

right by my old trolleys

PROFILE OF SHIRLEY DELIBERO,
former CEO of the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County
(METRO) and New Jersey Transit Corporation (NJ Transit)

*Interview location: her condo in Milton, Massachusetts and Ashmont Grill in
Dorchester, Massachusetts*

*How we got there: by Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA)
When asked to describe herself in one word, she says, “Tenacious.”*

By Laura Lee Huttenbach



Shirley DeLibero, in front of her old trolleys in Milton, Massachusetts, in September 2017. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

In public transportation circles, Shirley DeLibero is known as the Queen of Transit. Over the course of a career that spanned three decades, she improved transportation at agencies in Boston; Washington, DC; Dallas; New Jersey; and finally Houston, where, as CEO of the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (METRO), she oversaw the construction of the METRORail, the city’s first light rail. Her efforts in Houston were recognized with a building named in her honor, the Shirley A. DeLibero Rail Operations Center. “Everybody thinks, *Oh you’ve had a great career. You have a building named after you,*” says Shirley, sitting in the living room of her condo in Milton, Massachusetts. “But they don’t understand some of the nuances that you go through. I had a lot of hard nights.” >

a real awakening

Shirley was born in 1937 and raised in Falmouth, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod, a fact betrayed by her Eastern Massachusetts accent. Her parents and grandparents had emigrated from Cape Verde, an island country off the northwest coast of Africa. “It was a great way of growing up,” she says. “Living on the Cape, I feared nothing and everybody loved me.”

Her family moved to Boston when she was fourteen. “That was a real awakening,” she says. “I remember coming home from school and telling my mom someone called me ‘n-----.’ I’d never heard that word. It sounded funny to me.” Cape Cod, she says, “kept me innocent. Boston was reality. It’s been like that since.”

Shirley married shortly out of high school, and she and her husband had two sons before the union fell apart. As a newly single mom, Shirley got a job on an assembly line, making widgets for circuit break boards. In 1976, she was inspired by a campaign by Governor Michael Dukakis encouraging women to work for the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA). Shirley interviewed for a position as a project manager for a team that refurbished streetcars. She was hired to



Shirley at home in September 2017. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

oversee sand blasters, painters, welders, and pipe fitters, working in the “car barn,” where trolley cars were repaired or refurbished.

At the time, she says, “Having a woman and a minority in that position was a really big deal. The T was pretty white, male, Catholic, Irish.” Employees didn’t take kindly to the new leadership, and her office door became a canvas for hate. Some mornings, when she arrived at work, racial slurs were carved into her door. “Nasty words,” she says. “‘Black bitch,’ that was one I remember.” She’d call an employee to sand out the slur. “When the guy was sanding my door, he’d say, ‘Oh, I can’t *believe* that someone wrote this,’” she recalls, shaking her head and smiling a coy smile. “It was probably *him* that wrote it.” From all the sanding, her office door became thin.

When she walked through the car barn, employees cursed at her and shouted racist and misogynist epithets. She says she never got visibly upset or tried to fight back. “I wasn’t vindictive,” she says. “I just said, It’s someone’s ignorance. I’m not going to play into that. I think that’s what helped me eventually to get them on my side.”

The means by which Shirley got her team onto her side were unusual. The streetcars were prone to a mechanical problem: the doors closed too hard and latched in place. In one instance, the doors closed on a passenger's arm and dragged her down the street. "The chief mechanical officer, who was my boss, wanted me to keep all the vehicles in that day until we found out what caused the problem," Shirley says. "I was going crazy trying to figure it out, and I had my best engineers looking at it."

That night, while Shirley was at home puzzling over the issue, the phone rang. The caller wouldn't identify himself, and she couldn't recognize the voice. "He said, 'I know what the problem is,'" recalls Shirley. He told her that the culprit was a plate in the door that held the spring. "He said, 'We need

to back the screw off and give it more play.'" The following morning, he instructed, she should call the whole team together and announce that she'd discovered a solution. She asked the caller again to identify himself. He said, "You don't need to know."

Shirley looked deeper into the plate's schematics. There were over 2,300 moving parts in a trolley door, and the caller's suggestion sounded too simple to be true. Driving to work the following day, she considered that he might be setting her up. "But my mother always told me sometimes people try to do good things in mysterious ways," she says. "So I thought maybe this guy was trying to help me." That morning, she called her employees together and announced that she had found a solution to the problem. "All the guys were laughing, saying, 'What does she know?'" Shirley says. She sent one of her mechanics—"the biggest loudmouth"—down to fix it. "Meanwhile I was sweating bullets," she says. "I was either gonna be a hero or a jerk." When the mechanic returned, he said, "Well I'll be damned. She's right. It works."

To this day, Shirley doesn't know who gave her the tip. "Somebody wanted to help me," she says. "I said, 'That must be my guardian angel.'" The incident marked a turning point in Shirley's relationship with her staff. At the car barn, the name-calling stopped. Her office door stayed clean. "The guys became a lot more friendly," she says. "I don't know if they liked me, but at least they started to respect me."

When she speaks about the abuse she endured at the MBTA, she doesn't sound angry or bitter. "How did you not take that personally?" I ask.



Shirley DeLibero, 2017. (Photo used with permission by Shirley DeLibero.)



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"It's hard not to take it personal," she says. "You do take it personal. I thought several times, *Maybe this isn't the job for me.*" She admits she knew little about refurbishing streetcars when she was hired. "But I tried to learn everything I could," she says. "I took every schematic home. I learned how to put it together. I figured I could do this job as good as anyone."

I ask how she remained so confident in her abilities. "There were nine of us in my family, and I'm the next to the youngest," she says. "I've always been thinking I can do anything."

Despite the hostility at the car barn, Shirley enjoyed her foray into the field of public transit. "When you're doing widgets, you really never have a sense of satisfaction that you're providing a service that's really needed," she says. "In transit, you do get that. You know you're taking people to work, to their place of worship, to the doctor. You're doing something for somebody that's quantifiable." At the MBTA, she made a promise to herself. "I said, I'm going to be a general manager some day. That became my goal."

Shirley knew that if she wanted to become a general manager she'd need experience working in different modes of transit. The MBTA had taught her about streetcars. To learn about buses, she moved to Washington, DC, where she worked as a regional manager for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA). She was soon promoted to director, overseeing nine bus garages across DC, Maryland, and Virginia. In her final year, she managed the WMATA Metrorail.

At WMATA, a member of the board of directors named Thomas Downs ended up having an extreme influence on Shirley's career. Downs was a friend of the CEO of Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART). DART was looking for a deputy executive, and in 1987, at Downs's suggestion, Shirley interviewed for the position and got the job. "I had bus [experience]. Had streetcars. Had a year of rails," she says. "This gave me the political side. It gave me the opportunity to learn about funding. As the number two, I'd run everything inside. I knew if I ever wanted to be a CEO, politics played a major role."

In 1990, she heard from Downs again. He was now the Commissioner of Transportation for the State of New Jersey, and he was looking for a new executive director at New Jersey Transit Corporation (NJ Transit). Shirley interviewed for the position and was hired. "Off I moved to New Jersey," she says, smiling. "We were extending a line. We built two or three new stations. We had a lot of new construction. I had the whole State of New Jersey. We had trains going into Philadelphia and New York. God, I loved it."

On management, she implemented a strategy of “wandering around.” She didn’t want to be stuck in her office. She wanted to talk to people and know what was going on. “I was in the field,” she says. “People have such a sense of pride when you come to them. Bus garages were immaculate.” Plus, with her background in the car barn, she could speak the mechanic’s language. She knew how to take a bus apart and put it back together. “I always had the philosophy that if you take care of the people, they’ll take care of the product,” she says.

She believes in hiring to her weaknesses. “A lot of people want to hire people who can finish their sentences,” she says, “but I want to hire people that know what I don’t know. It’s hard to hire to your weaknesses, though. You have to be confident.”

Every Friday afternoon, from two to four, she had an open door policy at her office. “I told people, ‘Come and chat with me about anything.’” For an annual United Way fundraiser, she raised money by raffling off five-dollar tickets to employees. She drew five names of employees whom she invited to her home for dinner. “I cooked for them,” she recalls. She wanted people from different positions in the company to eat at the same table, and she wanted to be accessible to her employees. “I think that’s what’s been part of my success,” she says. “Before, they never saw the guy in charge. I wanted to be more visible.”

By 1999, Shirley was 62 years old and thinking about retirement. That’s when she got a call from

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Houston Mayor Lee Brown, asking her to become the CEO of Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (METRO).

“He said he wanted to build a light rail in Houston,” recalls Shirley. “He wanted it to be his legacy.”

Shirley respected Mayor Brown and wanted to work for him, but she wasn’t going to do it without proper compensation. “I gave him all these ridiculous requests,” she says. “Bill Clinton was president at the time. He was making two hundred thousand dollars. I said I wanted two hundred ten.” She also asked for five weeks’ vacation and a pension improvement. Until she found a place to live in Houston, she wanted to stay at the Four Seasons. “Everything I said, he said yes,” she recalls. “So I said, I guess I gotta come. Off I went to Houston.”

After an hour and a half at her apartment, Shirley and I walk a block to the Milton stop of the MBTA's Red Line. A streetcar takes us three stops to Dorchester, where we eat lunch at the Ashmont Grill. Over her Greek salad, Shirley tells me more about her time in Houston. In 1999, Mayor Brown was already in his second of three two-year terms, and he wanted the light rail running before he left office. Shirley knew it would be a battle to get Texans enthusiastic about a light rail. "People in Dallas didn't want to get out of their cars, and in Houston, it was the same thing," she says.

A lot of people in Houston didn't want the Metro built, and Shirley was a target for opposition. News broke that Shirley's resume included a piece of information that was untrue. "It said I had an associate's degree," she tells me, although she had never attended college. She'd listed the associate's degree back in the seventies, to help her land the job at the widget factory. "I had two young kids. I needed a job. I made it up," she says. "I shouldn't have done that. It was stupid, but it helped. I proved myself and never thought of it again."

Mayor Brown faced pressure to fire Shirley, but he refused, saying that he'd never even seen her resume; he'd hired her because of her professional achievements. He didn't want to sanction her for her misdeeds, but she insisted. "I would've punished a bus operator for lying on a resume," she says. She apologized publicly and took a month without pay. "People really wanted my head," she says. "They made sure that they put [me] on the front page. I'm just glad I was

good at what I did." She is adamant that lying was wrong, and she regrets doing it. But she is at peace with the predicament. "If that's the worst thing I do in my career, I'm okay with it," she tells me.

Houston broke ground on the METRORail in March 2001. Shirley worked long hours to get everything done. "I'd leave early and come home after ten p.m. from town hall meetings," she says. "At these meetings, thirty people would get up to speak, and nobody had something nice to say. In the beginning it looked like it was never going to happen."

But it did happen. On January 1, 2004, with a conductor's assistance, Mayor Brown operated the first train ride on the METRORail. Shirley rode in the VIP car with dignitaries and the board of directors. "That was the best day of my life," she says. Mayor Brown left office the following day. Shirley meant to retire immediately after the opening, but she says, "Houston had the World Series and Super Bowl that year, so the new mayor asked me to stay on for a couple months to transition leadership." I ask if she thought public transit had something to do with those events running smoothly. "I think so," she says. As to whether she was given sufficient credit for her contribution to their successes, she says, "I got tickets on the fifty-yard line. I was happy."

But the City of Houston had even more ways to show Shirley their gratitude. After its successful launch, in April, METRORail's Operations Center became the Shirley A. DeLibero Rail Operations Center.

In June 2004, Shirley moved back to Boston. Her search for a condo near the city was, naturally, influenced by transit. When touring one apartment with a view of nearby tracks of the T, “I saw the trolley coming down the tracks,” she recalls. “I saw the number on the car was the same number of the last trolley I refurbished.” She took it as a sign. “So here I am,” she says, smiling. “Right by my old trolleys.”



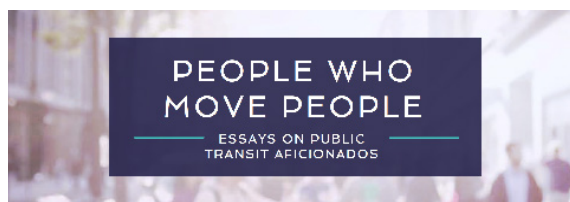
Shirley, remembering her induction into APTA's Hall of Fame. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

Two years later, in recognition of her storied career in transit, Shirley was inducted into the American Public Transportation Association's Hall of Fame. By then she was happily settled into retirement and enjoying her freedom. (APTA has also named an annual scholarship in Shirley's honor.) These days, she enjoys spending time with her grandchildren. She also likes to travel. “I say I'm spending my children's inheritance,” she says. She recently took her granddaughter to Paris and her grandson to South Africa, and she's just returned from a trip to Greece, where she swam in the Aegean Sea but regrets that she can't go SCUBA diving anymore. “The water was transparent,” she says. Her recent travels also include a trip to Las Vegas, where she saw the Michael Jackson Cirque du Soleil Show and a J-Lo concert. “I'm happy J-Lo is dating Alex Rodriguez,” she adds. “Finally, he's someone up to her caliber.”

Shirley and I finish our lunch and head our separate ways, she to her home beside the trolley tracks and I to catch a train. Before we part, she gives me an invitation to her upcoming eightieth birthday party. The invitation displays a photo of her standing in front of the Houston building that bears her name. Beneath the photo, the headline reads *Great Life, Accomplished Career, Awesome Sons, Super Grandkids*. Shirley believes confidence is a healthy thing, and she knows she has a lot to celebrate. “You gotta like yourself,” says the Queen of Transit. “And I like me.”



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.