

# on the side of angels

PROFILE ON JOEL VOLINSKI,

Director at the National Center for Transportation Research

*Interview location: Center for Urban Transportation Research, University of South Florida in Tampa*

*How we got there: On foot from the parking lot where I parked my rental car*

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

*By Laura Lee Huttenbach*



Joel Volinski in 2017. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

When Joel Volinski accepted a job as the interim director of Florida’s Broward County Transit Agency in 1983, he had never ridden on a public transit bus. “Here I was, the person who knew less about the subject than anyone, and suddenly I was directing the biggest agency in county government,” he tells me, leaning back in his leather chair. “So you have to have a sense of humor, and you have to be kind of a quick study.” We are sitting in the boardroom at the Center for Urban Transportation Research (CUTR) on the campus of the University of South Florida in Tampa, where Joel now serves as Director of the National Center for Transit Research (NCTR). >

# a mutual aid society

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Before Broward County Transit, he was an Assistant County Manager doing doctoral work on public administration with a focus on management and management theory. When he was offered the job, he says, “I thought, *Well, it’ll be a good opportunity to test the theories.*” To learn more about the business, he decided to start in the operational center. When he introduced himself as the new director, the bus operators said, “Really? You’re the director? We’ve never met a director at this agency.”

Joel was surprised. *How could a director manage a transit agency without speaking to the people who provide the service?* “The whole thing was run like a paramilitary operation,” he says. Furthermore, the county had hired truck drivers for positions as bus operators while giving only minimal training in customer service for their new job. “There was no personal touch,” says Joel, shaking his head. “I guess when you hear the words ‘mass transit,’ you start thinking in terms of big numbers and not the person. And it’s funny—not that I quote Joseph Stalin very often—but he did say, ‘One person dying is a tragedy, but a million people dying is a statistic.’”



Courtesy of Joel Volinski.

Joel carried the Stalin quote around with him, which apparently did not compromise his mission to reform the military image. “I was trying to remind people, ‘Hey, everybody on that bus is a unique and special person, and they’re here because mobility is fundamental to their life requirements.’”

When he attended his first American Public Transportation Association (APTA) legislative conference in Washington, DC, he saw that the problems within his agency were representative of the industry. “It was a very unfriendly atmosphere at the time. I saw a bunch of old people with grey hair,” he says, pausing and pointing to his own carefully combed grey hair. “Well, I’m one of them

now.” He has distinct memories from that first conference. “People in wheelchairs were tipping themselves over, throwing themselves in front of buses in protest to block them because they were not wheelchair accessible,” he recalls. It was still seven years before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) would mandate that every person have access to public transportation.

When Joel returned from Washington to Fort Lauderdale, he demanded that every new bus be made wheelchair accessible. He spruced up facilities. Once a month, he and his managers met as many bus operators and mechanics as possible at the operational centers, providing them with a forum (and donuts) for them to voice their concerns. “When the operator is in a good mood—and it’s a very stressful job—then everything is a lot easier on the bus,” observes

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Joel. He says the vehicle and its agency are like a household, which reminds me of the Southern adage, *If Momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.*

At headquarters, Joel set up a television studio and became the host of “Broward County in Transit,” a talk show where he invited passengers, legislators, and transit workers alike to discuss improvements to the system. “We didn’t threaten the *Cosby Show* with ratings,” he says jokingly, “But we were trying to communicate what we’re doing to an extensive work force that you don’t see day to day.” Bus operators come in early and work late and are on the road their entire shift. “They’re kind of out there on their own, captain of the ship. That’s why I think a lot of bus operators just think, *Nobody cares about me.*”

In his decade as director, he changed the culture of the agency, shifting the focus from managing a system to serving their customers. “It really softened the atmosphere of the place,” he says, readying another quote. “It’s like John Maxwell said, ‘People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.’”

Joel’s strategy worked. When he left the agency in 1994, ridership had more than doubled, from 11 million to 24 million annual passengers. “Transit is nice,” concludes Joel, “because you can measure things and see if what you are doing is working.”

**B**efore I met Joel in Tampa, he warned me that I was catching him in the middle of a “horrendously busy time,”

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around the deadlines for several federal grants. For this reason, we stuck around the CUTR facilities. CUTR (pronounced “cutter”) is one of 35 federally funded University Transportation Centers. While many centers focus on matters of hard mechanical engineering, like highways or bridges or pavement, CUTR is a leader in public transit research.

From the boardroom, Joel gives me a tour of the research facility, which consists of long hallways and green floors with two white lines and black boxes running down the center. “They’re supposed to be railroad tracks,” explains Joel. On the walls, I’m surprised to see pictures of cars. “Yeah, to tell you the truth, I didn’t like that idea at a research center focused primarily on public transportation,” he says. “But the Center was founded by a race car driver.”

I’d hoped to sit in on a class, but the National Center for Transportation Research is just that—a research center and not a university, though several undergraduate and graduate students are inside their offices working

as research assistants on any of a number of projects at CUTR. He apologizes that he can’t show me any cool crash test centers or big labs. “We’re more on the soft side,” he says. “We’re just a bunch of researchers who do work on policy and management issues. We don’t have the fancy gadgets. Just the brains.”

We walk upstairs and follow the green tracks to the office of Sean Barbeau, Principal Mobile Software Architect for R&D (Research and Development). Sean, who has a PhD in Computer Science and Engineering, is in his mid-thirties, friendly and tall with blonde hair. He stands up from his desk as Joel introduces. “I told Laura Lee a bit about your work,” says Joel, “but can you tell her more?”

Sean invites me to sit down, and Joel waits in his office a few doors down. On the bulletin board to the right of Sean’s desk, I notice a picture of a Holstein cow ice-skating in a pink tutu, and I inquire about the artwork. “Oh, that’s a Chick-fil-A calendar,” he says. “Actually, I think it’s last year’s.”

He checks. It is—January 2015, which reveals how much a software engineer relies on a desk calendar. Less conspicuous items on his wall include several patents.

Sean has designed an app called the Traveler’s Assistance Device, which helps riders with intellectual disabilities remember the right bus stop. The idea originally came from a man named Mark Sheppard, who is a travel trainer—a sort of coach who helps riders with disabilities learn to navigate public transit. Mark told Sean that one of the biggest challenges



As President of the Council of University Transportation Centers (CUTC), a national organization made of 90 universities around the country, Joel served as the Master of Ceremonies for the CUTC Annual Awards Banquet last year. The Banquet serves as the unofficial kickoff for the Transportation Research Board Annual Meeting, which attracts about 13,000 people to Washington, DC every January. Here, Joel stands beside the keynote speaker and former USDOT Secretary Anthony Foxx (left) and Greg Winfree (right), former US Assistant Secretary of Transportation for Research and Technology. (Photo courtesy of Joel Volinski.)

for his passengers with cognitive disabilities is getting off the bus at the right time. “So we started looking at the problem, and it went from there,” explains Sean. He picks up the smartphone on his desk to show me how the app works. Before boarding the bus, a passenger inputs his route. When he approaches his stop, he receives two notifications—one telling him to “get ready” and then another to “pull the cord to request stop.” The alerts can come by text or a phone call, which is a recording of Mark’s voice. As someone who has missed her bus stop many times, I ask Sean if the app is available to me. He smiles. “Oh yeah,” he says. “I think that’s a universal problem even for people without intellectual disabilities. I’ve missed my stop before. Or you fall asleep on a long commute.” He predicts the app, for which he holds the

patent, will have multiple uses, though it is not yet publicly available.

I ask about the highlights of working in public transit, and Sean says, “There are a lot of interesting problems.” He gets satisfaction from solving them and playing with technology. “Smartphones are definitely here to stay,” he says, pointing to his, now back on the desk. “I think there are a lot of opportunities to leverage that technology and find better information. It’s exciting.”

**B**ack in the boardroom, Joel explains a few more programs they manage at CUTR, like the

Best Workplaces for Commuters, which recognizes companies that encourage employees to decrease the use of single-occupant vehicles. To qualify, an employer must offer at least one primary benefit that includes employer-paid tax-free transit, teleworking, or parking cash-out (enabling workers to trade free parking for its cash equivalent).

An award from the Best Workplaces for Commuters can be used as a marketing tool for companies to attract young talent. “Twenty-five percent fewer 16- to 24-year-olds are getting their driver’s license,” he says. “That used to be a rite of passage, but now many young people would rather focus on what they’re doing on their cell phone than have to worry about driving.” He makes the point clear that the shift away from personal cars has less to do with saving the environment than it does with people’s desire to use their time in transit productively. This extends to Millennials wanting real-time updates about when their bus will arrive, so they can sip on their coffee at Starbucks until the last minute. “They don’t want to spend their life waiting at a bus stop,” says Joel.

With smart phones and the arrival of automated or “driverless” cars, Joel predicts more change in transit in the next 10 or 15 years than there has been in the last 80. He leans forward and asks, “I mean, how many minutes a day do you use your car?”

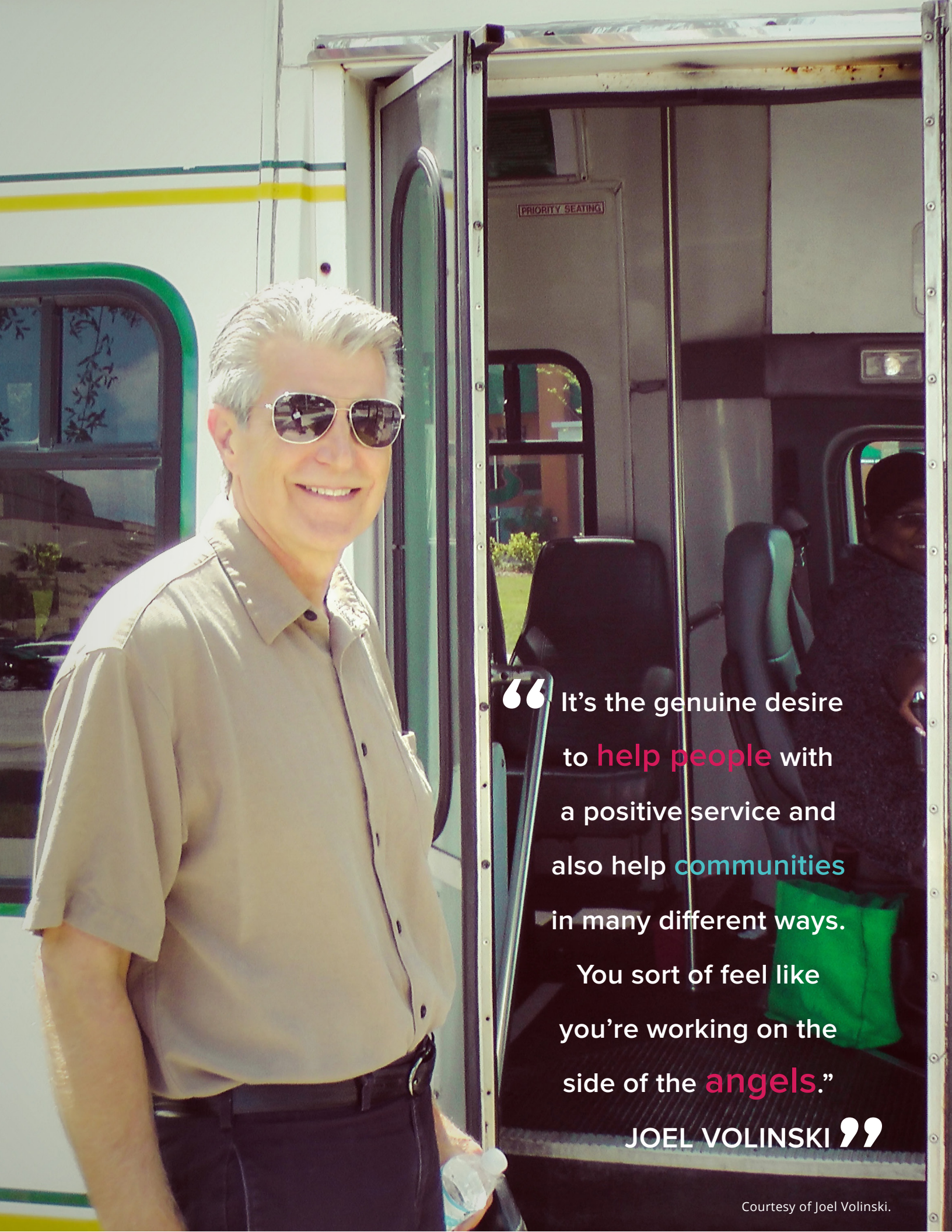
I tell him that it depends.

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I’m paying for it 24 hours a day,” he says. He tallies up his car expenses—insurance, gas, licensing, registration, maintenance, tolls, parking. “In the average American household, transportation is the second biggest expense,” he says. “More and more people are realizing, ‘Why am I doing this?’”

He refers to an experiment in Helsinki, Finland, where the idea is to have what’s called a “Package of Mobility.” A passenger will have a multimodal pass loaded with credits for Uber, for a bike-or-car-sharing program, or for a bus or train service. Each usage of different transportation options deducts credits from the passenger’s account—consolidating all the different modes of transportation into one place. In the U.S., some agencies are already implementing “first mile, last mile” programs that partner with Uber or Lyft to get passengers from home to the station, or from the station back home.



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With change happening so quickly, Joel says sometimes an official report is outdated the minute it's printed. "So what we've set up are listservs that provide the opportunity for practicing professionals to trade information rapidly with each other." He calls it a "mutual aid society," where over 10,000 people working in public transit can talk about issues they're facing on the job. To help me understand, he provides this example: "Someone can say, 'I've got this issue—my engine keeps dying under

with the equipment that the manufacturer is responsible for fixing."

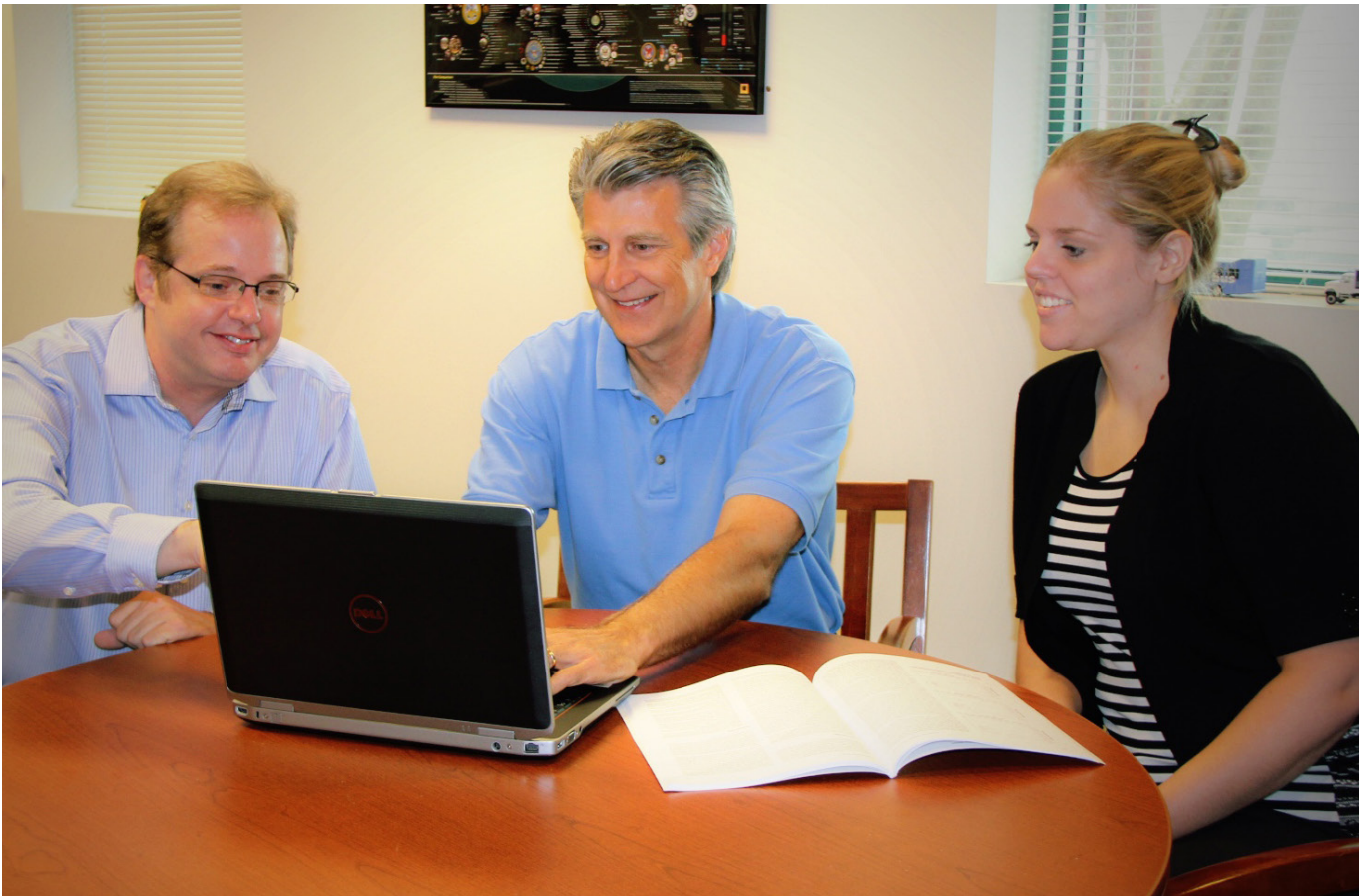
Conversations among members of the listserv are archived and searchable by key words, so that they can be referenced later. "It may not be the final word, but at least it's the current word," explains Joel. "You don't have to wait for a year and a half for a report to come out. It's almost instantaneous."



Joel Volinski in 2017. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

these circumstances, is anybody else having similar issues?' And within hours, they'll be getting responses from a whole bunch of people saying, 'Yeah, we're having the same problem.' That helps them know it is probably not a problem they caused due to poor maintenance, rather it is a problem

**T**he work Joel has devoted his life to didn't play any part in his childhood. He grew up in a small town in Long Island, and his dad was an Oldsmobile dealer by trade. He recalls watching an episode of *The Honeymooners*,



Joel Volinski in 2015 with Patrick Buddenbrock (left), NCTR Student of the Year, and Casey Jarrell, runner-up for the NCTR Student of the Year award. Both students have done exceptional work in the area of transit. (Photo courtesy of Joel Volinski)

where Jackie Gleason drives a bus in New York City, thinking it was a totally foreign concept. Ironically, he now has a poster of *The Honeymooners* signed by Jackie Gleason who lived in Broward County while Joel was the transit director.

Joel's eyes started to open in 1973, when he began his Masters in Urban Planning at Columbia University and found that he liked taking the subway. "You get to see your community more," he says. Otherwise, "When you think about it, you go from your private house or apartment into your private car and probably go into a private office, and you don't mix and mingle with anybody." On a train or bus, he says, you can look out

the window and see your community more clearly since you aren't focused on driving and sit next to a person who lives in your neighborhood but you don't know. "In that sense, you're more a part of your community. You're more connected and sympathetic to people who are different from you, as opposed to being behind locked doors and closed modules."

To Joel, mobility is a basic right. "You've got food, clothes, and shelter—okay," he says, "How can you get food and shelter without mobility?" To hammer home the point, he invokes Einstein. "Like he said, 'Nothing happens until something moves.'"

As obvious as it seems to him now, he concedes that he never considered a career in public transit before it was handed to him. “Growing up, you think of things like doctors and lawyers and engineers, and you kind of know what they do. If you ask somebody, ‘How about a career in public transit’, they look at you and say, ‘Why? You want me to be a bus driver or a train conductor?’” Joel laughs. “They don’t know much beyond that. But there are like 150 disciplines related to public transit. We like to joke we have research projects from A to Z, anthropology to zoology.”

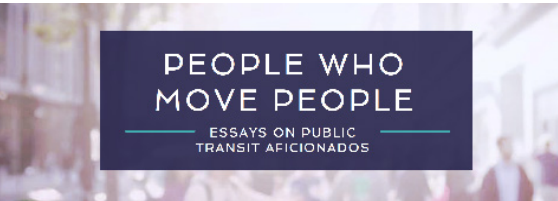
After nearly two hours in the boardroom, Joel has to get back to his University Transportation Center grants. We walk outside to take a picture in front of the university transit system, the Bull Runner, named after the USF mascot, and board the minibus for one stop.

Considering all the diverse disciplines that contribute to public transit, I ask Joel what he has in common with other industry professionals. “I think it’s the genuine desire to help people with a positive service and also help communities in many different ways,” he says. “You sort of feel like you’re working on the side of the angels.” ■



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](http://www.LLHuttenbach.com).

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