Alone in a Crowd

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Arlene Tupper's upbeat attitude carries her through almost all situations.

I think I was fourteen when I got a job at a men's clothing store. It lasted a week and a half. One of the people who had been there for many years made a pass at me. I didn't have any idea what was going on, and I just went numb. The man told the boss that I had made passes at him, so I was fired. That was a real shock at my young age. Of course, now I can see it from his point of view. He had been there so long and had made, maybe, his first mistake. He couldn't lose his job over something like that, and I was just a punk kid.

After that I worked in a doughnut factory, in a candy store, and at the post office over Christmas. My first non-traditional job was as a draftsman. I had no skills at all, nothing to do, and out of work, when a neighbor told me they were hiring draftsmen where he worked. I had taken a lot of math in high school, so I got hired and sent to a six-week training program. When I walked into the class the first day, I didn't know what a draftsman was. That was in January of nineteen fifty-seven. My husband is a draftsman. I nailed him at work. I met him in July of nineteen fifty-seven, and we were married in July of nineteen fifty-eight. I worked there a total of three years. I had leaves of absence in between working, to have babies. After three babies, it got to where I couldn't handle the job and so many babies and quit.
I went back to work when my youngest girl was in the third grade. It was during that big layoff, and I knew my husband was going to get laid off. The money would help, but mostly I didn't want to be at home and listening to him moan and groan for the next ten months. I went to work at a department store, which was the only job available at the time. I stayed there for three years and quit when I couldn't stand it any more. I used to come home and scream at night. You worked as hard as you could work, and when they saw that you could do the job, then they would give you more responsibility with no more pay and no more hope of advancement. And I don't know if it was working with women or what, but there was so much picking. If something went wrong, there was always somebody running to the boss and telling these tales. It seemed like there was so much stress all the time in the job. They didn't even let you sit down for eight hours. After awhile the women that worked there were kind of beaten down. They had decided this was the best they could ever do.

Well, I decided that I could do better, and then they passed the law that women and minorities had to be hired everywhere in Washington. I had never thought of doing anything exciting, because in that day and age there wasn't anything a woman without an education could do. When they passed that law, I began thinking about getting a job where I could make some money. Then one of the gals I worked with—a black lady named Lula—told me her husband, a bus driver, said they were hiring women to drive bus. I told her to talk to him and find out the details. So the next day she came back and told me, "I don't think you want to hear this."

"What is it? Tell me."

She said, "He said for you to keep your big butt out of there." I went down the next day and put my application in. That was in nineteen seventy-three, when they first started hiring women. I might not have jumped so quick, but when I got that answer
back, I saw it as a challenge. When I went in and applied, they just almost kissed me and dragged me in the door. They were so happy to see me. They had to hire women, and no women were applying. It just amazed me. On most jobs when you go in to apply, you feel like, “Well, shoot, I’m not getting that one.” But they almost dragged me in the door. I had never had that experience before. I was the fourth woman hired.

I had a lot of misgivings about lasting as a bus driver. I had never driven anything larger than a small truck and the buses were so big. But my husband, Dean, was very supportive. He kept saying, “You are the kind of person who should be a bus driver. You’ll love it, and quit this negative thinking.”

During my twenty-four-day training period I was petrified. I didn’t do so well. I wasn’t aggressive. I was scared to death and the instructor we had was unusual. There were three women in our class and five men. This instructor had apparently been in the service and felt that, in order to train somebody, first you had to break them down. He picked on the women, of course, and had all three of us crying, and then he was our friend. He just bullied and yelled at you all the time you were driving. He wanted to fluster you, but it wasn’t to get you to make mistakes. His theory was this will happen to you out on the road, so you had better get used to it. He did fire one man. The man had been a good driver, but the instructor stood up next to him and yelled in his ear all the time, “You’re a lousy driver! How come you’re driving so bad?” The guy got flustered and almost hit a pole and the instructor fired him. But I did make it through training, and then when I got out on the road, I could drive. But I spent all my breaks pouring over maps with this other lady who felt the same way I did; we spent at least four hours a day getting ready for our next run. We did that for the first two weeks. Then things started falling into place, but I really didn’t get to like the job for three months. Through it all, my husband was very supportive. When I’d go home and cry, he’d listen and then tell me, “Well,
by God, you can do it! You can do it.” He just was really good at it.

At first, quite a few passengers would not ride my bus. They had never seen women drivers. The first time that happened it was a bit of a shock. After that, I just said, “Fine,” and closed the door. You had your revenge by thinking, “They’re gonna probably have to wait another hour because they’re so stubborn.”

Some of the other drivers were pretty hostile, too. When I was still in the training period, I went out with other drivers during their regular run. One driver refused to take me. He said that he didn’t want students, especially women students, and then he went home sick. I found out later this guy became “Operator of the Year” and I felt bitter for a while. But it turned out that he had heart problems, and I figured that, if it upset him that much to have a woman on his bus, then he shouldn’t do it. At first, when I went to the bases, the men were very macho. They swore a lot and were full of dirty stories. They were trying to scare us off, but they ran out of dirty stories. I don’t think it lasted more than two weeks. Once they found out that we were there to make a living and to do a job, and we weren’t taking their jobs, then they were just real helpful. It just took them awhile. Their masculinity was being threatened.

Things really started changing when the first driver got pregnant. She was one of the second or third women they hired. They had never had a pregnant bus driver and didn’t know what to do with her. She was very outspoken and insisted that they do things. She was a beautiful woman, just beautiful! And very well built, and she found that being pregnant, her breasts just got so large that she couldn’t drive because they bounced and got extremely sore. They had never come up with these problems at the transit company before, so they didn’t know what to do with her. They put her in the office, finally, and let her work at driver’s pay up until the baby was born. But she insisted that things change. She’d say, “I’m not going to go to the bathroom in
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that men's bathroom." She did a lot of good and got things changed.

The first day in training our instructor said, "Now you can become a bus driver, but someday you might want to be a supervisor." Well, right that day I decided I was going to be a supervisor. I thought, "Gee, why not?" Actually when I became supervisor, it was quite a fluke. When I had been there two years, there was only one woman left that had been hired in ahead of me. Management didn't want her to be a supervisor, and they told me that. They also said they were waiting to give the supervisor's test until I had two years in and could take it. The reason they had to have me was because the government said that they had to have so many women supervisors and they had none. There were about a hundred of us that took the written exam, and then only some of us got to go before an oral review board. They had no real criteria at the time for choosing supervisors. I think they picked eight of us to be trained.

Since I've been in supervision, every department that I have gone into has been a new challenge, because they don't want women. When I first walked into a base to be trained, they said, "Oh, good! Now we have somebody to type." You know, earlier, when I kept changing jobs, I had thought, "Oh, how I wish I could type." And this was one time I thought, "Thank God! I can't type." But that was the attitude. They had never had a woman around. It took quite a bit of time.

I had learned to deal with the drivers as a fellow driver, but now I was their boss. That was another challenge. It took quite a few of them a long time to get used to me as a boss. It was a blow to their ego to have a woman tell them what to do. Some wouldn't talk to me, or if you told them to do something, they would not respond at all, and there was no way you could make them do it. At that time, there was nothing I could do. If you told 'em, "You have to work this piece of work," well, some of them would argue and say, "Why?" Now the report people must take
the work. At the time, they didn’t have to, so each day you’d
have to go down the list and talk one into doing the piece of
work. If nobody would do it, then you’d get angry and finally
somebody would do it, but it was a real problem at the time.

Then, when I got out on the streets as a street supervisor, it
started all over again. I can remember one man who got down-
town five minutes early every day. I told him about it, but we
had no real way of disciplining back then. I could write a
“greenie,” which was just a memo. It didn’t mean diddley-shit.
You wrote it, the boss looked at it, talked to the guy, and that
was the end of it. That was all we could do. So I talked to this guy
who was early, and he said, “Yes.” He kept doing it, so I told him
that I was going to have to write a greenie because he was always
early. He said, “Fine, just write all the greenies that you want,
and I will continue being early. There is nothing you can do
about it. No woman is going to tell me what to do.” So I wrote
the greenie and he continued to be early, and he was right; there
was nothing I could do about it.

When I first went into supervision I couldn’t work in the
instruction department. The boss wouldn’t let me. He told me
that as long as he was the head of instruction, he would never
have a woman in there. And as long as he was there, I never got
in. That only changed when he retired.

I think the worst challenge was going into the coordinator’s
office. That is dispatch, where you have control of all the buses
on the road. You’re actually a troubleshooter. Each person up
there has from two to five hundred buses to control during the
day. It is quite a job, and I had to fight to get in there. They had
never had a woman dispatcher, and they were not about to have
a woman dispatcher. The head supervisor in dispatch was a
friend of mine and I told him I wanted to break in. He said,
“Well, there’s so much opposition. I just don’t know.” But he
worked on it and I kept calling him up to ask when I would get to
go in. The thing was that you only got into dispatch by invita-
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tion. There was no other way in. But I kept after the head, until one day he called and said, "Well, do you want to break in up here?" I was just elated. I knew all the people that worked up there to talk to on the phone, but I didn't know them. They had all decided before I came up that they would not help me at all; they would just go by the book and tell me what they had to, and that would be the end of it. The coordinator's office was the last male stronghold, and they made more money, and they decided to keep it all male. But after the first week, when they found out I could do the job and was not threatening, we all became good friends. A lot of the drivers tell me now that they are glad I'm not in coordination any more. They couldn't handle a woman telling 'em what to do on the road.

In the coordinator's office, you make snap decisions constantly, and at first I felt uncomfortable with some of my decisions. There were so many choices you can make, but you haven't got the time. But after I made a few mistakes, I relaxed. We had a very supportive boss. He would never bawl you out for what you did. He would just tell you that maybe you shouldn't have done this. And if you did something wrong and the higher-ups came down on you for it, he would back you up all the way and say, "Hey, you weren't there. You don't know what happened. This was the best decision that the person could make." But when it was all over, he'd come by and say, "You dumb shit." You knew he knew you'd screwed up, but he'd back you up one hundred percent, and then he'd come down and say, "Why?" You have to realize that when you're making snap decisions, you're bound to make mistakes. Of course you'll make mistakes.

Another place that I finally worked in was instruction. Believe it or not, I actually got bored with it. Saturdays and Sundays were "up" days because I was teaching new people to drive, but the rest of the week was extremely boring. You didn't have much to do except ride check, which is when you gotta ride on
somebody's bus, and you have a list of things you have to check off to make sure that they are doing everything properly. You check that they are driving in a safe manner, signing their bus properly, and treating their passengers right. The reason I left there was because eventually I wanted to become a chief in the base, and I thought in order to do that I'm gonna have to become more familiar with base work again. So that's what I'm doing now.

I found that I really liked working in the bases better, because as an instructor you can't really relate to the people you're teaching. You always have to keep up a facade. If they do something wrong, you can't say, "You dumb shit." You have to say, "Well, maybe you should have done it this way." You can't really get to know the people. In the bases, you can get to know the people.

Figuring out where the different drivers are coming from and how they think can be a real challenge. You can't treat everybody the same. Some people when you greet them in the morning, you say, "Good morning. Nice to see you." Other people you say, "Well, how the hell are you today?" It's a real challenge to know how they want to be treated.

At the bases I make sure that every bus has a driver, that they all get out of the base on time, that everybody signs in, that they're all paid properly, dressed in their uniforms, and all the paperwork is done. There's a lot of paperwork, but most of it revolves around making sure that every bus has a driver. Sometimes it gets very hectic, like when three people don't show up and you have nobody standing around looking for work. Then it gets tense, but it's fun.

I love to hug people, but at one base I got in trouble for it once. When my friends came to the window at the base, I would give them a hug, and I'd usually pick out two or three older drivers that had been there thirty years—they were the drivers that
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would come to work, sign in, not talk to anybody, and they'd go to work, and then all of a sudden they retired, and nobody knew who they were. It was sad to me, so I started hugging them every day. I just felt that they probably needed it, and then they would start talking to people. They'd come in the morning and smile. I just felt they needed physical contact. It doesn't have to be sexual. It can be just a "I'm glad you're here today," and a big hug. Anyway, my boss told me I had to stop hugging people. I quit for a week and everybody thought something was wrong with me, so I thought, "Piss on him. That's not me." I started hugging again, and told my boss, "I'm sorry, I tried it, but I don't think it's influencing my work. I just can't go around not hugging people." He never said anything again. He realized that was just the way I was.

My husband, Dean, has never been upset by my being around all these men. In fact, one time he came into work right when this one guy had grabbed me over backwards and was giving me a big kiss, right? So when Dean walked in the door, I said, "Hey, Dean, I want you to meet so-and-so."

The guy said, "Oh, that's your husband. Hi," and gave me another big kiss. He was just that way. I asked Dean if that bothered him.

He said, "Shoot, no, you guys looked like you were having a good time." And we just started laughing about it.

Oh, I'm sure that Dean has had some doubts in his own mind, but he has never said anything to me. He knows how much I love him. In fact, after I went to work there he said that he was really glad that I did, because I became a more interesting person and wasn't shut up in my own little world. Dean doesn't like to go out with me and the guys from work for drinks because all we talk about is work, and he finds it extremely boring. He knows I always come home. If we get carried away in our conversation, and I get home late, Dean doesn't say anything. One time he did
say I was doing it too often, and I was. You know, two or three times a week was too much, so he did mention that. But he has never worried about me going out with men from work.

I've never had too much of a problem of men coming onto me. Sometimes a guy has too much to drink, and then they're kind of sloppy, but you don't worry about those. When I talked with other women who started about the same time as I did, I found out that my being married made a big difference. I didn't believe it at first, because all the men were friends to me. We would go out for breakfast, eat lunch together, go out and have drinks, and nobody ever made a pass at me. But the single women found that the men were very overt in their advances. One gal that I got to know really well told me they would wait for her getting off the bus, and the men would not just say, "Do you want to go have a drink?" She said they said, "Do you wanna fuck?" When she told me this, I thought, "Well, maybe it's just her." You really don't know because it had never happened to me. But she married a driver, and all these people quit doing it and became her friends. Then I believed her, because it immediately changed when she got married.

My kids have always thought it was a great lark that I was a bus driver. They're all grown and gone now, but they were still home when I made supervisor, and one of my kids said, "Mom, do we have to tell anybody you're a supervisor?"

And I said, "It doesn't matter to me, but why are you asking?"

She said, "Well, people ask what does your mother do, and you tell people she's a supervisor, nobody cares, But if you say, 'My mother is a bus driver,' they're impressed with that. I don't have to tell 'em you're a supervisor, do I?"

I said, "No."

My life with Dean has changed a great deal, too. We don't live in a house any more. We live in a sailboat. I think the way it has changed is that the kids are all gone, and they used to cook
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dinner for Dean. He hates to cook, and now he has to fix his own dinner, because I work such odd hours. That means he doesn’t eat very well. One night I asked him what he had for dinner, and he said, “Peanut butter.”

And I said, “What do you mean, peanut butter? Didn’t you have anything with it?”

“Oh, yes. I dipped it in butter,” he said. After that he bought a microwave because he didn’t have time to cook his own dinner on the wood stove. So that is different. I still do the laundry and housecleaning and what-not.

The other big change in my life is that I am not afraid to go anywhere or to do anything by myself. Before, I used to have a friend go with me. Now I think I would do almost anything by myself. I think that came from having my free time during such odd hours that nobody else has the same time off, and from working on the street as a supervisor. Shoot, I’d go down First Avenue now at night and wouldn’t think anything of it. You learn that there are really not very many places that you can’t go. It’s just that people have always told you, “That’s a bad place to go,” so you wouldn’t go there. In Seattle, there’s only a few places I wouldn’t walk at night. One’s at Fourteenth and Jefferson. I would never walk there at night, but I don’t know of a lot more.