roll up your sleeves

PROFILE OF RHONDA BRIGGINS,
Senior Director of External Affairs

Interview location: MARTA Headquarters in Atlanta, GA and SIP The Experience
How we got there: on foot
In one word, she describes herself as "blessed."

By Laura Lee Huttenbach

Rhonda Briggins at the MARTA headquarters in Atlanta, GA. (Photo credit Allison Colburn).

Before Rhonda Briggins goes home to Birmingham, Alabama for Christmas, she has to call her parents and see how many children will be at their house. In the last four decades, Rhonda's mother and father have been foster parents to hundreds of children. Once she learns the number and the age of the new siblings she'll meet, "I go over to Toys"R"Us or Target to buy a whole bunch of gifts so they have something to open," she says. ›

access & accessibility

I'm sitting with Rhonda, who is forty-five, in her office at the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) headquarters, where she works as the Senior Director of External Affairs. Her hair is styled in a short blonde bob and her jeans are cuffed above black patent leather Chanel loafers. Bright turquoise beads hang over her black t-shirt and tan cardigan. "I hope you don't need to take pictures today," she'd announced when we met. "I didn't feel like dressing up."

When she first mentions that her parents had raised a couple hundred foster children, Rhonda delivers the information in a totally nonchalant way, as if she were telling me where she went to elementary school. This is typical when Rhonda tells a story. There is no self-pity or self-adulation. She tells it like it is, and it can catch you off-guard. In addition to the foster kids, Rhonda is the oldest of four biological brothers and sisters and several adopted siblings. "So when you came home from school," I say, "there would be a new face, and you'd just be like, 'Nice to meet you, I'm Rhonda, welcome to my home?'"

"Yeah," she says. "Mm-hm, exactly."

"Do you remember the first time your parents brought home a foster child?" I ask.

Rhonda Briggins at the MARTA headquarters in Atlanta, GA. (Photo credit Allison Colburn).

"I do," she says. "I was six years old." There were two sisters, ages two and four. The younger child had a severe intellectual disability and was hooked to a feeding tube. Sometimes the girl would lose consciousness and Rhonda's mother would revive her with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. "I remember going to the grocery store with my mom, and people would be pointing at her, making judgments, not knowing that that wasn't even her biological daughter or what my mom was doing," she says, choking up. One day, Rhonda came home from school. "I remember General Hospital was on the television," she says. "The baby was in the bassinet. My mom asked me to go get her up. So I went, and she wasn't breathing."

The little girl had died.

"How did your mom explain something like that to you?" I ask.

"She didn't have to explain it," says Rhonda. "I knew what was going on. I grew up young."

Rhonda's convictions stretch back so early in her life that when she talks about them, they don't seem like adopted beliefs. She presents them as truisms. For instance, she tells me that she learned at a young age what it meant to be a civil citizen. To Rhonda, this means, "I have a social and moral responsibility beyond myself. When you're at decision-making tables you have to make the best decision, not based on your own needs, but the community as a whole."

As a lobbyist for MARTA and Georgia transit, Rhonda sits at a lot of different tables. To do her job well, she must understand the needs of the community and then communicate them to elected officials that make the laws. This requires an ability to move seamlessly between worlds. I ask how she learned to do so.

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She tells me that she usually starts the narrative of her life in high school, at the Alabama School of Fine Arts, where she met a classmate who became a dear friend, named Malika Sanders. Malika's parents, Hank and Rose, were black, Harvard-educated civil rights attorneys working in Selma (Henry "Hank" Sanders is currently a state senator, and Rose—who changed her name to Faya Ora Rose Touré—became Alabama's first black judge). "They dedicated their lives to the South, especially Selma," explains Rhonda. "Immediately I wanted to go to law school and become an attorney."

In high school at the Alabama School of Fine Arts, Rhonda studied theater, which she was inspired to do after watching the television show Fame, about an arts school in New York. "I said, 'Oh, I want to go to a school like that,'" recalls Rhonda. (She'd applied to the Alabama School of Fine Arts without her parent's knowledge and just asked her dad for a ride to the school when it came time to audition.) In theatre, she learned to focus on the big picture—the overall production—as well as the smallest details, down to every word, light, and prop. She also learned to dream. "That's the cool thing about theatre, right?" she says. "You get to dream. You get to play different people. You get to be things that you're not. You get to wear those shoes and put on that outfit."

I press her on where her drive came from. "I don't know," she insists. "I'm telling you, I've been grown for a long time. I think my parents—they got so many damn kids, they're just trying to keep the lights on." She laughs, then pauses for a moment, considering how much of her life to disclose. "Well, if you're gonna get this, you might

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as well get all my business," she finally says, smiling. "I grew up Mormon."

Her parents, who have been married for forty-four years, were the second black family in Birmingham to be recruited by the Mormon Church. At church, everyone had large families with ten or twelve kids. "That was helpful with growing up and not feeling different," she says. "The church helped anchor us as a family." Their house was a revolving door for young Mormons from all over the country on their mission years between high school and college. But when Rhonda turned eighteen, she declined a scholarship to Brigham Young University. "I said, 'No thank you. I won't be in Utah. Y'all can give that to somebody else, because I'm gonna be doing some drinking in college.'"

"You left the church?" I ask.

She nods. "I was like, 'Peace out.'"

"Were you able to maintain relations with your parents?"

"Oh yeah," she says. "My mom left the church after two or three years. She didn't stay long at all." Her mother tried out a few other denominations but eventually settled on Baptist. "Older kids went to church with Dad, younger kids went to church with Mom," explains Rhonda. "Baptist and Mormon. We all coexisted. It was no big deal." On Monday, the missionaries would come over and eat dinner with their family. "Then on Tuesday, Mom would have Bible study, and she rebutted everything that my dad taught us that wasn't one hundred percent right."

"Wasn't that confusing to you as a kid?" I ask. "At that age, you don't have the intellectual capacity to be cherry-picking what you believe in."

"But we did," she asserts. "It was what it was. When you grow up in that, you think that's normal. You don't know any different."

"How did you keep it all straight?" I ask. "You learned something on Monday, and then Tuesday, your mom says, 'Eh, well…'"

Rhonda laughs. "I don't even remember half the stuff of what the church was about," she says. "The values were what came out of that. I could focus on the values, not the religion." This put her in the rare, advantageous position of being able to judge individuals on what they said and believed, rather than focusing on the institutions that informed them.

Her family's relationship with religion, she says, is unique in that they have a sense of humor about it, and they try to focus on what they have in common rather what divides their respective faiths. Still, I have trouble wrapping my head around the scene that unfolded every Monday night. "So your mom would serve the missionaries dinner," I say, "and sit

Rhonda Briggins outside the Marta headquarters at Lindbergh Station (Photo credit Allison Colburn).

at the table with them and say, 'Welcome to my home, thanks for coming, even though I'm not a part of what you're doing'?"

"No," says Rhonda. "She'd just say, 'Welcome.'"

On the top shelf of a bookcase in her office, there are five clear plastic boxes with Barbie dolls. To the left, in the first box from 2000, a blonde Barbie is wearing a blue skirt suit set and pearls. The box also includes mini-ballots, a pin that says, "Barbie for president," mini-tickets to the inaugural ball, and a strapless red gown with matching high heels. Rhonda, working with the White House Project, an organization whose goal is to advance women's leadership, was one of the original brains behind the Barbie for President campaign, which has released a new doll every election year since 2000 (Mattel has since taken over the campaign under the name She Should Run). One day, Rhonda hopes a female president won't be make-believe.

For lunch, we walk a block to SIP The Experience, a cute coffee shop. Along the way, we pass the entrance to the subway, and buses are pulling in and out. The MARTA headquarters are attached to the Lindbergh Center Station, which serves the red and gold lines of the Atlanta rail system. When it opened in 1984, the station was isolated in the Buckhead neighborhood with nothing but parking lots surrounding the area. In the last decade, transit oriented development has sprouted up around the station, attracting condos, restaurants, and businesses.

At SIP, over turkey BLT sandwiches and carrot cake, Rhonda and I talk more about her entry into the transit world. As a political science major at Georgia State, she was required to do an internship her senior year. Most of her classmates were assigned positions at the Georgia General Assembly, working as aides to elected officials, but Rhonda was assigned to MARTA's Department of Government Affairs. "I was their first legislative intern," she explains. She isn't exactly sure how she was selected to go to MARTA, but she believes it has to do with the Olympics. In 1995, a year before Atlanta's Summer Games, MARTA was figuring out how to move the additional two million spectators, athletes, and media that would be in town for the event. Three new stations were opening on the North Line, adding seven miles to the system, and the city would have to borrow a thousand or more buses.

It was Rhonda's first look at the legislative process from the perspective of transit, which she quickly saw was not just about buses and trains but "understanding it from the civil and social justice stand," she says. "It was a human rights piece of access and accessibility, mobility and transportation."

With her eyes set on practicing law, Rhonda filed away the memory of MARTA and, after graduating from Georgia State in 1995, began working in a legal clinic for the homeless. "My favorite job," she says, tapping the table. "Around the Olympics, there was this whole big battle of what to do with the homeless. We were making sure they weren't getting one-way tickets out of Atlanta and that [the city] preserved housing for low-income people."

Her work attracted admiration from Malika's parents, Hank and Rose Sanders. They recruited her to come back to Alabama to work along

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the "Black Belt," the stretch of Highway 70 that runs from Montgomery to Mississippi. There, Rhonda began fighting the policy of "tracking" students, which gave a teacher the authority to determine which students were fit for academic life and which should pursue a trade. "Once they put you in a track, they set your fate," she says. "There was no way to get out of it. We thought that was illegal."

To meet with the parents of the students, she had to go to where they were—forty-five miles away, in the chicken plants in Mississippi. "They can't go to PTA meetings at school in the middle of the day," she

Rhonda post-interview (Photo credit Allison Colburn).

says. “They’re working.” At four in the morning, Rhonda would drive out to the chicken plants and hold PTA meetings there. “Everyone loves their children,” she says. “It doesn’t matter what your income is. Everyone wants their children to strive and do great things.”

In 2001, at twenty-nine, she began her first year at Jones School of Law in Montgomery. In case after case in her course textbooks, Rhonda noticed the only time a person of color appeared on the page was to break the law. “It was always in a criminal aspect,” she tells me. “It was never anything positive.” This pattern prompted Rhonda to look more closely at the system as a whole. “Litigation is based off current laws and past precedent,” she says. “Being from Alabama, I saw how public policies had been used to marginalize various people in communities, where they have been systematically hindered to ever be successful. If we’re going to give young people opportunities to be really good citizens, we have to have public policies that spur growth and development, not hinder.”

She calls this realization her aha moment. She set aside her dream to practice law and decided to focus on making the law itself. She wanted to rewrite the rules. She graduated from law school, but says she knew “I was never going to practice. Instead, I was going to be a lobbyist and do public policy work. Because that was going to be the next movement to usher in equity and equality in this country.”

In 2003, a job opened up at MARTA in the department where Rhonda had interned a decade earlier, in the department she heads today. “At that particular time, I kept saying, ‘What are you doing to me, God?’” she recalls. “But I was soon reminded that Rosa Parks started on a bus. Historically, all the sit-ins and protests—none of that really moved the needle. It was access that moved the needle. It was mobility that moved the needle. In little bitty Montgomery, when they stopped the buses, that’s what got this country moving to look at civil rights in a different way. To build communities, you have to have access.”

> ***“It was mobility that moved the needle.”***

To illustrate this point, she uses my bag of potato chips as a prop. She pushes it to the edge of the table across from her and places our empty cups and plates and napkins in the way. “Now let’s say I’m hungry. I can see the food is right there,” she says, pointing to the potato chips out of her reach. “But if there are all these barriers, and I can’t get to it, are you really trying to feed me? You say you are, but if you were really trying to feed me, you would clear the pathway so I could get to that food. As a human in this country, you should have certain rights privileges, and opportunities. But if you can’t get to those opportunities—and that’s where transportation comes in—is that really an opportunity?”

She lists three additional reasons why issues of mobility are becoming increasingly important. First, she says, there are the Millennials, who are buying cars at lower rates than their predecessors. "They have decided, for a lot of reasons, that their mode of transportation and quality of life will be centered around transit," she says. Second, there's she what she calls the "Silver Tsunami," when the aging population eventually grows beyond what we have ever seen. "Folks are living longer, and they want their independence." Mobility and access will determine their quality of life. Third, the country's infrastructure in metropolitan areas can't sustain the increasing number of cars on the road. "Look at what happened to I-85," she says, referring to the highway overpass that caught fire and collapsed in Metro Atlanta on March 30, 2017. To assist residents who couldn't drive to work while the bridge was under repair, MARTA got a lot of people where they needed to go. During that time, ridership increased by twenty-five percent.

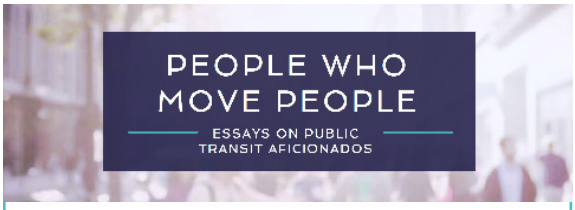
Rhonda says that all her "blabbing" has put her in national and state leadership positions that she's excited about. For the last three years, she's been President of the Conference of Minorities in Transportation. She's also President of the Georgia Transit Association, which coordinates the efforts of the 138 transit agencies in the state. In June, Georgia House Speaker David Ralson named Rhonda to the House Commission on Transit Governance and Funding, which had been a stipulation of House Resolution 848, passed in March 2017. "For the first time, I think the state is ready to do something about it," predicts Rhonda. "We're at this place of history making in Georgia."

When she started working at MARTA, she says that she didn't want to tell people. "People would say, 'Ugh, gross! Why do you work there?' But now people say, 'Oh, I love what you're doing.' I can be proud."

Critical thinking and the ability to bounce between roles have served Rhonda well in her position at MARTA. But of all the experiences and influential people who have crossed her path, she believes her parents have made the greatest impact. "They taught me that you have to extend yourself to the community," she says. "You have to fill in the gaps." The older she gets, the more she appreciates her upbringing. "I see success differently, too," she says. "It's not always money or big education. It's how you treat people and what you do on this earth."

She aspires to follow her parents' examples, to be what she calls a servant leader—someone who's willing to serve the people they lead. "A lot of people who lead just want to sit high up on their throne and be served," she says. "But I can't tell you to get in and roll up your sleeves if I'm not rolling up my sleeves as well. Or better yet, my sleeves are already rolled up. I'm waiting on you."

Writer Laura Lee Huttenbach is the author of "The Boy is Gone" and "Running with Raven" (Kensington Press, May 2017). Her website is www.LLHuttenbach.com.



People Who Move People is a web series profiling individuals who have made an impact in public transit. The series has been initiated and funded by RouteMatch Software, an Atlanta-based company who is passionate about transit and proud to record these stories. Find out more at peoplewhomovepeople.