

movement on wheels

PROFILE OF JOHN LEWIS,
U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FOR GEORGIA'S FIFTH DISTRICT,
"BIG SIX" LEADER OF CIVIL RIGHTS

*Interview location: Congressman Lewis's office in Atlanta, Georgia, and aboard the Streetcar
He describes himself with the word "Patience."*

By Laura Lee Huttenbach



Congressman John Lewis in his office. Atlanta, GA - 2016 (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

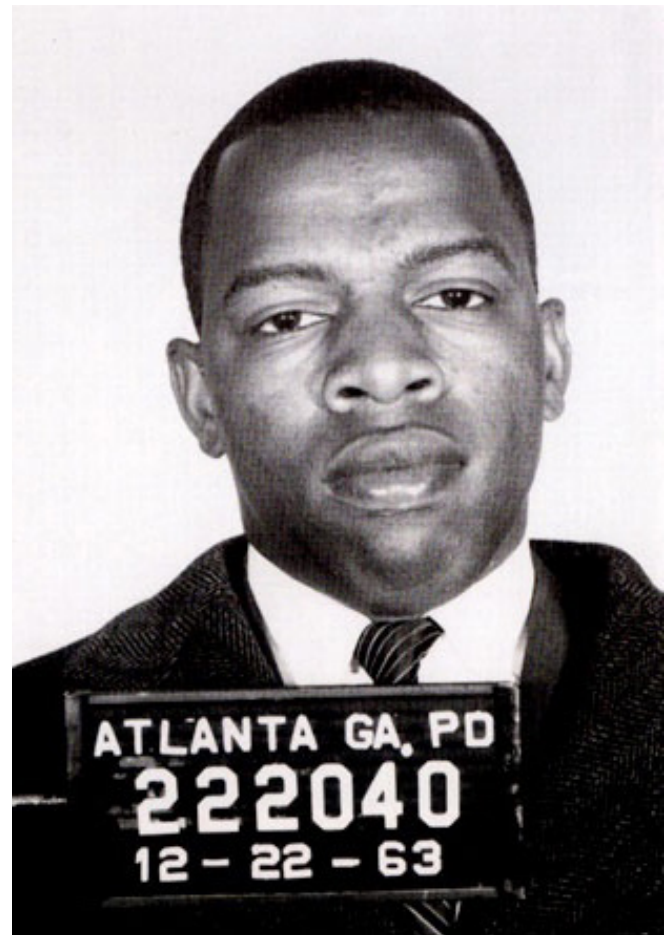
As the Greyhound pulled into the Rock Hill, South Carolina, bus station, the Ku Klux Klan readied their fists and pipes. It was May 9, 1961. The bus was carrying the "Freedom Riders," a group of men and women, black and white, traveling from Washington, D.C., to New Orleans. The passengers wanted to sit next to each other in the seats that they had chosen, and that was unacceptable in the Deep South; black people were supposed to sit in the back, and the races weren't allowed to share an adjoining seat. >

love in calculation

One Freedom Rider, a 21-year-old African-American college student named John Lewis, was sitting next to a white friend named Albert Bigelow. In Rock Hill, they stepped off the bus together and headed for the waiting room—which was designated for whites only. Before they set foot in the bus station, the Klan attacked them. “We were beaten,” recalls John Lewis, who is now a U.S. Representative for Georgia’s 5th Congressional District, “and left lying in a pool of blood.”

Today, 55 years later, Congressman Lewis and I are sitting in his Downtown Atlanta office. From the 19th-story window, we can see the Georgia State Capitol Building, sun shining off its gold dome. A streetcar is winding through the streets below, and a MARTA train is gliding across the tracks in the distance. This is my second time interviewing Congressman Lewis, whose work in civil rights has earned him recognition as one of the “Big Six” leaders of the Movement. He is a personal hero of mine.

The idea of a Freedom Ride, explains Congressman Lewis, was inspired by a decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Boynton v. Virginia*. In December 1958, Bruce Boynton, a black law student studying at Howard University in D.C., was on a



John Lewis mugshot from 1963.

Trailways bus home to Selma, Alabama, for Christmas break. When the bus made a stop in Richmond, Virginia, Boynton walked into the bus station’s whites-only restaurant and ordered food. The staff refused to serve him, but Boynton stood his ground. He wouldn’t leave the establishment without service, so police arrested him. Two weeks later, he was found guilty of trespassing, and fined. In his appeal, Boynton argued that the conviction violated his right to Equal Protection under the Interstate Commerce Act, which forbade discrimination in interstate passenger transportation.

Boynton won the case in court, but enforcement of the law in the Jim Crow South was a different story.

“So James Farmer, who was head of CORE—the Congress of Racial Equality—organized a test,” Congressman Lewis explains. “Thirteen of us volunteered to go on the Freedom Rides, whites and African Americans.” Meeting in Washington D.C., on the first of May, 1961, the Freedom Riders had two days of training in nonviolent protest. “The morning of May fourth, some boarded a Greyhound Bus and others boarded a Trailways bus,” says Congressman Lewis. “It [the Freedom Ride] left Washington in two separate groups.”

The first incident occurred in Charlotte, North Carolina. “A young African-American man attempted to get a shoe shine in a so-called white waiting room in a so-called white barber shop,” says Congressman Lewis. “He was arrested and taken to jail.” Then came Rock

Hill, where a punch square in the face sent Lewis to the ground. Klansmen kicked his sides and stomped on his head until he tasted blood.

“I got off the bus there,” says Congressman Lewis. “I was getting ready to graduate from college,” from Fisk University back in Nashville. “I was supposed to be joining the Ride in Montgomery, but people never made it to Montgomery.”

Speaking with Congressman Lewis makes me realize how much movement was involved in the Civil Rights Movement. “Transportation—the buses in particular but also the trains,” he tells me, “played a major role in the whole struggle for civil rights and social change.”

John Lewis was born in 1940. Growing up on a cotton farm in Troy, Alabama, about an hour south of Montgomery, he didn’t ride public transit as a kid. People back then had personal automobiles or a mule and cart. He attended segregated schools and had little to no interaction, positive or negative, with white people. He always wanted to be a minister, and he practiced his oratory skills on the chickens he raised. “I used to preach to those chickens,” says Congressman Lewis, nodding. “I’d baptize them.” He pauses for a moment as a wry smile spreads across his face. “They tended to listen to me much better than some of my colleagues today.”

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Congressman Lewis heard that a woman named Rosa Parks was taken to jail when she refused to give up her seat to a white passenger. “It meant something to me, knowing that African-Americans could not sit near the front,” he says. For black bus riders, the indignity of being shunted to the back was daily and unavoidable. “Many people didn’t have cars,” he says. “People had to go places—to work, to shop. In a city like Atlanta or Nashville, [a bus] was the only way to get to a job.”

At 15, Congressman Lewis had never ridden on public transit. But on the radio a few days after Rosa Parks’ arrest, he heard a speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (himself a Big Six leader) at the Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, just after the crowd had voted to boycott the buses. In the speech, Dr. King set the parameters for the boycott, making it clear that the campaign should be nonviolent. “There will be no crosses burned at any bus stops in Montgomery,” said Dr. King. “There will be no white person pulled out of their homes and taken out on some distant road and lynched for not cooperating.” The only weapon to be used in the boycott, he said, was nonviolent protest. “Let us be Christian in all of our actions,” he said, adding one distinction. “It isn’t enough for us to talk about love . . . There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation. Justice is correcting that which revolts against love.” Dr. King himself had never ridden on a bus in Montgomery; he had a car. “But,” he said, “I would be less than a Christian if I stood back and said, ‘Because I don’t have

A photograph of a man in a dark suit and light blue shirt, seen from the side and back, looking out of a window. Outside the window, a building with a sign that partially reads "centenni" is visible. The image is used as a background for the quote on the right side of the page.

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MLK”



Atlanta Streetcar operator, introducing himself to Congressman Lewis in 2016 (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

to ride a bus, that it doesn't concern me.” Instead, he offered his own automobile and gas to organize carpools for workers who couldn't get to work on the bus.

The protest lasted a full year. By the end of 1956, the Montgomery bus company was nearly bankrupt, and in *Browder v. Gayle*, the Supreme Court outlawed bus segregation laws in Alabama. But again, a law requires enforcement.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott and Dr. King's

trains to go from one part of the country to another,” he says. “You go to Chicago, and there's so many people that can be traced back to Mississippi.” Leaning forward, he ponders, “If it hadn't been for buses and trains, I don't know what would've happened to a whole generation of people.”

He asks if I've heard of A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. When I admit that I haven't, he doesn't admonish me. Instead, he tells me the story. In the 1920s, the Pullman Company, a manufacturer and

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words sparked an internal revolution within John Lewis, who, five years later, would become a passenger aboard the Freedom Ride through the same city. But, as he tells the story, the Congressman encourages me to look deeper in history—long before Montgomery—to understand the significance of transportation. He reminds me of the Great Migration, when, between 1916 and 1970, six million black Americans from the rural South moved north and west across the United States. “That was people boarding buses and

operator of railroad cars that introduced the sleeping car aboard railway trains, was the largest single employer of black Americans, who worked as porters—sleeping car attendants who waited on passengers and made up their berths. In 1925, Randolph became the leader of the first-ever labor union for black workers, who were ineligible for promotions and whose dignity was assaulted by their supervisors who regularly called every black worker “George,” which was the first name of Pullman's founder.

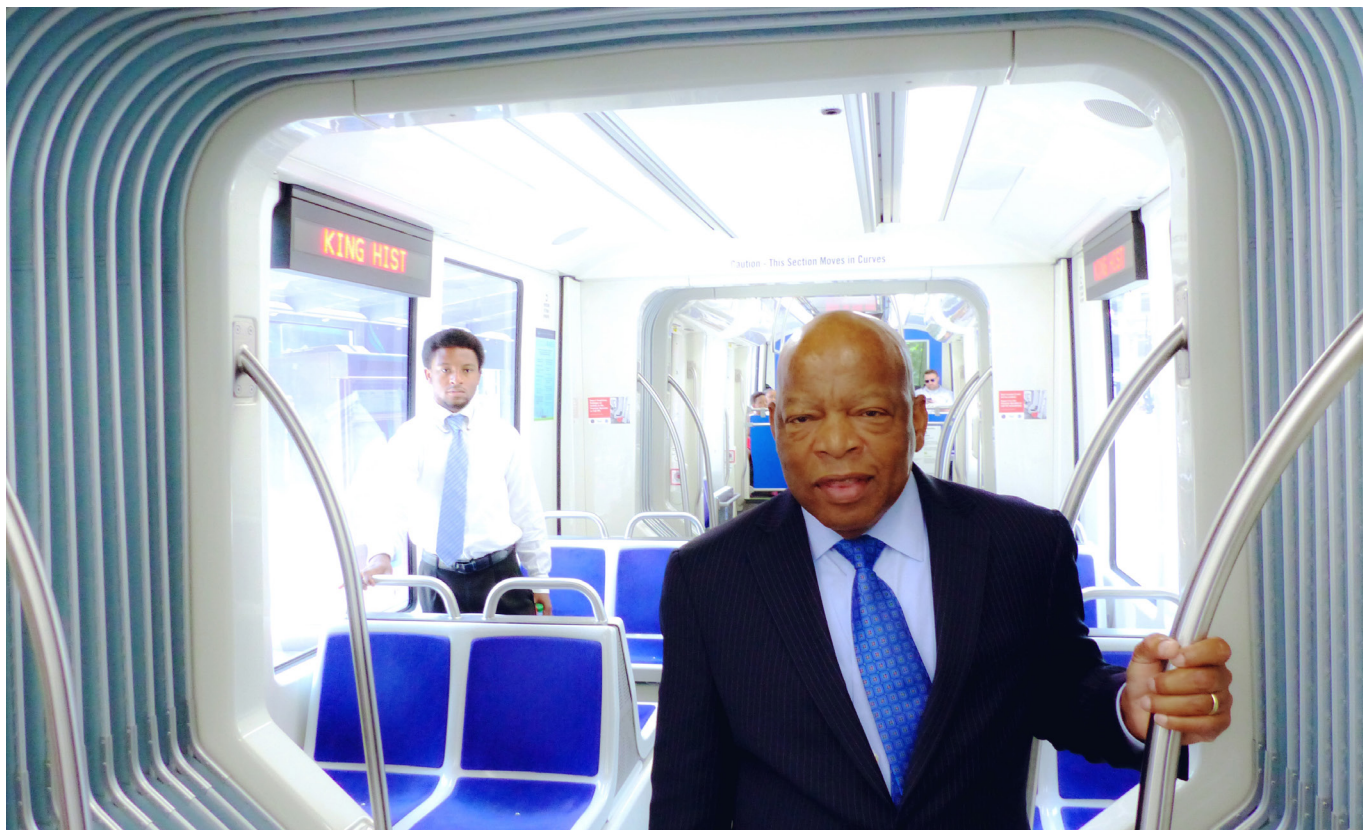
Many years later, in 1963, Congressman Lewis would stand next to Randolph at the March on Washington, which Randolph organized and where Lewis addressed the audience before Dr. King gave his iconic “I Have a Dream” speech. Today Randolph, too, is considered one of the Big Six Leaders of Civil Rights.

Since Congressman Lewis’s election to the House of Representatives in 1986, he has fought for Atlanta constituents to have access to transportation. “Being able to move around is a human right,” he says. “A public transportation system—the capacity to move people—is needed more now than ever before to be able to enjoy life—to shop, to get to work, to get to school.” Most recently, he helped secure a Federal Transit Administration grant of \$47 million to build Atlanta’s streetcar, which made its first run at

the end of 2014. The 2.7-mile track loops around downtown Atlanta with twelve stops that include Centennial Olympic Park and the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site.

In Atlanta, the streetcar has received a fair amount of criticism for low ridership and expensive maintenance. But Congressman Lewis believes it will prove to be good for the city. “I’ve seen streetcars in other parts of the world and in San Francisco,” he says. “It’s successful in connecting neighborhoods.” He hopes MARTA, Atlanta’s main transit system, will expand, too. “I think our transit system here is one of the best systems in America,” he says.

Smiling, he recalls his first impression of public transit in New York, where he lived



Congressman John Lewis on the Atlanta Streetcar in 2016 (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)



for a year in 1966. “When I first went there, I used to think that the worst thing you can do to someone who grew up in the rural South like I did would be to take [them] to New York City and drop [them] off at Grand Central Station at 5 pm, and say, ‘You’re on your own. Make it.’” Considering Congressman Lewis’ history, it’s a pretty strong statement. “But I learned the system,” he continues, though he admits, “In cities like New York, I just love to walk.”

This afternoon, in the sticky summer heat of Georgia, Congressman Lewis is taking his first ride on the streetcar with me. As we exit his office building the streetcar is passing by, and our timing is perfect to make it to the stop. But everyone from the security guard to a tourist on the sidewalk recognizes Congressman Lewis and asks to take a picture with him. When the streetcar stops at a light, I break into a sprint until I’m outside the operator’s window, asking him to hold the streetcar for Congressman Lewis, who’s still in the midst of camera flashes. The operator grudgingly obliges, with the caveat that he is “on a schedule.”

As he takes his seat, Congressman Lewis remarks, “It’s a nice car.” It is nice. It’s white, clean, quiet, and smells fresh. A family interrupts us, asking to take a picture. Congressman Lewis waves their son over. “Come on, young brother,” he says. A stop or two later, the streetcar has to wait for three minutes to get back on schedule, so the operator comes back to shake Congressman Lewis’s hand. “How you doing, sir?” says Congressman Lewis. “I’m honored to be on this train.”

“I’m honored to have you,” says the operator, introducing himself as Ruffner. “Thank you for everything, sir. I appreciate you.” Congressman Lewis asks how long he’s been driving, and Operator Ruffner says it’s been a little over a year.

“You look too young to be operating this thing,” the Congressman jokes. We laugh, and Ruffner returns to the wheel, wishing us a good ride.

An old building on Luckie Street catches Congressman Lewis’s attention. “That used to be Herren’s Restaurant,” he says, “one of the first restaurants [in Atlanta] to desegregate.” Despite Klan pickets and bomb threats, Herren’s Restaurant became an integrated establishment in 1963. Lewis adds that the food lived up to the reputation; their seafood plate was delicious.

“Did you have a favorite form of protest?” I ask.

“Marches,” he says, adding, “It’s that movement.” He looks out the window. “At the sit-in, you’re just sitting, waiting to be served. But with marches or on a bus, you’re in motion. You’re

going from town to town, bringing the movement on wheels. It was a drama, to be moving.” Our ride only lasts fifteen minutes, and we get off the streetcar at Woodruff Park. Congressman Lewis can’t take two steps without someone rushing up to him, offering praise and gratitude. One woman in a business suit comes running up. “Hi, Ambassador Young!” she says, mistaking him for Andrew Young, Atlanta’s former mayor. Congressman Lewis chuckles, gently correcting the woman. “I’m Congressman Lewis,” he says.

responds, “I appreciate you.” From across the path, a man stands up from his perch on the ledge of a fountain. “Everybody stay around here!” he says. “Mr. Lewis is gonna buy us all lunch!” Congressman Lewis, gracefully demurs. “Oh, I wish I could afford it,” he says. A woman wearing a short cheetah-print dress tells him he is one of her icons. “Sir,” she says, “Can I take a picture with you?” She hands her phone to me, and I snap the photo. Before she walks away, he says, “Make sure



John Lewis in 2016, greeting streetcar riders in Atlanta, GA (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

Embarrassed, the woman covers her mouth and apologizes. “It’s okay,” he says. “You knew it was one of us. He’s a good friend, like a big brother.”

Continuing through Woodruff Park, men sitting on a park bench tip their hats to him. “Good to see you,” says Congressman Lewis. Somebody

you drink lots of water today,” he says. “It’s hot out here.” He calls out greetings to other people in the park—“How you doing, my dear? Good to see you, my brother!” A man walks up carrying a brown paper bag from Kinko’s and pulls a sheet of paper from his copies. “I want to give you this poem I wrote,”

he says. “I was just thinking about you, and here you are.” Congressman Lewis thanks the man, saying he looks forward to reading the poem. As we cross the street back to his office, an older man says, “Hey, Mr. Lewis! How you doin’?”

“Fine, brother,” says Congressman Lewis. “It’s good to see you.”

“You doin’ a good thing. Keep doing what you doing,” says the man. “You the last of the Mohicans.”

“Thank you, sir,” says Congressman Lewis.

“That’s real, sir. You should run for president.”

“No,” says Congressman Lewis with a

chuckle. “I’m too old. Don’t have any interest.”

After the encounter at the bus station in Rock Hill on May 9, 1961, John Lewis returned to Nashville with cuts and bruises to attend his college graduation from Fisk University. The Freedom Ride, however, went on without him. Six days later, the Freedom Riders on the Greyhound bus were pulling into the station in Anniston, Alabama. A mob of Klansmen with clubs and pipes and chains surrounded the bus. They slashed tires and cracked windows, but they couldn’t get onto the bus. When the police arrived, they made no arrests, but they escorted the bus to the city limits, where some 40 cars and pickups took over. Most of the drivers were from the Ku Klux Klan wearing their Sunday best, many coming



John Lewis stands to the left of Martin Luther King Jr. as President Kennedy meets with leaders of the March on Washington at the White House on August 28, 1963. (Photo by MPI/Getty Images)

straight from the Mother's Day church service. On an isolated stretch of highway, the angry mob drove the Greyhound off the road. Someone threw a rock through the window, followed by flaming rags, drenched in kerosene, that quickly engulfed the bus seats. The Freedom Riders inhaled black smoke and thought they were going to suffocate. Outside, the mob blocked the bus doors, yelling slurs, threatening the riders with death if they tried to escape. Fortunately, the fire spread to two fuel tanks, which exploded and scared the mob away. This allowed some riders to flee the bus, but others were still trapped and many were wounded. When state troopers called for emergency medical services, ambulances refused to carry black passengers. Hospitals would not treat black patients.

Around the same time, the Trailways bus with the other half of the Freedom Riders was pulling into the station, again, at Anniston. This time, Klansmen were already on board and advising their friends outside how to get to the Freedom Riders. After a lot more blood was spilled, Attorney General Robert Kennedy called for a "cooling off period," and CORE suspended the Freedom Ride.

From Nashville, says Congressman Lewis, "I started to organize, to pick up where they left off." He didn't want to cool off or give up. Three days after the Anniston bus burning, "on Wednesday, May 17th, a group of us, African Americans and whites, students in Nashville, boarded a bus to pick up the Freedom Ride." They made it to the city limit of Birmingham, where Bull Connor, the city's Commissioner of Public Safety, stopped the

bus and came on board. "He asked to see all of our tickets," recalls Congressman Lewis. "Our tickets read, 'From Nashville to Birmingham, from Birmingham to Montgomery, Montgomery to Jackson, Mississippi, from Jackson to New Orleans.'" Connor looked at a young white man sitting next to a young black man at the front of the bus and ordered them to move. "They refused to move," says Congressman Lewis. "They were arrested and taken to jail."

When the bus arrived at the station in Birmingham, Commissioner Connor "let all of the regular bus passengers off the bus and ordered us to stay on." He announced he was putting the Freedom Riders in "protective custody." He ordered the local police to cover the bus windows with cardboard and newspaper, "so the people and the photographers couldn't see what was happening." That night, the Freedom Riders went to jail—just one of Congressman Lewis's 40-plus arrests for civil disobedience. "We stayed in jail that Wednesday night, and Thursday night," says Lewis. "Early Friday morning" —he holds the word "early" for a full note, as if he were preaching a rousing sermon— "[Connor] decided to take us to the Alabama-Tennessee state line and left us. We didn't know what was going to happen. It was Klan territory."

They walked across some railroad tracks, where an older African American couple gave the Riders refuge in their home. That afternoon, a student from Nashville drove down to pick them up. By 5 pm, John and the Freedom Riders were back at the bus



In 1965, John Lewis (far right) with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (center) leads a march in Alabama from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. (© Steve Schapiro/Corbis)

station in Birmingham, sitting on a parked Greyhound, when the bus driver made an announcement. “The bus driver said, in effect, ‘I only have one life to give, and I’m not going to give it to CORE or the NAACP,’” recalls Congressman Lewis. “We stayed in the Greyhound Bus Station that whole night.” The following morning, another driver finally agreed to drive, pulling out of the station with a police escort, a plane flying overhead, and two officials from Greyhound on board. “My seatmate and I were riding behind the bus driver,” says Congressman Lewis. “Then we get to the Greyhound bus station in Montgomery, [and] the plane disappears.” The patrol cars peeled off, too.

“The very moment that we started down the steps, the bus was surround by press, by reporters and photographers,” he says. That’s when the Klan stepped in. “Several of the reporters were beaten. Cameras were destroyed . . . if you had a pencil and a pad,

you were in trouble. My seatmate and myself were caught up against the wall and literally beaten.” He says that people, including women and children, came from every corner wielding makeshift weapons—baseball bats, chains, tire irons, and even hoes and rakes. Somehow, one camera managed to escape the destruction and capture John in his suit and white shirt, torn and stained with blood. “It was very, very, very dangerous,” says Congressman Lewis, each very making the hair on my arm stand taller.

Klansmen ripped his briefcase from his fingers and bashed him in the head with it until he was unconscious. That’s when somebody cracked a wooden Coca-Cola crate against his skull. A few of his fellow Freedom Riders— young women, black and white—tried to get to safety in a taxi, but when they climbed in the car, the cab driver informed them, “I can’t drive. It’s against the law in Alabama for black people and white people to be driving in a cab

together.” Congressman Lewis is shaking his head remembering the story. “One of the black women told the cab driver, ‘You move over. I will drive. I will drive the cab.’”

Also in Montgomery that day was John Seigenthaler, an assistant to Robert Kennedy, who had come to negotiate with Governor John Patterson on behalf of the Justice Department to give protection to the Freedom Riders. “John Seigenthaler saw these young women being chased by members of the mob,” recalls Congressman Lewis, “and told them to jump in [his car], that he was a federal man, and he would help them.” In an interview that I watched later, Seigenthaler recalled, “There was a skinny young kid, and he was sort of dancing in front of this young woman, punching her, and I could see, as she turned her head, blood from her nose and mouth.” The young woman declined Seigenthaler’s assistance, urging him, “Mister, please, we don’t want you to get hurt.” That moment, “Somebody walked up and hit him in the head with a lead pipe,” recalls Congressman Lewis. Seigenthaler was left unconscious, lying under a car.

Though he woke up and recovered, “that made President Kennedy and his brother, Bobby Kennedy, really angry,” continues Congressman Lewis. “So the city of Montgomery was put under martial law.” Federal troops protected the Freedom Riders as they carried on to Jackson, Mississippi, where jails accommodated them. That summer, more than 400 people traveled to Jackson “and they were all arrested in put in jail,” says Congressman Lewis. It was one of the first times the Civil Rights Movement used the “jail, no bail” tactic. “Finally President Kennedy [and] Bobby Kennedy got the Interstate Commerce Commission to issue an order

banning racial discrimination and segregation on means of public transportation. It went into effect on November the first, 1961.”

When Congressman Lewis finishes telling me about the Freedom Ride, he sighs.

“How many times do you think you’ve told that story?” I ask.

“Several,” he says. “I don’t know how many times. Many, many times.”

“How do you get the energy to keep telling it?”

“You have to do it,” he says. “It’s so important for young people to know what happened, how it happened, and to believe that change is possible.” I ask how he finds the strength to

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And **love** the hell out of everybody.

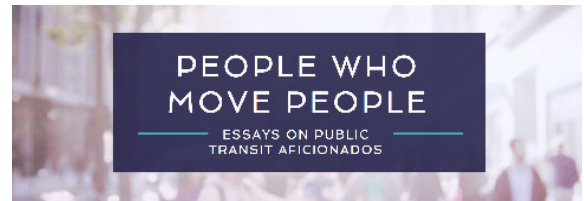
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have civil conversations with people who hurt him so violently, and he tells me about one day in February 2009 when a man in his seventies from Rock Hill, South Carolina, came into his office in D.C. “His son was with him,” recalls Congressman Lewis. “He came to my office and said, ‘Mr. Lewis, I’m one of the people who beat you and your seatmate. I’d been a member of the Klan.’ He said, ‘I want to apologize. Will you accept my apology? Will you forgive me?’” He inhales. “His son started crying. Then he started crying. He hugged me, and I hugged him back, and I started crying.”

“Hate is too heavy a burden to bear,” Congressman Lewis tells me. “Put it down. Believe in the capacity for people and situations to change. And love the hell out of everybody.” ■



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.



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.