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Media Release

District alumni come full circle as employees of CCSD

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Charleston, SC – Long before Charleston County School District (CCSD) school buses had cameras or radios for school bus drivers to communicate with dispatch, buses were driven by high school students.

It was a nation-wide trend and a way for teenagers to earn money.

The job was a coveted and highly sought after position. It was also a celebrated one in which drivers from each school were highlighted in their yearbook.

The U.S. Labor Department eventually announced in February of 1988 that 17-year-olds must stop driving school buses in North and South Carolina.

Under exemptions that had been renewed annually by the Labor Department, the two states had been allowed to hire 16-and 17-year-old bus drivers. The department ended the states' use of 16-year-old drivers in December of 1987. It was all to tighten up enforcement of the rules of child labor.

At the time, South Carolina had 6,000 school bus drivers, of whom 1,200 were 17 years old. Students who were employed as drivers were put through a selection and training process, after which they were tested and certified by the state department of education. Requirements and training varied from state to state.

The way it was

Several James Island High classmates, who are now also employed by CCSD look back fondly on those days. In the late 1980's, these students earned an average of \$50 a week driving school buses for CCSD.

Libby Smalls-Tisdale grew up on James Island. She walked through a pathway leading to EME Apartments with older siblings, where they caught the school bus.

They had to trudge through rain and cold to catch the bus and often arrived at school or at home soaked to the bone. When she learned there was an opportunity to drive a bus, rather than wait on one, she jumped at the opportunity. When she found out she could get paid for it, she was even more thrilled.

Smalls-Tisdale enrolled in a two-day session to learn how to drive stick-shift. She passed the written exam but had some trouble with the driving portion.

"It was challenging for a female because there was no one to help me practice," said Smalls-Tisdale. "It was scary the first time. I kept messing up the clutch and there was an elderly man grading me and he started fussing and told me to park the bus and get out of the driver's seat. He showed me how to do it again so I just watched and kept practicing in my head."

Smalls-Tisdale went back a second time, determined to pass. She did it and was soon assigned a route near her home. She knew the kids on the route and their parents, which made the transition from being a rider to a driver much easier.

Also in her favor, was the fact that the bus she was assigned, #3099, was an automatic. She ran two routes, an elementary school route, and a high school route.

Her mother was happy with the arrangement as well. Smalls-Tisdale was able to park the bus in the yard, so her own school day was not interrupted by logistics.

As kids do, a handful of the bus riders acted out on occasion. One particular high school girl was jealous of Smalls-Tisdale because she wanted that particular route (since she lived in that area). She continuously criticized Smalls-Tisdale's driving. Eventually she got upset and pulled the bus over.

"We exchanged words," said Smalls-Tisdale. "That's the first time I ever stood up to anyone. It was a day of reckoning, but we eventually moved past it."

Her life came full circle when she came to work at CCSD at Camp Road Middle School (James Island Middle School) for ten years as a student data clerk. She retired but later returned to the workforce again as an employee in the District's Office of Strategy and Communications.

During her time with CCSD she has run into old classmates who also work for the district such as recently retired Neil Grant (CCSD Maintenance), and Cami Fissel (Camp Road Middle School). Not only did they all go to James Island High School in the 1980s, they were all bus drivers, too.

Grant drove the bus for four years and ran three routes. He liked the idea of driving a bus because he could park the bus in the yard and jump on in the

morning when it was time to start the route. Grant also liked having first period free and an early out so he could run the route on time.

"It was a really good experience for me," said Grant. "It taught me to deal with people when they get out of line. In my case, if the kids acted out, I just pulled the bus over."

Like Smalls-Tisdale, everyone knew Grant on his route.

"We all grew up together and we were either friends or family or both," said Grant.

In addition to driving three routes, he picked up extra money driving kids on field trips during his senior year. He also held down a part-time job at Piggly Wiggly during his high school years.

Driving a school bus was a lot of responsibility, Grant said.

"You had to keep up your grades just like you would if you played sports," said Grant. "Then, of course, you had the responsibility of ensuring the safety of all of those students."

By the time he graduated in 1984 he handed over his bus, #2695, to the late Rodney Hamilton who was also a former CCSD employee.

Grant worked for CCSD for 30 years and considers it "coming full circle."

His classmate Cami Fissel drove for three years.

"The first time I ever drove over the Cooper River Bridge I was taking elementary school kids to Palmetto Park for a field trip," said Fissel. "I was driving a bus with a clutch and no power steering - at age the age 16."

It started out as a joke between friends, Fissel explained. "These two guys in my class heard about the job and said, 'We'll go if you go'." At only \$2.84 an hour, it was a little nerve wracking because drivers did not have a radio and if you broke down you'd better hope there was a house nearby so you could use the phone, she added.

"I loved it," said Fissel. "It was a lot of responsibility for a 16-year-old."

The first female bus driver for the District was Jo Anne Daquigan. She works for the District as a Senior Administrative Support Specialist in the Office of Assessment and Evaluation.

She was only a substitute driver but it was a milestone for the young girl.

When Daquigan was a first-grader at Stiles Point Elementary School her brother was a senior at James Island High School. He drove a bus for part of that year and he paid Daquigan a dime to sweep out his bus.

"When I was in 11th grade at Fort Johnson High School and after I turned 18, I went to my Assistant Principal, Mr. Washington (who later became the principal at St. John's High School) and asked him if I could drive a bus," said Daquigan. "I will never forget the smile on his face and his words were 'really'? He signed the paper and I went to class."

Daquigan had never driven a vehicle with a clutch before but she knew the mechanics.

"The bus instructor said I was the first girl to drive a bus, so I thought that was pretty cool," added Daquigan. "It was a basic driving test and the best thing other than passing was the bus didn't start in first gear, but second, so there wasn't the threat of stalling out."

Today CCSD serves 22,000 bus riders out of a student population of 50,000. According to Jeff Scott, Executive Director of Transportation, it takes 370 buses to service the students.

"There is one bus per route," said Scott. "Bus runs are home to school and school to home. Most buses run two routes in the morning and two in the afternoon, which totals over 1350 bus runs a day."

Scott said that the training of bus drivers today is more comprehensive.

"All school bus drivers must obtain a Commercial Driver's License, receive a week's worth of classroom training from the South Carolina State Department of Education and receive at least 10 hours of behind the wheel training with an instructor," said Scott. "Only then can the driver receive certification, from the State, to drive. The training process normally takes a month from beginning to end."

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD), a nationally-accredited school district, is the second largest school system in South Carolina representing a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 87 schools and specialized programs. With approximately 6,100 employees district-wide, CCSD is the fourth largest employer in the region.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, charter, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), and Montessori schools, and is divided into three Learning Communities. Options include specialized programs in science, engineering and mathematics; liberal arts; music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military and other public service enterprises.