

# The Wheel

**FEATURE STORY:**

**OATS Transit is for  
EVERYONE**



*Operating Above the Standard*

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The Wheel is published quarterly and mailed or emailed to riders, agencies, legislators and other interested parties.

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OATS, Inc. (dba OATS Transit) is a private, not-for-profit transportation provider serving 87 Missouri counties. Transportation is available to the general public in rural areas. In urban areas (Columbia, St. Louis, St. Joseph, Springfield, and Kansas City) service is limited to contract service and not available to the general public. Contact your local OATS Transit office for service available to you or to enter into an agreement to pay for services.

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**Relay Missouri** is available to individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind, and/or speech impaired. Use the Relay Missouri service by calling 711 to talk with an OATS Transit representative or to schedule your trip.

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*Board Meetings are held six times a year and are open to the public.*

**Bus schedules and fare information can be found at:**

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*Cover photo: Lee's Summit rider Theron Denson standing in front of a RideKC bus, which is operated by OATS Transit.*



This year, National Volunteer Week is April 17-23. We want to highlight all of our volunteers, past or present, because you are a vital part of our history. OATS Transit was built by volunteers. Without your hard work and dedication, we wouldn't be where we are today. Thank you to all of the volunteers who have been a part of OATS Transit's history. You helped us create a non-profit that serves thousands of individuals in Missouri. You inspire us to keep going. Thank you!

*Pictured: Clay County riders*



Pictured above is Jessica Bax and Wendy Witcig of The Missouri Department of Mental Health riding an OATS Transit bus with driver, Terri, and riders. They traveled to UCP Heartland in St. Louis. OATS Transit partners with UCP and DMH to transport many riders to day programs, which is an essential part of their daily lives. Day programs offer individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities the opportunity to engage in their community, develop support groups outside of the family, as well as cultivate personal interests and vocational skills. This greatly improves the quality of life for impaired adults. This community-based service is vital to these adults. We are thankful for our partnership with UCP Heartland and The Missouri Department of Mental Health, which makes this transportation possible.

# New Operations DIRECTOR



**O**ATS Transit is pleased to announce the promotion of Dion Knipp as the new Operations Director for the company. As the Operations Director, Dion will have the responsibility of managing the statewide fleet inventory, facility maintenance, as well as safety and training programs for the company. Dion will replace outgoing Operations Director, Jack Heusted, who retired in March 2022.

Jack started with OATS Transit in 1997 as the Regional Director for Mid-Missouri Operations. In 2018, he was promoted to Operations Director at the home office. Prior to coming to work for OATS Transit, Jack had over 18 years of management experience in various areas of retail and food service operations, including ten years for a national restaurant chain.

During his tenure at OATS Transit, Jack also became a Certified Community Transit Manager, which is a national certification program for transit professionals. He officially retired from OATS Transit on March 31, 2022 with 25 years of service.

When asked about his time at OATS Transit, Jack said, “The very first county committee meeting I attended, I was approached by a little, white-haired lady who reminded me of my grandmother. She grabbed my hand and said, ‘Honey if it wasn’t for OATS, I don’t know what I would do.’ I knew then that I had found the right place to work. OATS Transit is about service and helping people. It has been an extraordinary journey, and I have gotten to take it with a group of amazing people!”

In February, Dion Knipp was promoted to Operations Director and has since been working with Jack to learn the role. Similar to Jack, Dion was first hired as the Mid-Missouri Regional Director; a role he has held since September 2018. As Regional Director, he oversaw transportation services and two offices in a 15 county region. Prior to OATS Transit, Dion was with the Missouri Department of Transportation, where he worked for 28 years in various roles, most recently as Transit Administrator.

*Pictured above: Jack Heusted (left) and Dion Knipp (right).*

# Feature Story:

# OATS TRANSIT IS FOR EVERYONE

**M**et frequent RideKC passenger, Theron Denson. Denson may seem like any other passenger at first glance, but spend a minute talking to him, and you'll learn about his love of music and entertainment. This passion of his has led to him being the world's only African American Neil Diamond tribute singer, known as the *Black Diamond*. His career began in 2000 when he was discovered at a pizza place in West Virginia. He was whisked away to Los Angeles where he appeared on Jimmy Kimmel Live. That guest appearance launched his career, and he has been performing as the *Black Diamond* for the past 21 years.



*Pictured: Theron Denson performing as the Black Diamond*

Denson is originally from Missouri. His family settled in Columbia, MO after spending several years moving from place to place because of the army. He attended a Church of Christ where he would sing regularly. Several ladies at the church noticed his voice had a striking similarity to Neil Diamond. They informed Denson of

their observation, which led him to buy a Neil Diamond record. This is where his fascination with the jazz singer - and his future career - began.

After Denson was discovered on Jimmy Kimmel Live, he was always on the go, traveling to different states to perform. This included performances with The Pointer Sisters, The Village People, Three Dog Night, Brad Paisley, and more well-known artists. Denson is still performing today, although his shows have slowed down due to the pandemic. This change of pace led him back to Missouri where he now lives in Lee's Summit, near Kansas City. "It's been a sort of homecoming for me," said Denson.

Denson first learned about OATS Transit in July 2021 from a friend of his. "If I'm honest, when I heard about OATS, I thought it was just for old people," he said. After some more research, Denson learned that OATS Transit in Lee's Summit is for everyone *regardless* of age. He was excited about the price and the environmental benefits. "I tend to walk most places because it's better for the environment and it's good for my health," Denson said. Walking to get around town worked for him most days, but weather and distance could pose a problem. He decided to give OATS Transit a call. His first trip was to the library, and he couldn't believe how affordable and convenient it was. After that





*Pictured: Theron Denson on OATS Transit bus*

initial trip, he was hooked.

Now he is a frequent passenger of the RideKC bus in Lee's Summit and uses it to get around town. OATS Transit, in partnership with KCATA and the City of Lee's Summit, operate the RideKC service.

OATS Transit keeps up with Denson's busy schedule and allows him to get where he needs to go. "I love how affordable it is to ride. It saves me money and I get to have fun while I'm getting to my destination," Denson said.

Since July, Denson has gotten to know two of his drivers very well. He bonded with one over their shared love of Christian music. Another driver, Kevin Burns, has always been friendly and very easy to talk to. "I look forward to riding the bus because I always know I will be welcomed with a smile and have a good conversation." Denson said the kind and caring atmosphere is one reason that he continues to ride.

Denson wants to share his love of OATS Transit with everyone - no matter their age. "I want to help spread the word that OATS Transit is for everyone. I won't disclose my age, but I will say that I'm not old," he joked. OATS Transit has helped

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**"I want to help spread the word that OATS Transit is for everyone. I won't disclose my age, but I will say that I'm not old."**

Denson get around Lee's Summit, which has saved him time and money.

Regardless of your age, we want to help people get where they need to go! Previously, OATS Transit had a reputation for transporting older individuals. We do love serving that demographic, but we have expanded our service to reach a more diverse population. We want everyone to feel welcome to ride when looking at transportation options. We encourage you to try us out - just like Denson did. You never know where it could lead.



*Pictured: Theron Denson and Driver Kevin Burns*

# Celebrating The Linc

**T**his year we are celebrating the 20th anniversary of *The Linc* service in Lincoln County. *The Linc* provides public transportation for residents of all ages in the county. Hundreds of riders take advantage of this service for employment, medical needs, shopping, and more. The project started in March 2002 with a grant to Lincoln County, and routes officially began on March 18, 2002.



Mary Sullivan-Thomas was one of the original task force members that started *The Linc*. She is the Executive Director of Community Operations in Troy, MO. “There was a large need in the community for transportation. We conducted a survey and 38% of the respondents said they relied on someone else for transportation,” she said. With the support of the community, *The Linc* was born. Over 20 years, Sullivan-Thomas said the ridership has continued to increase and has been vital to the residents of Lincoln County. “I love hearing stories where someone takes *The Linc* to work every day and then eventually saves up enough money to buy themselves a car, so they can drive themselves to work,” she said. Public transportation allows people to keep their independence and continue to live their lives. “I really appreciate the partnership with OATS Transit. Through this special agreement, we are able to provide great, consistent transportation. Every community needs reliable transportation,” added Sullivan-Thomas.

Julie Rodgers is the Executive Director of Lincoln County Economic Development and a member of the OATS Transit Board of Directors. She says *The Linc* is essential to the economic growth of the county. “Around 60% of riders use *The Linc* to go to work. Without this service, people would really struggle to get to their jobs,” Rodgers said. “*The Linc* makes our county stand out. I’m very proud of the investment from the County Commissioners and the support from the community. They keep *The Linc* running, which is absolutely critical for the residents of Lincoln County,” added Rodgers.

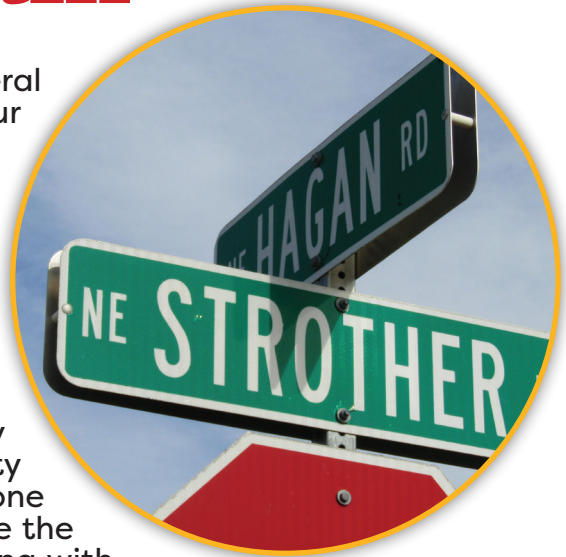
*The Linc* buses run Monday through Friday from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. OATS Transit oversees the operations of this service, which is funded by the Federal Transit Administration, Lincoln County, Community Opportunities, local advertisers, and rider fares/donations. Lincoln County residents are able to utilize not only *The Linc* service, but also OATS Transit and the InterCity Express, which offers long distance service to St. Louis and Columbia. All of these transportation options are available to anyone of any age.

Jeff Reed is a long-time rider who works as a 911 dispatcher in Lincoln County. He rides *The Linc* to work almost every day. Because of the help he receives from this service, he is able to help others when it matters most. “*The Linc* became a very valuable part of my life after my accident. I would not have been able to be as independent or go to work. I have had my job now for 19 years; I guess you could say I have a career, and I owe it all to OATS Transit and *The Linc*. I am very grateful,” Reed said.

Congratulations to *The Linc* for 20 years of wonderful, reliable service! You can find more information about Lincoln County public transportation online at: [www.oats-transit.org/lincoln](http://www.oats-transit.org/lincoln).

# Here we Grow Again

**O**ATS Transit has been awarded a federal grant to build a new facility to house our west region operations. For several decades we have rented office space in Harrisonville, which we outgrew long ago. In January 2022 we completed the purchase of a lot at the corner of Hagen and Strother Road in Lee's Summit. Our west region operations will be moved from Harrisonville to this location, which will include fenced parking for several of our vehicles, training space, and a bus wash station. This building project presents opportunities for growth, plus greatly improves access to major highways in the Kansas City area. A time line for construction hasn't been set in stone yet, but it will be at least three years from now before the building is completed and ready to move in. Partnering with the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority and the City of Lee's Summit, OATS Transit has operated city service there since 2017. We operate daily service in Lee's Summit for people of any age, which is our largest operations in Jackson County. Our west region facility serves the counties of Cass, Clay, Jackson, and Platte with 25 drivers and 7 office staff.



## Employee Anniversaries (Jan-March 2022)

### 30 Years



Marsha Tooley  
Southwest Driver

### 25 Years



Jack Heusted  
Home Office Ops. Director

### 20 Years



Christina Wadlow  
Mideast Ops. Coordinator

### 15 Years

Stella Patinio - Northeast Driver  
Kim Wood - Home Office HR Director  
Catherine Wohlbold - Home Office Accountant

### 5 Years

Steven Reese - Northeast Driver  
Pete Wittman - Midwest Ops. Coordinator  
Steve Griffith - Northwest Driver

### 10 Years

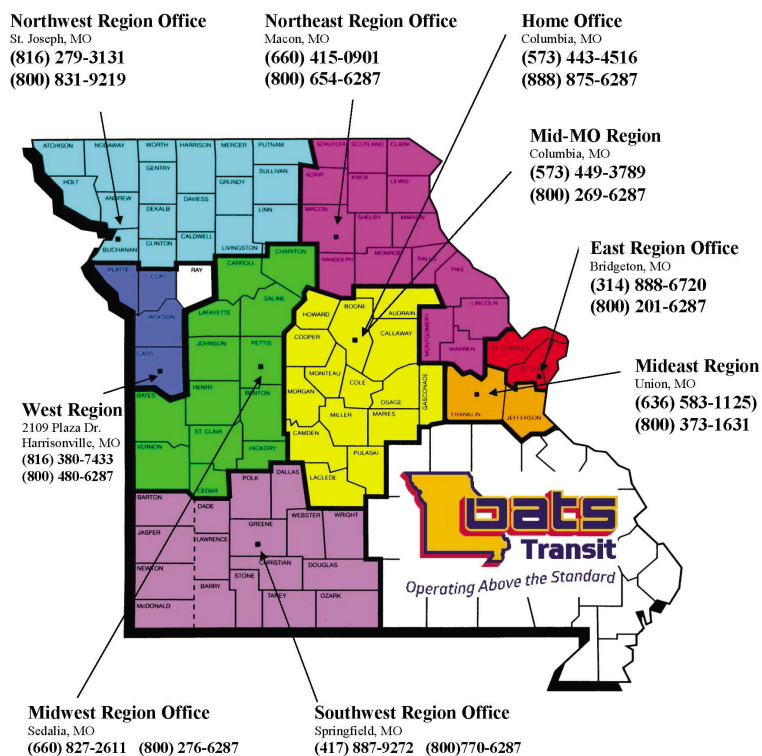
Lucinda Denby - Mideast Driver

**Congratulations! Thank you  
for your hard work.**



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## Upcoming HOLIDAY:

OATS Transit offices will be closed and regular routes will not be running on Monday, May 30th for the Memorial Day Holiday.

