about a barren landscape." When he moved back to Coleman, his brother got him a job working at the livestock auction.

I should say here that Felix has an endearing way of assuming knowledge from people. "You know what it's like to work at a cattle auction," he says to me, seriously. These types of assumptions could have a tendency to make a person feel stupid, but when Felix says it, I'm flattered that he thought I knew in the first place. Plus, without an ounce of pretention, this bus driver is always happy to provide clarification.

Felix's job at the cattle auction was to man a pen that held a cow. When the auctioneer called out his pen number, he raised the gate. The cow went to the scale and to bidding while he kept the gate open. "What's interesting is that in all the years I worked out there, I never got hit or injured by one cow," he says. "I was proud of that fact." He came to read the animals like a newspaper. "Usually it's the Brahmans you gotta watch out for," he says. "They're the most powerful, especially when they get mad." He leans back in his chair. "No matter what the weather is, the livestock auction goes on. Unless it's hailing real hard or a tornado, those guys are out penning cattle. Most people don't realize the work that goes into getting a hamburger or steak to your table." Taking a bite of my





Felix, with his "Driver's Guide to Better Job Performance and Customer Relationships." (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

steak quesadilla, I realize that in this way I am like most people.

After a decade at the livestock auction, Felix earned his Commercial Drivers' License, and became a truck driver for Central Freight Lines. "I lasted about three-and-a-half months," he says, popping a bite of enchilada in his mouth. On the long nights and 500-mile trips, "all I could think about was sleeping," he recalls. In Beaumont, coming in from New Orleans late one night, he nearly drove off a bridge. "I missed the cement guardrail by about six inches," he says, holding up two hands. Though he hated the job, he wants to make clear that

he deeply respected the people he worked with. "They do the country a lot of good and receive virtually no recognition," he says.

The job market in Coleman didn't offer many options, and Felix was desperate for work. Then, sometime in 1998, he read an ad in the local paper that City and Rural Rides was hiring bus drivers. "It's unreal how well it's worked out for me," says Felix, shaking his head. "It's like you ask God for something, and God gives it to you. You're going, *Wow*. The odds of that happening are practically zero."

Over the course of our lunch, Felix uses the phrase, “One of the best parts of driving a bus” several times. An aspect of the job that he finds extremely appealing is that every day is different. The night before he reports to work, he gets a call with his assignment—who he’ll pick up, where he’ll take them, and what time he’ll start. “Honestly, I like the late shift. If they say, ‘You’re gonna pull out at 11:15,’” he says, giving me two thumbs up, “all right! Because the first thing I do when I wake up in the morning is I make my coffee, I get my pen and paper out, and that gives me a couple hours to write.” He says that his creative energies are at their peak in the morning. “If I can get three-and-a-half or four hours in, I’m good,” he continues. “I don’t know about you, but anywhere after that, I just *pshhhhh*.” He makes a sound like a punctured tire leaking air.

I ask what he writes. “Philosophy,” he says. “My whole motivation to getting this job was getting enough money to get me by, so I could continue working on my writing.” Much to his delight, Felix discovered that he also really likes driving a bus. “At this point if I have about 200 miles on the odometer, it feels like I’m just getting warmed up.”

I tell Felix that I’ve just driven about 200 miles from San Antonio, and I don’t want to get back in the car. He

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shrugs, as if to say, *It’s not for everybody*. Most commonly, Felix takes passengers to dialysis appointments, but he provides transportation anywhere people need to go, from a hair salon to Walmart.

Felix makes a point of greeting every person who gets on his bus and says something positive about the day. “If it’s a new passenger, I try to compliment them,” he says. “I don’t make ’em up, but I try to find something nice to say, [like] ‘Oh I like your place. It’s neat up here.’” He has learned that to expect goodness from others, he must model the behavior. “What makes me feel best is if I’m nice to the first person and the second person—then next thing you know, those people are just as nice as pie to each other back there. That’s the kind of atmosphere I try to keep on my bus.”

From the driver's seat, he is hesitant to order anyone around. "I try to put things in the form of a request," he explains. He uses the seatbelt as an example. "Say I have a passenger, we're getting ready to take off, and they don't have their seatbelt on," continues Felix. He doesn't tell them, *Put on your seatbelt now*. "I just say, 'If you get your seatbelt on, we'll get going,' or something like that. A request. I find you get a lot more cooperation that way."

"Do you use your psychology degree driving?" I ask.

"Absolutely," he says. The first time he picks someone up, he goes through a mental checklist to determine their psychological state, "to see what level I should deal with this person," he explains. "If they're sad or going through a serious illness, you try to cheer 'em up a little. You can't do much, but you can try to bolster their spirits." Not long

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ago, Felix picked up a homeless veteran who hadn't showered in several days. At first the man wasn't making any sense. "Then finally he got to the point where he said, 'My wife died two years ago,' so a little

light bulb went off in my head that his wife's death was so traumatic for him that it sent him into a spiral and that's how he ended up where he was. I gave him five dollars after he got off the bus, and you'd have thought I'd given him 50. He really, really appreciated that."

Felix both performs and witnesses acts of kindness. Once, an old man struggled to get on the bus, and a woman, elderly but not quite as old, was sitting in the front seat with an oxygen tank. Seeing the man's trouble, she picked herself and the tank up and moved to the back. "It wasn't easy for her," observes Felix. "But she did it, and I didn't ask."

Another time, a few months ago, he picked up an elderly couple going to a dialysis center in San Angelo. "It was just a standard drive," says Felix. "No difficult roads or anything." But after the trip, as Felix was helping them back into their house, the woman said to her husband, "Boy, he sure was a good driver!" Felix beams as he recalls the compliment. "One of the most satisfying parts of my job is when you pick somebody up and drop 'em off, and they say, 'You're a good driver.'"

I ask if he has a favorite passenger, and he frowns. At first I think maybe it's not a fair question, but he tells me that his favorite passenger died four years ago. "Fred Watson," he says. "He was in his nineties but sharp as a tack." Fred used



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to run a chain of movie theaters. He could fly a plane and spoke fluent Spanish. “He would just tell these fantastic stories,” says Felix, eyes watering. “Sometimes, when I ask myself, ‘Did I do the right thing to take this job?’ Then I think, *Well I wouldn't have met Fred Watson if not.* So those little bitty things make you feel better.” Now Felix drives Fred’s daughter, who is blind, to the nursing home once a week, where she entertains residents by playing the organ.

The most challenging part of the job, according to Felix, is keeping up with paperwork from fare collection and overtime. “It’s easy to get behind,” says Felix. “You have to fill out all these forms.” He looks at his watch, which reads a quarter past four. He needs to be back for the drivers’ orientation meeting at 5 p.m., and I want to walk the course before then.

In the car on the way, I ask Felix, “When you tell people you’re a bus driver, what’s the reaction?”

He fidgets in his seat. He wants to be positive, but he settles for honesty. “There’s a lot of negativity toward transportation drivers,” he says apologetically. “That’s the truth. People see you driving the bus and think you’re just being lazy. There’s no way they understand why I’m drivin’.” For Felix, his job enables him to live and pursue what he believes he was put on the earth to do. “I’m trying to conserve my energies for writing,” he says. “Cause if you have a regular eight-to-five job somewhere, your creative energies are gonna go flat.”

Felix parks the car, and as we walk toward the course, he tells me that, though he loves to read ancient Greek and Roman history, his favorite author of all time is Mark Twain. “I’ve probably read about 90 percent of what he wrote,” says Felix. “And I’ve been to at least 15 places where he was,” including Twain’s birthplace and grave, as well as Angels Camp in California, where Twain overheard a tale that became his short story “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” Felix admires Twain for the simplicity with which he made profound observations. “Those one-line phrases of his,” he says, walking around an orange cone. “Man, to me it’s the most intense excitement that you can imagine—the way he uses that language.”





Felix Vitandi. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

The course is spread out across a large parking lot, divided into sections according to obstacle. Pausing in front of a set of cones, Felix explains that obstacle is called The Right Turn. To earn all fifty points, drivers must make a tight right turn at a ninety-degree angle without touching the “pivot” cone—a 25-point deduction—or the other cones, worth ten points each. If a driver has to reverse, it’s another deduction. Felix will be competing in a vehicle similar to the one he drives in Coleman, called a “body-on-chassis” or

cutaway vehicle, which is a little bigger than an ambulance. I follow Felix to another obstacle—The Serpentine—with cones laid out like the shape of an M. “This one’s harder than it looks,” remarks Felix, moving his arm like a snake to demonstrate how he will weave through the shoots around the pivot cone.

It’s seven minutes before Felix’s driver’s meeting, and he is looking at his watch at less than one-minute intervals. “I know you have to go,” I say. “I won’t keep you.”

“It’s okay,” he says genuinely. “I think in the two hours we’ve spent together, you know more about me than people who’ve worked with me for the last 17 years.” This is not an indictment on his coworkers but a statement on how little Felix lets people know about him. “I’m basically a hermit,” he says. “But the people I work with have become like a second family to me. They’ve been very generous, and I appreciate all they’ve done.”

Before we part ways, he reaches in the backseat and extracts a black-and-pink leather binder from his briefcase. “Here’s the book,” he says, giving it me, “the culmination of 30 years of philosophy.” Felix’s opus is 23 handwritten pages, entitled *A Driver’s Guide to Better Job Performance and Better Customer Relations*. It includes an introduction and conclusion with the body of the work organized by tips in alphabetical order on how to be an effective employee as well as a decent human being.

(For example on page 21, under the “Temper” section, Felix writes: “When you feel you are about to lose your temper, picture a hot skillet in your mind. This hot skillet is your anger. Then imagine pouring cool clear water on the skillet. See the skillet giving off steam and cooling down. When your skillet is cool enough you can proceed in your work.”)

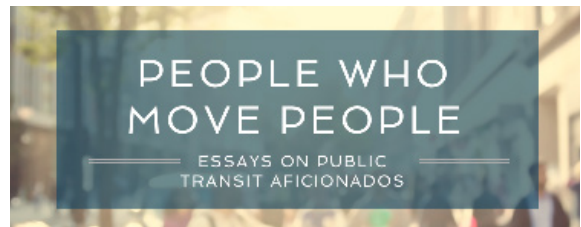
“Wanna know what took me the longest?” he asks. Turning to the title page, he points to the block letters. “That’s all by hand,” he says. “I learned a lot about graphic design.”

“Thank you,” I say. “I’m really glad you trusted me with your story.” I’m not sure whether to say good luck or break a leg in Saturday’s competition, so I offer both. As I climb in my car, I ask, “Any tips for the road?”

Petting his mustache over a smile, he has only one piece of advice: “Watch out for the idiots.” ■



Writer Laura Lee Huttenbach’s first book is *The Boy is Gone: Conversations with a Mau Mau General* (Ohio University Press, 2015). Her website is [www.LLHuttenbach.com](http://www.LLHuttenbach.com).



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