

# The Buses of Baldwin County

Driver of the Year Lenzy Williams shares his experience

by Beth Wilson

Traffic along Beach Boulevard is building steadily by early morning. The summer tourist season is filling hotels, beaches, restaurants and shops. Both visitors and residents traverse to vacation and employment destinations. The southern end of Baldwin County, Alabama - flanked by Mobile, Pensacola, and the Gulf of Mexico - is growing and transforming.

The traffic thins, however, as you drive north on Highway 59. Turning off the main road, towns and commercial districts fade away. Houses are nestled in dense wooded areas where occasional grocery and filling stations are connected by long, uninterrupted stretches of road with landmarks discernible only to the familiar. The northern and southern ends of Baldwin County are separated by some 75 miles; they may as well be separated by decades.

As he steers his bus from Little River in the northern part of the county down to Gulf Shores, Lenzy Williams seems to bridge space and time. Along with six years of experience driving for the Baldwin Rural Area Transportation System (BRATS), Lenzy's credentials now include the title of the 2000 Ricon Driver of the Year - an award that recognizes his outstanding performance in CTAA's National Roadeo at EXPO 2000. The two-day driver's competition culminates in ceremony, cash and trophy. The work that brings a driver to the Roadeo never culminates. It is a steady and constant engine of community.

Baldwin County encompasses nearly 1,600 square miles of terrain, most of it rural countryside. As the oldest county in Alabama, Baldwin boasts a rich history while grappling with a complicated transition as different segments of the population and economy are redefined. Lenzy knows the territory. Self-described as "terminally country," he was born in Baldwin County and, except for a brief childhood stint in New Orleans, he has spent all of his 33 years in the area. Driving through the county, he continuously calls attention to buildings, roads, small towns and history. He delivers interesting details about an old house, a natural spring, a burial spot, a meeting place, a familiar dog. His knowledge of the area's history includes that of his passengers. His driving routes include long work commutes - 50-70 miles one way - that connect employees in the north with job opportunities in the south. A typical day also includes a great deal of demand-response, picking up and delivering passengers who know him by name.

## Sharing Lenzy's Bus

Rose Nell and Kenny have a history. They and their families share old friendships. The two also share Lenzy's bus as he transports them from home to their work at the Association for Retarded Citizens (ARC). They and several of their co-workers know what time to be looking for the BRATS bus every morning. Lenzy greets each one by name. On his way to pick up the rest of the ARC crew, Lenzy listens intently to Kenny's current love-life woes. He dispenses thoughtful and diplomatic relationship advice (fully aware that Rose Nell, seated behind Kenny on the bus, is his old girlfriend). Margie and Lydia board with broad smiles and hand shakes. Arthur delivers an affectionate noogie while Lenzy offers a helpful reminder, "Is your lunch in the mailbox?" Chris is waiting outside as the bus pulls up. Boarding with a shy grin, he completes the roster, and they're off.

Each driver, explains Lenzy, develops a special relationship with their regular passengers. Lenzy has a long work history with the ARC facility. He drops off his busload and stops in for a quick visit. He calls out and waves to staff and clients. He's familiar with their daily routines and can tell you about one person's past or another's present. He understands how the ARC operates, its important impact on his passengers' lives. His role is getting them there.

While some of Lenzy's pickups are regular work runs and scheduled in advance, others are varied and sporadic - passengers running short errands to the bank, post office, grocery store. Others are making trips to their doctor's office or medical center. For many passengers, especially older residents, Lenzy's bus is a social outing - a chance not only to take care of necessary tasks and business but also to converse, laugh, catch up on happenings, talk about a hardship, tell someone their story.

Lenzy picks up Bruce at the bank and drops him off at the post-office, returning a short time later to take him home. Bruce uses the BRATS system often and knows Lenzy and other BRATS operators.

"I ride everyday... almost like I got a job or something," he jokes. "Even if I had a car, I think I'd take the bus. It's just easier."

The transit system, Bruce says, makes every effort to accommodate passengers and their needs. Take shopping at WalMart. Some passengers, he's observed, have their full shopping cart loaded right on the BRATS bus. The drivers make sure passenger and goods are transported safely home. The empty cart goes back to WalMart the next time that passenger goes shopping.

Bruce is content to ride along as Lenzy makes other passenger pickups and dropoffs. As they share stories and laughs, Bruce congratulates Lenzy on his award. His assessment is simple. "These are good people."

Lenzy pulls up in front of Bruce's home, placing a hand on his shoulder as he exits the bus. He comments on Bruce's big heart and easy-going nature, "He has a great attitude," says Lenzy. "But many [of our passengers] have a great attitude because of all we do for them."

## **Not Destiny, But Mission**

And, indeed, Lenzy does much more than drive. Throughout the day, he darts from the van to scout for scheduled passengers, assists them in boarding, carries on conversations, listens to problems, interjects humor, fills out paper work, carries groceries, collects fares, loads and unloads furniture, points out roadside attractions and picks up an add-on - all the while somehow managing to listen to activity and announcements on the dispatch radio. In the midst of incredible feats of multi-tasking, he's able to digest a barrage of driver numbers and codes, assessing the BRATS system status throughout the day.

Lenzy not only drives; he is driven. He describes his work as a mission. Not destiny, but mission. Before joining the BRATS team, Lenzy worked as a youth pastor, counseling young people through a local church. He was looking for a change - or, more specifically, searching for his path - when a woman in his church's congregation mentioned a position driving clients of the Association of Retarded Citizens. It sounded like a good fit. He met with BRATS director Rosie Broadus and, to his disappointment, found out that someone had already filled the position.

"Oh, I wanted that route so bad. And Rosie could see that it hurt me," he recalls. Rosie told him she believed that their encounter was not an accident, that Lenzy had arrived at BRATS for a reason. A few days later Lenzy received the call. The current driver learned of his interest, got his phone number, and made an unexpected proposition.

"She was in the middle of her shift and said, 'Do you want this job?'" Lenzy recalls.

With no time for formal hiring procedures that day, Lenzy dropped everything and rushed to her bus to take over. As he finished the route and dropped off his last passenger that evening, he pondered what had just taken place and the decision he had made.

"I said, 'Lord, I need to know what you want me to do, and Lord, you know I need you to be direct with me. This woman didn't like this job. Why should I? I need you to give me a sign.'"

He was headed down a country road, navigating the bus through the rural, northern segment of the county, when it came. A small sign designated the dirt road crossing his path as Lindsey Road. Despite the spelling variation, Lenzy felt it was his guidepost. On the other side of the road was a much larger sign marking the area - Lindsey Cemetery.

"I wasn't sure if that meant I was going to stay with BRATS until I die?!" he laughs. Still, the hectic schedule and long distance kept him driving the route for three days before he even made it back to the BRATS office for the official hiring.

Lenzy considers his future, but is committed to his present. Driving the BRATS bus and serving his community is a role he's supposed to play right now. "I don't want to sound over-spiritual, but I truly believe the Lord led me here."

## Long Days

David has an appointment at the medical center. Roy is returning for treatment. Stopping at Robertsdale High School, Lenzy runs in to see if passenger Olivia has finished her classes for the day. He assists her with the bus's lift, secures her chair and she's on her way to work at WalMart. The next pick ups are Vivian and Margaret at their apartment complex.

"Hi, Miss Vivian. How are you doing, Miss Margaret?" Lenzy greets his newest passengers. He drops off Margaret at Winn Dixie for grocery shopping.

"Give me an hour," she requests.

"You just give us a holler when you're ready to go home," Lenzy assures.

Lenzy is committed to BRATS and his work. His days usually begin around 7:00 a.m., and he might not finish his routes until 7:00 p.m.

"I work all the time," he says. "My wife tries to slow me down."

His wife Felisa speaks admirably of Lenzy's accomplishment and his work. "We're real proud of him. He's worked real hard for this," she says.

She and Lenzy own a home 35 miles north of the BRATS office in Rabun, next door to Lenzy's brother Joey and his wife. While their dogs Amos and Moses roam outside, the household is overseen by a stout orange feline - Andy Cat. Felisa attributes Lenzy's successful driving career, in part, to his commitment and dedication. But another equally important component, she says, is Lenzy's outgoing nature.

"His mother used to say when he was growing up, he never met a stranger," she recalls. "He's a real people person. It's just his nature."

Lenzy credits his diligence to his mother Sheila's profound influence. "She's a real hard worker. I guess that's where I get it - being real consistent, always showing up for work, doing my best," he says. "She made a lot of sacrifices for me and my brother Joey. She's always encouraged my brother and I to be honest, to do our best - in our jobs and in life. And I'm thankful for that."

## Community Parity

The crepe myrtles and oleander create an impressive vista of pink along Highway 59. But Lenzy has his eye on the road and his watch. It's a good 40-minute drive from the office in tiny Robertsdale down to the Gulf, and he still has to stop and switch vehicles. Lenzy pulls his body-on-chassis into the refueling lot at the southern end of the county. He trades it in for a much larger Bluebird coach. He needs the room for what he calls his "fast-food run," picking up dozens of workers at the end of their work day in the area's hotels and restaurants. Transporting them 40 miles north to Bay Minette, many of them will continue on to their homes in outlying areas. The bus has been parked in the hot summer sun, and the air conditioner is struggling noisily as Lenzy fills the vehicle to capacity.

"You're late!" one passenger chides as he boards. "Why are you late?"

Lenzy's reply is quick and earnest. "I had this woman riding the bus. And she went into labor! So I had to stop and deliver a baby! I didn't think you'd mind."

The group is pretending to buy it - even William, a hotel maintenance worker seated behind Lenzy.

"And you know what I named him? William!" Lenzy finishes the joke.

The bus explodes with laughter and applause.

The BRATS system accommodates the needs of workers, their employers, the elderly, the disabled, even area prison inmates. Lenzy knows the people he's transporting. He knows where they're coming from. He knows where they're going. Through his trips, he has amassed a great deal of personal history on these passengers. He considers it a unique educational opportunity.

"I talk with these people because you can learn a lot," he says.

Lenzy's work is about community parity. He recognizes and appreciates the contributions of others in his community, and wants to provide his share. He observes the complicated schedules many of his passengers are juggling. He knows these people work long, hard hours and feels their commute to and from work should not contribute to that labor.

"A woman who's up at 4:00 a.m., making breakfast for her husband, getting her kids ready for school, getting herself to work, maybe an hour or more away. She works all day. She's tired, but gets home and doesn't think about herself. She makes a home-cooked meal because her husband wants one. She takes care of things around the home. Maybe she gets to bed at 10:30 p.m. or 11:00 p.m., thinking of all the things she still needed to do, but has to be up by 4 again ... I owe that woman!" he says.

Lenzy's hard work and achievements are being recognized by the Baldwin County community. Area newspapers have interviewed Lenzy, a local television crew made him a feature on the five and 10 o'clock news and the County Commission is presenting him with a certificate of appreciation. Along with congratulatory praise from BRATS co-workers, the passengers have also been supportive.

Lenzy delivers Vivian to the antique store where she is picking out a bed frame. On the return trip, Lenzy carefully loads Vivian's new purchase on the bus. Returning to her residence, he then takes a moment to carry each piece of the frame to its new home. Lenzy's award, Vivian says, is an obvious outcome to his commitment to his work.

"It sure is good when people have the interest and want to take the time to learn to do their job the best way," she says.

"I saw your article in the paper, Lenzy!" Judy is an early morning pick-up. She has been a regular passenger for years, riding the BRATS bus every weekday to and from her work at the Visitor's Welcome Center.

"If I'd known you were coming this morning, I'd have brought my autograph book," she jokes with Lenzy as they make the winding commute from her home in the neighborhood of Lake Forest to the Center in Daphne.

"Will I see you tomorrow? Next week?" she asks.

Lenzy replies with a straight face: "No, Ma'am. I think next week I'm booked on the Tonight Show. Be looking for me!"

## **Getting Past the Obstacles**

Throughout his six years driving for BRATS, Lenzy has witnessed changes in the county and changes in the passengers. He wants to see area transportation change to better fit new needs. He feels the system is in the midst of a complex transformation. BRATS prides itself on serving the elderly and disabled. The system accommodates demand-response, one-on-one interaction. But more residents need to get to work. The growing job market is centered in the Gulf areas, primarily minimum wage positions in hotels and restaurants. These minimum-wage employees can't afford to live in the beachside communities. That means long commutes - 50-70 miles - for workers from the northern part of the county, and committed time and resources from BRATS. Lenzy doesn't see enough funds to meet all the needs.

"There are passengers not being served. How are we going to fix that?" Lenzy wonders. He is aware of, and frustrated by, the difficulties involved in running a community transit system. He talks about the problematic lack of coordination among and between public agencies and organizations, the constant struggle between having enough drivers and not having enough drivers, spending money and not spending money.

He is able to visualize an even better system, but doesn't know how to get past the obstacles.

"When I see that something could be better, it really bothers me," he says.

Lenzy comments on the dramatic difference between the rural north and more developed south. People living in the northern countryside don't always trust outsiders, he explains. For some, this distrust applies to an outside transit system. According to Lenzy, many residents up here wonder why anyone would need or want a bus. Where does anybody have to go? And yet many people want it, or ask for it - and they pay taxes, too.

## **An Outstanding Team**

Lenzy receives a call from dispatch. A fellow driver is tied up. Can he pick up an add-on? Ginette is on her way to the bank for a 10-minute errand. With instant communication and coordination, Lenzy makes a seemingly effortless detour to swing by and scoop her up.

Lenzy is back at the BRATS office. He checks in with dispatch and begins a pre-trip inspection for his afternoon route. The thorough examination of the vehicle about to go out on the road includes checking fluid levels, belts, cable to batteries, looking for leaks, testing the lights and blinkers, a walk around the bus for any body damage. Then into the driver's seat to check gauges, brakes, horn, mirror.

Director Rosie Broadus describes Lenzy as an incredibly caring individual. She recalls the day Lenzy came rushing in the office carrying a baby bird. He'd found the fallen bird while driving on his route. The nest was too high to try to put it back. Determined to save the bird, he ran out to buy \$2.00 worth of "wigglers" while he searched for a solution. He located an animal shelter a short distance away and came up with a plan.

"If I list the bird as passenger "Johnny Williams" and pay his fare, can I drive him to the shelter?"

Lenzy, Rosie says, has been a remarkable addition to an outstanding team that makes it all possible. BRATS drivers have continuously performed well at local, regional and state competitions. She jokes that it's going to get to the point where these roadeos won't let them attend since BRATS wins everything!

Lenzy feels his award-winning performance at the national competition was possible due to his co-workers' support and encouragement. He's thankful for a system director like Rosie.

"She's willing to invest in you," explains Lenzy, "encouraging us to do well but not pushing too hard. She strikes a good balance between an employer and a friend."

He recognizes Rosie's diligence in perpetuating a good community image for the BRATS system. He applauds her committed focus on serving the needs of the elderly and disabled.

"She doesn't do this for money. People come first. Her first question is always, 'How can we keep more routes; how can we serve more people?'"

Although Lenzy placed third in the state roadeo, Rosie was convinced of his skill and potential. She told him to start preparing for the national competition.

"I didn't realize beforehand how much I appreciated Rosie's efforts to bring us up to a level where we were ready for the nationals," he acknowledges. "If everybody could just understand how important this is for their employees," Rosie urges. "The directors come [to the Roadeo], but they don't always bring anybody else. If they did, I think they'd see their employees would take a lot more pride in their jobs."

Lenzy has a special relationship with fellow driver Kathy Weeks. Kathy won first place in the Alabama state roadeo, and went on to compete, along with Lenzy, in CTAA's national roadeo in Ft. Lauderdale. Both spent many hours training together on the weekends. Kathy became Lenzy's coach, encouraging, guiding and pushing him to improve.

"You've got to focus, Lenzy," he remembers her insisting. "Get your mind on what you're doing."

Her support and tenacity, Lenzy feels, enabled him to excel in the national competition. "It's important to find someone to work with you who's honest and tells you the truth, who really lets you know where you're off," he says. Kathy was that someone. "She'd tell me, 'Lenzy, you've got a bad haircut AND you're hitting all those cones!'"

Despite his diligent preparation, the award came as a surprise.

"The name announced at the awards ceremony was Lenny. I said, 'Who else is here from Robertsdale? Nobody! That's you!'"

Lenzy doesn't feel that the honor sets him apart from the other drivers who competed. In his opinion, they are the transit industry's best and brightest.

"I'm not any better than those guys. I want to be those guys!" The roadeo, he says, was an extraordinary opportunity to learn from some of the best in the business.

Lenzy pulls the bus doors closed after the final passenger of the day exits. He finds his way back to the main road and heads for Bay Minette, parking the vehicle in a small lot where it will be waiting for the morning run. With his work day over, Lenzy completes his paperwork. At that moment, he describes a sense of completion. He has seen his last passenger home safely; the bus has made it through the day; he can check off his list and close the day.

"I like a beginning and an end to something," Lenzy explains. "In my job, one thing I like about it - it begins when I get the paper work; it ends when I drop off the bus that night."

And this is how Lenzy lives each work day - as a commitment to his present role. This is where he stands (or drives) today, and today he will stand to the best of his ability. It's not about what could be, what might be, how he will aspire to something in the future. It's about right here, right now, these people, this day.

"And it will be a different day tomorrow!"