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For Immediate Release

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Driving Social Change

The 60th anniversary of Rosa Parks' historic moment of defiance in Montgomery, Alabama, when the seamstress famously refused to give up her seat on a city bus to a white passenger, coincides with another milestone in our local public transit history: Lewis Sims was hired in 1955 as the first African American bus driver in Fort Wayne.

In the 1950-60's trolley/motor bus service was provided by the Fort Wayne Transit company. It was then a private-for-profit business managed by a man named Don Walker. In order to qualify for federal transit subsidy the private company needed to integrate their workforce. Mr. Walker met Mr. Sims, who was working as a bartender for the Chamber of Commerce, and encouraged him to apply to be a bus driver. Sims remembers being apprehensive after he started but wasn't afraid. He recalls "Some drivers quit, some riders waited for the next bus or made negative remarks; however, Mr. Walker, some of the drivers and some passengers stood behind me and more followed along after". Sims joined the ranks of 580 drivers as a part-time Bus Operator at 84 cents/hour and 36 years later retired number one in seniority.

Frost Illustrated ran a lengthy article about Mr. Sims in the April 4-10, 1990 issue upon his retirement. In it Sims recounted that his biggest satisfaction came from the knowledge that, as a pioneer, he helped other African Americans who came after him. "I look at the roster and see the black employees. I feel I had something to do with that. I thought if I made it, the company would be encouraged to hire more black workers."



Recent photo of retired Fort Wayne Citilink drivers Leonard Ferrell (left) and Lewis Sims (right) standing by a painting, created by Terry Ratliff in 2002, of a 1957 photo of Fort Wayne Transit service. Mr. Ratliff took artistic license and inserted a likeness of Rosa Parks into the foreground for his painting. (Photo credit Jean Marie Boykins)

One of those to follow in his footsteps was John Thomas who began driving for Fort Wayne Transit (then known as PTC) in 1967, he was promoted to serve as the first African American Street Supervisor/Dispatcher and retired in 1994. Throughout his 27 years of service to Fort Wayne Transit he was sufficiently fulfilled to recommend it as a career to his son Richard Thomas who began as a driver in 1978 and he has served for 37 years, and counting. Slightly less than a year after starting his new job, Richard Thomas welcomed our third generation



Three generations of Fort Wayne Citilink bus drivers standing in front of their bus. From L-R Richard Thomas, Sr., John Thomas, and Richard Thomas, Jr. (Photo credit Richard Thomas, Jr.)

Thomas Family bus driver. Fort Wayne Transit (now known as Citilink) welcomed Richard Thomas, Jr. as a bus driver in 2003 and he was promoted to Street Supervisor/Dispatcher in 2006 – following in his Grandfather’s footsteps.

Richard, Jr. recalls; “I would ride along with my Dad and Grandpa and hang around the bus company. Finally, I decided if I was going to spend so much time there I might as well get paid.” He added. “Busses are in our blood, my Dad made buses out of old cereal boxes when he was a child and it was my childhood dream to be a bus driver”.

A favored tagline for public transit resonates – ***Public Transit, Getting You There Wherever Life Takes You.*** On many levels public transit is movement for social change; whether you are riding the bus or driving it. It is access to jobs, and a good union job. It is mobility and economic stability. It is connectivity and empowerment. We are proud of every member of our Fort Wayne Citilink team and the valuable service they provide to help our community move in the right direction.